The road to Salamanca
Little heart at the 2013 World Wilderness Congress

The 10th World Wilderness Congress, WILD 10, was held in October 2013 in Salamanca, Spain. ECOS *was given press status to observe the struggles reported by indigenous cultures to hold on to their remaining wild land and their consciousness. The event also revealed a new brand of conservation imperialism from the opportunistic proposals on rewilding across parts of Europe.*

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Indigenous communities and conservation

Rewilding was prominent in the agenda for WILD 10 in Salamanca, but there was also a chance to engage with indigenous peoples and their perception of conservation. The problem for remaining indigenous cultures is that they occupy the margins, such as non-productive wildland of remnant rain-forests, the Arctic tundra, the deserts and more remote mountains. It is in these margins that a resource-hungry globalised economy is scouring for its last-gasps of oil, gas and essential minerals.

These threatened cultures have now combined as activists under the banner of ICCA (Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas)[1] and the first two days of Salamanca were taken up by their meeting with those representatives from government more naturally disposed to help them – the agencies concerned with conservation and wilderness protection. Almost all of the world's remaining wild places contain indigenous people, but models of 'protection' based upon species conservation, or zero-impact concepts of wilderness, are generally not adequate to accommodate them. They came therefore seeking alliances: from East Asia there were representatives from remote islands off the coast of China; communities from remote mountains in the Philippines and Nepal; from Australia came a large delegation from the Kimberley Range in the west; from South America there were representatives from Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Guatemala; from North America came many representatives from the Salish reservation in Montana, and along the north-west coast from Mexico to Alaska, where tribal peoples have been reclaiming fishing rights and negotiating protection zones; Africa brought Toureg from the Aire Massif, tribal peoples from the Congo forests, Senegalese fishermen; and Madagascar and Mozambique provided government representatives responsible for indigenous affairs.

The scale of devastation

I regard myself as well-informed on environmental issues, but the sheer scale of the invasion faced by indigenous peoples, especially the acceleration in the past

five years, was deeply shocking. Even where their homeland has acquired the status of World Heritage Site, there was little buffer from environmental and social impacts. In some cases, protestors against bulldozers had been murdered. In all cases, the protests were about loss of 'home' and way of life, rather than issues of health or safety (for example in mining), where oddly, their rights might have had more protection. There was little documentation of the health risks of mining uranium, iron ore, copper, gold and coltan, or of the pollution from gas and oil, simply because these peoples were fighting not against pollution, although that was a common threat, but for the survival of a way of life. Universally, they did not want the developed world's model of development, which all too clearly meant loss of community, loss of young people to cities of crime, prostitution and disease. Inevitably, mining and logging roads brought unmanageable contact, with un-supporting governments that for the most part wanted an end to indigenous cultures and turned a blind-eye to illegal activities.

It was clear also that a new threat was driven by the hunger for renewable energy sources in the form of hydro-schemes, biofuel plantations and arrays of vast wind turbines and their accompanying tracks and infrastructure – the latter now a major intrusion in the wilderness of the Sami people in Lapland. All of these intrusions bring roads and settlements of non-indigenous and often temporary workers.

A two way paradigm shift?

WILD 10 was largely an old-fashioned plenary conference set-up. On the podium listening to these presentations were sympathetic conservationists from the secretariat. The aim was to build an alliance. Here there was an interesting dynamic. For the most part, representatives of the indigenous cultures were highly articulate, educated and well-able to take on the conservation paradigm with its focus on biodiversity and ecosystem services – there were several presentations showing how this had succeeded and could act as a model for other regions. But the indigenous peoples also had a message for the civilisation that had created 'conservation' as a major concern and this, despite the work of ICCA, did not appear to be registering among the concerned conservationists in the Wild10 secretariat. Indeed, as the representative of two million nomadic Iranians pointed out to the rapporteur, his comments on what was needed to turn the whole thing around had not got past the typist – to which the typist responded that she "did not feel comfortable with his phrase", and that was that! The typist was an experienced member of the conference secretariat. The Iranian had said that nothing short of a revolution in consciousness (in the West) could salvage the global situation!

Back in 2005, I tried to say something similar in my book *Beyond Conservation* – with a chapter titled 'The Healing Forest' and seeking to bridge the divide between scientific and shamanic perceptions of nature.[2] I argued that we need a revolution in our own consciousness. Since then the eerie conviction has grown that 'conservationists' are party to the destruction. We do not speak strongly enough from our hearts and too easily collude with the corporatist world-view. There is also a massive hypocrisy afoot, where environmentalists have created a climate alarmism and then aligned themselves beneficially to what they see as a

Indigenous peoples promote respect for their wilderness and their linked culture at the WILD 10 event.

Photo: Jaime Rojo

solution – without a single detailed analysis of the environmental consequences of the supposed mitigation programmes they have unleashed. Perversely, having created the renewables monster, environmental campaign groups now seek funds to reign it in! Green advocates of a nuclear renaissance, such as the recently retired ex-director of Greenpeace, should visit the uranium mines in Australia or Niger, if they could get permission.

In all of this gloom, there were some bright spots – like the coalition of indigenous peoples along the Pacific coast of Central and North America brokering a marine protected areas system through Mexico and California, led by the Sinkyone Wilderness Alliance. The brightest element being the combination of cultural values with a scientific framework expertly articulated by this coalition, and the receptive ear of the US and Mexican governments. In some of the more developed democracies things have changed. But perhaps not in the UK as it now turns to uranium fuel with help from Chinese state-owned corporations that elsewhere are accelerating the invasion of protected areas.

Indigenous Nature

Indigenous peoples are now central to the management of the remaining wild places of the world – that much is clear. And their values are gradually being respected and honoured in management agreements. But what characterises the indigenous, their perceptions and attitudes toward nature?

The first English use of the word Nature was actually with regard to human nature, not 'the environment', and most tribal peoples don't have a word environment

in the sense of something separate – for them, nature is 'home' or 'mother' (The Latin means 'birth'!). What of *our* indigenous nature? It is clear we do share something very deep and very human with indigenous peoples, but also clear at this conference that we 'white' people (of varying shades), constantly repress the deeper side of ourselves. And we do so because it is politic to do so. I can personally attest to what happens professionally and publically if you do not! It is part of the scientific-econometric paradigm to which the conservation sector has attached its colours.

We can become very passionate about the beauty of wildlife – our award winning television documentaries attest to that. It is not that the heart cannot be engaged in conservation. But it is the inner nature of the heart, the realm of an enquiring and perceptive faculty of inner vision that is suppressed in our culture. And I would argue, deliberately so. It is too scary on many counts, not least of which relates to the nature of the *creative power* – which indigenous people know how to meet within themselves and acknowledge as real, loving, present and parental. This inner knowledge is relegated by conservation biology to the realm of the subjective, the personal and private category of 'religion' – and which many if not most scientists believe is a delusion. That is the dominant political reality, and within that context acceptable 'religions' are almost entirely patriarchal and long-divorced from an equally active earthen mother. The indigenous nature, which in Britain we would have shared in pre-Roman times at least, and perhaps as late as the 7th or 8th century Celts, does not separate the creative power from the realms of nature and the realm of human.

This is not a subject for discussion at the Wildlife Trusts, Greenpeace headquarters, the IUCN or the modern crop of nature writers and environmental polemicists. Why the discomfort? On a political level, perhaps because there is a consequence of going inside and meeting the creator…..which is the realisation that humans and this creative power *are the same thing*.

Then there is the real consequence, and I submit, the real reason for the suppression of all roads to inner knowledge within our education system – and that is as creative beings, we are all actually *equal*. Indigenous knowledge is not about being equal 'in the sight of God' but then legitimately exploitable by men, it is about being equal *in community*. In that state of consciousness it is simply not possible to exploit your fellow human. Yes, you might have to fight occasionally – people lose consciousness, but such conflict is rare. Peoples who maintain their roots on the land and in community do not exploit each other.

The legacy of empires

In this latter respect, the venue of Salamanca was apposite. Here toward the end of the 16th century, Queen Isabella of Spain legitimised the conquest of the American native peoples. She was chided then by Francisco de Vittoria at Salamanca University, seen as the founding father of international law, to respect indigenous people as equal in law and humanity. That equality, he added with a sting, brought with it a responsibility to trade!

From that deal evolved the modern development model – first come land-rights, then *individual* land rights against which the individual can raise money, then sale of properties and then accumulation of property, tythes, taxes, wealth and power. The less smart lose out on the trading floor, become landless and head for the 'cities'. Actually, vast millions occupy not the cities but the periphery of cities, excluded from the centres of power and wealth, suffering real poverty, which is not the absence of money, but the absence of a sustaining environment. People are cut from their roots, their land, their culture and language – what ICCA calls 'legacy disruption'.

Everywhere we could look today, the global economic development model has not changed and this exodus from the land continues. We, in the UK, of course, are long-distanced from our own legacy disruption.

Enter, stage right – Rewilding Europe

I was not looking forward to the special day on Rewilding Europe. Not since reading glossy brochures extolling the opportunity now presented by 'abandoned land' on the margins – in western Spain, Croatia, Romania and Slovakia.[4,5] Here could now roam wild cattle, wild horses, bison, boar, many species of deer, and more predators like bear, wolf and lynx. What's not to like? Is it not a conservationists' dream? There on the podium were WWF, Birdlife, The Dutch rewilders with their surplus wild-grazing stock, and the Zoological Society of London – announcing a European rewilder's network.

I sat through, thinking "This is all smoke and mirrors". According to Rewilding Europe's view, Britain's contribution to rewilding is a dot on the map: Alladale in Scotland. I contributed reluctantly from the floor, not wishing to dent the exuberance: first that I felt alienated by the top-down approach, and second, that the recent British initiatives, publications and explorative debates had been ignored. We in the UK had over five years of experience networking best-practice on the ground, had conducted four regional seminars, three issues seminars, helped to found a University institute (Wildland Research Institute at Leeds), and written two books, the last entitled *Rewilding*[3] with over 60 contributing authors drawn from across many different projects! Much of this legacy can be found through the documented achievements of a web based network created by BANC, the Wildland Network: www.wildland-network.org. If Rewilding Europe had no idea of all this investment or simply overlooked it, despite their multifarious connections, then what did that say for other countries like Spain and Romania?

It got worse. The 'network', for which they have received liberal funding (Dutch and Swedish Lottery), has 'criteria' of membership that makes uncomfortable reading. They are looking for local partners who can see a business opportunity in a large scale enterprise bringing in the charismatic herbivores. It would appear that if you are a nascent Alladale, then apply. If not, 'we are not interested'. I have to work hard to avoid cynicism when the Zoo mentality is embraced. The 'spectacle' does not always sit comfortably with objectives of conservation. But funding can distort objectives now that the pot has some honey in it.

How might this all play on the abandoned hills of western Spain, where there are thousands of sad ghost-villages, hardly populated, and then mostly by older people from another paradigm? Who cares, as long as we get the conservation benefits? Wolves are returning. Vultures can thrive again. Natural processes can re-assert themselves.

It is an opportunity lost. Old-thinking conservation sectoralists are now jumping on the rewilding bandwagon as a way of re-invigorating the sector. In their new-found enthusiasm there is a great danger of misreading the political mood and being seen as opportunists exploiting a situation where others are desperately trying to restore broken communities. This is conservation imperialism.

There is a spectrum of rewilding and everyone can learn from all shades. If we are to achieve significant core-areas, as exist in other parts of the world, we need cooperation for buffer zones and corridors – we need a political profile that is inclusive. Not one that appeals only to high-end ecotourism, or the bear hunters.

Enter stage left, *The Guardian* journalist George Monbiot, as keynote speaker at the larger gathering. He spoke of our long-lost European megafauna – the elephant and rhino, bison, lion and hyena, and their inimitable grazing and browsing pressure "Which no-one in the conservation movement had given a thought to". Yet the chapter on herbivores in *Beyond Conservation*, commissioned by BANC, addressed this head-on, and he later in the press conference acknowledged he had been influenced by the book. I reminded him that elephants needed to migrate and in *Beyond Conservation* we had concluded it was rather impractical.

The future – where does the road go from here?

The prospects for wildlife and wildland in Europe are good. There *is* a wildlife 'come-back', well documented by a Wilder Europe publication (a separate but linked initiative for the conference). Wolf, bear and lynx are recovering, as are most eagles, vultures (three out of four), bison, deer in some places – and the areas under protection are also increasing. Much of this is due to abandonment of land in marginal areas and some to more active legal protection and to successful re-introductions (like the bearded vulture, sea eagle and red kite). And although much of this needs to be seen within the context of past depredation and depletion, there *is* a good prospect.

On the wider world stage, though, how does Rewilding play? One of the indigenous conservationists commented – 'we can handle our own ecosystems, it's your *egosystems* that cause us the problems'.

On the road to Salamanca, I thought long about the legacy of empires, including the scientific and the economic. What is now left of the natural world, the wild, in both landscape and community, is rare and threatened. The tragedy at Salamanca is that conservationists still fail to see that they are part of the old empire. When they seek to repair the world, they also seek to place their ego within it. Who amongst us can say we are free of this shadow? But the indigenous people I sat next to had something that emanated in the conference hall, even that they were dressed in

normal western garb, except the Brazilian Yawanara chief, who unselfconsciously wore his feathered headdress wherever he went! They had a certain joy and a peaceful way that reached somewhere behind my eyes and welled tears whenever they spoke. They were not part of the egosystem. Their legacy was not yet disrupted. And they were looking for help to maintain the life they knew.

Meanwhile, at close of debate, the secretariat introduced them to the well-known dangers of climate change and alien species invasion. Most of them had not thought too much about these things. But secretariats have an eye on the funding streams for the next event and the boxes to tick along the way. That's not the road.

Rewilding the human

The wild does not have to be an abandoned land, safari-lodged and ring-fenced. In Romania, shepherding communities co-exist with healthy populations of large carnivores. Certainly, there is a place for core areas with no domestic stock – but in the corridors and buffer zones, there can also be revitalised wildlife-friendly communities. And some of those corridors can come right into the suburbs and cities as was illustrated at WILD 10 by experience from Chicago.[6]

The road ahead needs to be one of revelation, a Damascean conversion to the values of the heart and human community. Just as we lost the wolf and the bear, we lost a part of our soul, our direction and our dream. We in Britain led the industrial revolution and too easily forget it was built on land clearances, migration to cities, economic exploitation and abject slavery. To now truly go beyond the conservation paradigm is to realise its way of thinking is rooted in an imperial economic and scientific mindset. The remedy is not out of reach – it lies in humble grass-roots initiatives, where people are reconnecting in practical ways to the land, and can rekindle associated crafts, livelihoods, creativity and wisdom.

As conservation professionals we need to *listen* to the voice of the indigenous peoples – both the communities on abandoned land in Europe, *and* those further afield still with their legacy intact. There needs to be a two-way flow. The future of European wildlife is not just about species and spectacle, it is about *us* as humans in a wilder world. If we are to make the landscape wilder, then we need to become wilder to live in harmony with it, and not allow science to separate us from nature.

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