

Learning from Max Nicholson

From managing population growth to tackling ecocide

10 years after the conservation visionary Max Nicholson died, this article discusses how we can sustain species and co-exist with a rich array of wildlife as relentless development pressures take their toll. How can the achievements of Max Nicholson inform the environmental actions needed now?

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"Few other conservationists have been so consistently outspoken in their criticisms of man-oriented ideologies and religions. In his book *The Environmental Revolution* Max Nicholson declared that "the vote of no confidence in the vainglorious religions of big capitalism and big Marxism is too clear to be any longer denied". He argues that "the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of traditional leaders will leave environmentalists no option but to step into the breach".¹ So wrote Charlie Pye-Smith and Philip Lowe following their interview with Max Nicholson for the first ever edition of *ECOS* in the winter of 1980.

It was 10 years ago last April that Nicholson died at the age of 98, and now is appropriate to recall his contribution and indeed the debt owed. Nicholson, as well as putting forward practical measures, also tried to change how people valued nature – as he said himself "in the 1950s the media considered us to be a music hall joke, and wildlife to be pure escapism".² In the decade since his death pressures on the natural world have increased; the task for Nicholson's heirs is to establish new means of safeguarding nature in the context of unprecedented human population pressures, but a fundamental re-appraisal concerning how the natural world is valued is also necessary for those measures to have any appreciable effect. This article goes on to say that the impact of population growth, in the UK at least, is exacerbated by cultural constraints and government's failure to promote the leadership and innovation necessary for the sustainable development of our cities. Instead, the requirement for local councils to draw up plans for suburban extensions into the greenbelt both destroys the habitat necessary for other species and is insufficient to meet the challenge of the burgeoning population of our own.

My introduction to Max Nicholson

I had, I am embarrassed to say, never heard of Max Nicholson until I read the bio-note of his son, Piers Nicholson, whom I was due to meet at a Mansion House luncheon in July last year - attending in his capacity as Master of a City livery company. I did not expect to discuss the founding of the WWF in the heart of the City of London,

but conversation with Piers made me realise that everyone concerned with the natural world – not least me - should know about Max Nicholson's contribution to conservation, and hence this article, which starts with Nicholson's legacy, was born.



Max Nicholson

Max Nicholson's legacy to conservation and beyond

Much has also been written about Nicholson,³ but what might particularly interest *ECOS* readers is that when he became Director-General of Nature Conservancy in 1952 he championed the MSc in ecology and conservation at University College London, and in so doing could be said to have had a decisive influence on the emergence of *BANC*;⁴ and of course *ECOS*'s first edition also contained the interview with him.⁵ Nicholson's memory is celebrated in the website www.maxnicholson.com and every July a memorial walk takes place along the Jubilee Walkway, another of Nicholson's numerous and varied achievements. More widely known is that in 1961 he, together with Sir Julian Huxley and Guy Mountford, set up WWF under the patronage of the Duke of Edinburgh. In 1977 he initiated the *ENDS* Report and in 1996 the New Renaissance Group (NRG), a think tank which aimed to halt humanity from what he considered to be its then (and continuing) disastrous course. These are edited highlights of an illustrious career, alongside which Nicholson managed to find time to be a prolific author. He initially published aged 13 for *The Field* and wrote his first book, *Birds in England* (1926) at 22. He went on to write several more, including *The System* (1967) and *The Environmental Revolution* (1970) – for many environmentalists an important work - and at the age of 96 contributed to the NRG's paper *Beyond Sustainable Development* (2001).

The WWF was founded in the year of my birth, so for me Nicholson's contribution to conservation has always been there, even if I did not know it. Nicholson had many qualities and clearly among them was a strong sense of prescience; researching this article commentators repeatedly alluded to his ideas being ahead of their time. But what difference did Max Nicholson make? Did his foresight establish adequate measures to protect nature for subsequent generations? Or has the pace of environmental destruction changed, altered qualitatively and developed greater impetus in the decade since his death? Would something akin to the WWF have been created without him, and what difference has the WWF and other NGOs made?

From what I have read about Nicholson he was a remarkable man, whom the widow of Sir Peter Scott described as "great".⁶ One of Nicholson's defining characteristics was his extreme ability in so many areas, from writing to chairing and administering, to starting up new initiatives while working across the fields of current affairs and conservation. And, of course, he was an iconoclast and forward thinker. So yes, recognising that the natural world was under siege – itself no less an achievement for the time - as the consummate organiser and fixer, and originator of ideas, Max Nicholson clearly made a difference.

I have not begun to seriously contemplate still less research how the world would look without WWF or the 25 UK-based NGOs which collectively compiled the *State of Nature* report;⁷ it would have been easy to conclude that NGOs make little difference when in June we watched Sumatra's forests burn.⁸ And of course, this would be wrong. After all, simply maintaining reserves on the scale of, say, Corbett Park in Uttar Pradesh established in 1936, or the UK's network of local county wildlife reserves, is rarely headline grabbing, but are important achievements nevertheless. And NGOs' political influence cannot be underplayed either; even Jeremy Clarkson respects the RSPB.⁹

The increasing pace of change

But things have changed since Nicholson. What struck me in writing this retrospective piece is the significance of people arriving at different starting points. Before Independence Jim Corbett became concerned for the plight of India's forests¹⁰ and when he and the British left India in 1947 there were still 100,000 tigers living wild on the subcontinent whereas despite the WWF and others' best efforts today there are only some 3,200 occupying just 7 per cent of their historic range.¹¹ And as this year's *State of Nature* has reported 60 per cent of species studied in the UK have declined, some markedly so.¹² And so each new generation arrives to find an increasingly impoverished world, but will rarely recognise it as such – after all the world they inherit is the only one they know. Most people do not appreciate the astonishing pace of intergenerational change and the scale of what has been lost.¹³

In the last decade my perception is that the challenges facing conservation have shifted from a concern with the uncontextualised consequences of, for example poaching and habitat loss, to more of a focus on the causes of those outcomes. The common denominator to most if not all conservation challenges is the increasing breadth and weight of the human footprint caused by demographic change and in particular a human population growing from 7bn at present to over 9bn by 2050 – a vertiginous additional 160,000 people a day, which can be observed in real time at <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population>. The impacts of population growth require further in-depth research outside of the scope of this article, but some salient prognoses do make startling reading. Amongst these the former Government Chief Scientific Advisor, Sir John Beddington, warned that by 2030 there will be a 'perfect storm' of food, water and energy shortages which will unleash public unrest and international conflict,¹⁴ and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation predicts that food production will need to increase by 70 per cent by 2050 to keep pace with the world's growing population.¹⁵ These pressures cannot fail to impact on the natural world. Closer to home following the June Spending Review the Chancellor's promise of £50bn of capital infrastructure projects,¹⁶ new roads,¹⁷ docklands, rail freight depots and the like, and Planning Minister Nick Boles MP's talk of building on "boring fields",¹⁸ all presaged a renewed assault and battery on the UK's countryside.

If Nicholson were alive today and was looking both afresh at current conservation challenges as well as with the benefit of his lifetime's experience, what new proposals and solutions might he propose? I am no Max Nicholson, but might I

tentatively suggest that – as invaluable as NGOs such as the WWF are – not more of the same, but something radically different is required: what Thomas Kuhn characterised as a paradigm shift¹⁹ in thinking leading to action commensurate with the task in hand. NGOs cannot on their own withstand in particular the colossal pressures arising from population growth, felt in a myriad of ways. Not least of these increasing carbon emissions, and the rising demand for commodities which directly impact on species' losses; as palm oil in the west resulting in deforestation, traditional 'medicine' in the east leading to poaching, and food products such as shark fin soup and bushmeat, illustrate.

Proportionate measures for today's pressures on the natural world?

I would like to suggest a completely new way of responding to these pressures, which could begin with or at least include²⁰ three essential principles:

Recognising the principle of ecocide - people have since antiquity, including notably the Polynesians on their island hopping voyage to modern New Zealand, caused a litany of exterminations.²¹ The Polynesian killing spree cumulated in hunting the Giant Moa to extinction between the late 13th and late 14th centuries, which to date represents the most rapid megafaunal extinction on record.²² Fast forward to today and Jim Wickens offers a heart rending account of how the west's insatiable appetite for palm oil is threatening the world's rarest elephant as well as other animals in Sumatra.²³

Human activities which cause local extinctions – large or small – need to be recognised for what they are: ecocide. In 2010 Polly Higgins proposed to the United Nations a working definition of ecocide as "the extensive damage to, destruction of or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes, to such an extent that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been or will be severely diminished".²⁴ Crucially, "inhabitants" means all beings, not just human beings.

Ecocide is perhaps not an expression that will appeal to everyone, suggesting a fundamentalist perspective which could also be criticised as imprecise alluding to unintended consequences, as well as activities, such as poaching, which most observers would recognise as deliberate. Ecocide is, however, a useful albeit 'catch-all' term for two main reasons. First, ecocide emphasises the killing of an environment's inhabitants and less on the destruction of the environment itself. Thus lamenting the loss of the Sumatran rainforest in the recent fires and forgetting the inhabitants of that forest would be analogous to pitying a burning house and forgetting the people inside; a pristine rainforest may be intrinsically beautiful, but concern should be for the denizens of that habitat and less for the habitat which is the means of corporeal life, but not that life itself. Second, whether inadvertent or otherwise the consequences of human activities which extirpate other species are the same, though quantitative and qualitative judgements concerning their severity need to be exercised.

Eradicating Ecocide's website cites 10 instances of typical mass scale ecocides, such as mountain top mining in the eastern United States.²⁵ But surely a proposed

250 mph energy intensive railway project which jeopardises 350 wildlife sites including 50 ancient woodlands also constitutes comparably scaled ecocide,^{26,27} just as executive housing developments replacing orchards²⁸ (literally up the author's street) incurring the complete removal of near 100 year old trees²⁹ is ecocide on a smaller scale. Understood in these terms ecocide is not just widespread it is nearly ubiquitous and in its more comprehensive dimensions epitomised by assarting the rainforest home of a unique community of rare animals becomes a euphemism cloaking the horror of what it in practice entails.

Ecocide implicitly carries the epithet which says this is wrong; achieving general acceptance of this principle is essential if the age old trajectory of habitat destruction and species' losses is to be slowed, halted and then even reversed in favour of genuinely sustainable patterns of development - which do not just benefit future generations of our own species, but value and safeguard all others.

Eradicating ecocide in practice³⁰- WISH20 is a global campaign to end ecocide which requires it to be ratified as the fifth crime against peace under Roman Statute; the campaign's objective is no less than to make ecocide unlawful by 2020. *The Reduction ad absurdum* counter argument is that people would be unable so much as to tend their garden without harming invertebrates and falling foul of the law. That would not, however, be the outcome of laws preventing ecocide. What such laws would achieve is to assert an intrinsic value on natural habitats and their proscribed violation would spur solutions to demographic and economic pressures without causing harm to those habitats' inhabitants. Two examples illustrate how a law against ecocide could work in practice.

First, the Government is considering a range of measures to halt bee declines, including creating 200,000 hectares of additional wildflower habitats over the next 10 years. From the perspective of eradicating ecocide the Minister, Lord de Mauley, recently said that "we are committed to preventing further human-induced extinctions of known species"³¹ and that 'bee-friendly' measures could be written into planning policy. This could include prohibiting developers from demolishing old buildings from April to June when solitary bees may be nesting and providing 'bee hotels' as alternative nesting sites. The National Planning Policy Framework could insist on 'bee-friendly' practice as part of the local plans drawn up by councils and planning applications put forward by developers. This would ensure new developments establish and retain wildlife friendly gardens and create space for insects such as specially-designed areas full of rotting wood. It remains to be seen whether these conditions will be retained within the National Pollinator Strategy due to be published this November, but, at face value, when developments take place compensatory measures could be mandatory to ensure the inhabitants of threatened environments are safeguarded, ergo ecocide for the targeted pollinators at least would be avoided. Similar measures already exist for other species, and if extended to all would be a giant leap in the right direction.

The second example is derived from private sector initiatives such as The Environment Bank,³² which through an 'environmental markets exchange' allows developers to

fund landowners' environmental improvements. This is reminiscent of the mediaeval practice of atoning for sin through acts of piety, but if mandatory and implemented effectively development pressure might not lead to irreversible habitat losses as now, but could achieve a net equilibrium or even conservation gains if developers had to overcompensate as a condition of planning consent.

The first condition of the necessary paradigm shift is, therefore, the focus of attention moving from the harm caused by anthropogenic activities on the general environment or specific habitat to the species impacted – the inhabitants made at worst locally extinct or at best unable to continue the 'peaceful enjoyment' of their territory. This entails moving from regretting the loss of things we humans value, trees, landscape, nature's aesthetic beauty, to the inhabitants for which those things are the necessities of life. In other words, we need to stop thinking about what we would miss and focus instead on the species dependant on the environments being threatened.

Establishing genuinely sustainable development - the second pre-condition to the paradigm shift is that development in future needs to be genuinely *sustainable*, not the over used term often deployed to promote infrastructure and other developments which are the antonym of what the word sustainable is meant to denote. The 'three pillars' of sustainability adopted at the 2005 UN World Summit on Social Development is the one acknowledged in the NPPF which in its final form was published in March 2012.³³ But then in October that same year the Government announced a review of housing standards and building regulations, jeopardising the Code for Sustainable Homes which was to make Code 6 – that is carbon neutral homes – the standard by 2016.³⁴ Aside from where homes are built and the habitat they can vitiate, their construction and subsequent occupancy contributes to the domestic housing sector's 30 per cent share of the UK's total CO₂ emissions,³⁵ which is to say new homes failing to meet Code 6 are by definition unsustainable. By this environmental criterion very little housing, never mind other forms of development, is sustainable and much of it also fails to meet the social sustainability criterion despite what politicians like John Prescott in the last government claimed.³⁶ In the example of the former orchard eleven executive homes, some of which are being retailed at well over £1m each, are far from *affordable*, and their affluent occupants are likely to generate more CO₂ than the average homeowner; as new-builds the opportunity to incorporate low carbon features was strenuously overlooked. This pattern of unsustainable development must simply cease.

Cities; the solution to demographic pressures - the final principle is that solutions to the problems of housing supply in particular should lie within our cities. There have been some suggestions that more houses could be built in the countryside at the same time as achieving considerable afforestation,³⁷ but this underestimates the overwhelming challenge of population growth which in the UK is expected to reach 100m by 2100, most of which will be concentrated in the south east.³⁸ 2008 was the first year when more people lived in cities than in the country, and Karen Seto's work at Yale University suggests cities will grow to cover from 3 to 5 per cent of land at present to 10 per cent of land by 2030, most of this change taking place in Asia. Although increasingly urbanised land use will



The architects, Boeristudio, claim that the Bosco Verticale towers when finished will offer 50,000M2 of dwelling space and equal to 10,000M2 (1 ha) of woodland.

result in localised ecocide, conversely people living in cities have smaller carbon footprints than people who live in suburbia or the countryside.³⁹ In this connection Jonathan Porritt has commented “there are many who now believe that it’s at the level of the city... that sustainability will really take root”⁴⁰ mentioning specifically energy initiatives and food strategies. Herbert Girardet goes further, promoting the concept of regenerative cities, which give back to nature as much as they take. He cites examples as widespread as Adelaide in Australia, Seville in Spain and Oakland in California, where significant progress in reducing carbon emissions and waste, establishing local food supplies, and extensive tree planting in order to, *inter alia*, absorb carbon and increase biodiversity, have all been achieved.⁴¹ Projects such as *Bosco Verticale* in Milan show that trees can be integrated with high-rise living in a 2:1 ratio of trees to living space.⁴² The exciting aspect of building up rather than out is that afforestation can still take place in a crowded world despite Twain’s aphorism about not making land any more.

To meet the challenges of significant demographic change and growth, organisations like WWF will struggle to hold back humanity’s rising tide, and species’ extinctions could continue unabated and in fact are likely to accelerate. What is required, therefore, is a radical change in thinking leading to proportionate action; for a sustainable future three measures are needed. First, that activities which harm the environment are recognised as acts of ecocide (appropriately legislated against), and attention should be focused on the inhabitants of those environments as much

as if not more than on the environments themselves. Second, that all development in future should be genuinely sustainable, and thereby avoid ecocide. And, finally, that increasing urbanisation should be concentrated within cities and not market or commuter towns or suburbia, as cities hold the potential for more sustainable forms of living, and at their most innovative even begin to find the space for afforestation not available in rural areas where food production may need to remain the dominant form of land use.

Urban innovation vs. suburban spread

A third of housing demand may be being generated by immigration⁴³ but for some decades it has also been driven by the purchasing power of isolated nuclear families, and increasingly, divorced individuals. The growing phenomenon of first time buyers having to wait until their middle age to purchase their first home,⁴⁴ with half of London living in rented accommodation,⁴⁵ is almost spoken of in terms of a national crisis. In contrast young professionals in Germany – where I lived for 2 ½ years – aspire to renting a *Wohnung*⁴⁶ and the prospect of buying a house did not seem to occur to them. And in India generations of the same family share accommodation, a model experienced by my parents when they were young. In other words, the demand for housing has a strong cultural dimension – which is not the same as an objective assessment of need – and other societies’ intimate more sustainable models. But if successive governments continue to encourage councils to review their greenbelt boundaries and build outwards⁴⁷ – and it is now reported that 9,000 acres have been removed from the greenbelt for housebuilding⁴⁸ – the result will be an increasingly spavined countryside, or in the South East by its outright replacement by seamless suburbia separated only by ribbons of parks and sports pitches. And these developments, no less than slashing and burning rainforest, still entail ecocide, and as well as being unsustainable do not address the scale of the challenge.

This article points to some means of deflecting the pressures mounting on the natural world. It is, therefore, disheartening to observe the UK Government failing to address the medium term exigency of accommodating a near doubling of the population within less than a century in a way which will not disfigure the face of Britain, but instead seems preoccupied with boosting the economy generally and the construction industry in any way, shape or form – well on the way to achieving that very outcome. And instead of tasking the likes of Girardet, Kato, and the architects behind *Bosco Verticale* – people perhaps in the mould of Nicholson – the Government requires local councillors to predict and provide for future housing provision, necessarily piecemeal, and falling woefully short of the ambition and vision required to plan for 100m souls.

Conclusion – remedies to sustain species plurality?

The ubiquity and abundance of species’ declines and extinctions requires not more of the same, but a radical re-appraisal of the value placed on nature and emanating from this, new measures equal to the task of protecting the natural world against unprecedented pressures caused primarily by human population growth. I have suggested three measures which combined would go some way to sustain species’ plurality. There are, of course, others.⁴⁹



Max Nicholson in 1950
(sculpture by Alan Jarvis)

Over lunch at Mansion House Piers Nicholson confided that it was sometimes difficult for the family to keep up with their driven father and his eclectic passions. Nicholson was a man of ideas as well as action, and his metier was to institute organisations in order to execute his thoughts for solving contemporary and anticipated problems, and then allowing others to lead what he had started. *ECOS* readers can help consolidate Nicholson's legacy by signing the WISH20 pledge to eradicate ecocide by 2020 – which can be found here <http://eradicatingecocide.com/wish20/>. I hope Max Nicholson would approve.

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