

# Electric energy: BANC nature tweets

*BANC has begun a series of Twitter debates, opportunities for people to swap views on hot topics facing conservation. This article summarises some of the main exchanges from the first sessions on politics and on land rights.*

## EMILY ADAMS

The conservation sector has taken a battering politically, practically and financially. Many NGOs are struggling to make ends meet and continue their campaigning (see George Bangham's article in this issue), hard-fought legislation is under threat in the UK<sup>1</sup> and internationally<sup>2</sup> (to the horror of conservationists<sup>3</sup>), and individuals are facing pressure to produce more for less. This is why BANC is calling for a 'revitalisation of conservation'.

Faced with these issues, BANC is creating a greater on-line presence. As part of its digital switch over of ECOS, BANC got more active online, starting in July 2015 a series of Twitter debates on the theme of 'revitalising conservation'. These allow BANC to engage within and outside its membership to see how we and others can help keep conservation alive, kicking and enthused.

### **Social media and computer games: procrastination trap or conservation solution?**

So-called 'digital nature' is a hot research topic at the moment. Recent papers have emerged on the rise of computer programmes to help children and adults engage with nature,<sup>4</sup> the use of social media to share research findings outside conferences and academia<sup>5</sup> and the shifts in how conservation organisations engage with members via social media and how this can change public understanding of conservation,<sup>6</sup> amongst other topics.

But there are limits to the help which computer games and social media can provide to nature conservation. The examples cited above variously conclude that:

- Twitter's extreme brevity (just 140 characters) can prevent the accurate presentation of complex scientific results, leading to misrepresentation and simplification in reporting and public misunderstanding;
- Twitter and Facebook messages fail to reach people outside personal contact networks.;
- The narratives demanded for computer games require such simplification of complex natural processes or locations that they become unhelpful as educational tools; and
- Digital nature may come to supplant real nature, thus reducing engagement.



NEIL BENNETT

### The first BANC debates: politics and land

BANC Council felt that Twitter would be a good means to engage people and spark interest beyond ECOS and the web site. A programme of debate topics is scheduled (see [www.banc.org.uk/events](http://www.banc.org.uk/events)). The first Twitter event in July 2015 tackled politics, under the title:

#### **What would it take to make nature conservation a political issue in the UK?**

About 20 people tweeted to discuss this question. The nature of Twitter is such that the conversation rapidly drew in others, developed side-branches and generally became chaotic. I curated the discussion via Storify<sup>7</sup> to make the debate available to

non-Twitter users, and to draw together the key outcomes. There were two main, related themes:

**A need to connect politics and communities:** Many participants wanted more emphasis on engagement and democratic involvement in conservation. The lack of impact of individuals and communities on policy was seen as causing inertia and disinterest in politics. Part of this is attitudes within and without the conservation sector to 'expertise' – mirroring society generally, non-scientists are often undervalued although they can bring both significant practical experience and new ideas to discussions. This is most extreme with citizens wishing to engage on more technical topics and can contribute to the disconnect between community and policy.

**More environmental education** was a major theme in the tweets, with contributors swapping tips on their experiences. The importance of 'nature mentors' was highlighted. Nature mentors were defined as people who can guide and encourage young and old alike to engage with the environment. It was felt that greater emphasis on environmental education would both encourage the idea of conservation as a 'moral imperative' and help engagement beyond the 'converted' and thus easiest-to-talk-to groups, something many conservation organisations and individuals are guilty of. Further, nature can be perceived as 'too safe', and as 'too emotional' – another critique levelled at social media which is most shared and spread around, when involving personal feelings or emotive issues such as animal welfare.<sup>8</sup> Yet, without emotion, there is no connection. Thus it was suggested that conservationists need to keep emotion without becoming simplistic.

Running through these main topics were issues such as scale – the almost unimaginable scale of global climate change, for example – acting to disempower people ('what can I, just one person on this teeming planet, do to make a difference?') and language (presenting nature in terms that people can understand rather than 'cons speak' or acronyms).

### How can the British people gain more power over the way their land is used?

This second debate on land rights was less well-attended – probably because the question was so much broader. Again, the debate is curated on Storify.<sup>9</sup> Many of the elements from the first debate turned up again (education, language, community engagement...) but new themes were:

**Who has power?** We began to think about who in the UK has power over land, and who the 'general public' are – or rather, publics, as there are many ways of grouping people. Groups like ramblers and walkers, tourists, farmers, forestry managers were all mentioned, along with NGOs and policy makers as an 'elite' of land owners and decision-makers.

**New land use models:** 21<sup>st</sup> century commons were suggested as one way to challenge existing models of land management and to encourage greater community

ownership. Local community projects by LandLife were suggested as good models of community engagement in urban green space and wildlife management.

### Tweet on

Twitter for BANC has been an engaging experiment, and one that we will continue through the autumn and winter, so please join us at #revitalisecons to share your thoughts! And thanks to all of you who joined us already. It has been good to join passionate, interesting and enthusiastic people in discussing conservation topics, and we hope these debates will contribute to revitalising the conservation sector.

### References and notes

1. Osborne's claim wildlife rules too costly for business challenged by own review: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2012/mar/22/conservation-business-review>
2. Fitness Check of EU Nature Legislation (Birds and Habitats Directives): [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/fitness\\_check/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/fitness_check/index_en.htm); Habitats and Wild Birds Directives Implementation Review: <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-6156>
3. 100 British conservation groups oppose review of EU wildlife laws: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/12/100-british-conservation-groups-oppose-review-of-eu-wildlife-laws>
4. Sandbrook et al, 2014. Digital games and nature conservation. *Conservation Letters*, 8: 118-124. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12113/abstract>
5. Bombaci et al, 2015. Using Twitter to communicate science beyond professional conferences. *Conservation Biology*, accepted article. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cobi.12570/abstract>
6. Büscher, B. 2014. Nature 2.0: Exploring and theorizing the links between new media and nature conservation. <http://nms.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/08/01/1461444814545841.abstract>
7. <https://storify.com/BANC/what>
8. Does social media 'like' conservation? <http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/34852/title/Opinion--Does-Social-Media--Like--Conservation-/>
9. <https://storify.com/BANC/how-can-the-british-people-take>

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**'Flags' produced by leaf and flower bashing onto linen triangles**, by participants on the 'Wild Learning' project by Neroche Woodlanders at Young Wood - the venue for this year's BANC AGM and 'Revitalising Conservation' event. Learners come from local deprived estates and homeless shelters in Taunton. They were invited to make patterns with the leaves and flowers and write some words to describe their experience of being in the woods.

Photo: Gavin Saunders

