# In search of Nature's renaissance people

*Some voices say conservation needs to pull itself together and become a rigorous scientific, evidence-based discipline once again, ridding itself of its woolly, people-centred distractions. Others are turned off a coldly scientific approach and want a warmer, more human approach which delves deeper into wider culture. The modern challenge for conservationists is to span these extremes, and become cultural polymaths – and real people.*

GAVIN SAUNDERS

*She watches us rise at dawn*
*"Get up, my children" she says*
*Because of her we think and create*
*Because of her we make songs*
*Because of her the designs appear as we weave*
*Because of her we tell stories and laugh*
*We believe in old values and new ideas*
(Lucy Tapahonso, Navajo)

## Needing Nature?

I'm writing this two days after the Paris attacks in November 2015. I feel cold horror and impotent empathy for the victims, their families, their city and their country, and all those other countries facing similar violence. And I think of the trail of uprooted humanity spilling out of the Middle East and Africa, the hardship, and the mix of warm welcome and cold suspicion they face in Europe. And I think of all those twisted, brainwashed people who want to divide us from each other, creating hate to legitimise their own.

And against that apocalyptic backdrop I find myself asking: what use is my plea about the natural world? What point is there in arguing for nature conservation? It feels like the conventional arguments for saving wildlife are fair-weather contentions for comfortable people, not for those fleeing bullets, seeking shelter, food and safety.

Yet I know in my heart that the need for Nature is not negated by more pressing exigencies of human suffering. On the contrary, it is underlined by them. I know that the succour, the redemption, the reflection, the grace that wild nature offers, is a source of deep goodness for any individual, family or community. The neutral ground that a wild space provides for us, for free, lets us see other people on a level, stripped of hierarchy, label and tribe. It allows us to connect with life, not just cling to it.





It is in my *heart* that I know this – not just my head. My heart sets the spark which my head then busies itself with manifesting, rationalising, describing, making sense of. But my head sometimes thinks it can stand alone, without that spark, and rely on reason, and communicate with other heads, in the same stripped-down way. Well-trained after a science degree and 30 years in conservation, my head can construct a neat scaffold of arguments about the need for biodiversity, the importance of ecosystem services, the moral obligations to non-human life, and all the rest of it. But I know that scaffold will crumple like matchsticks in a November gale, as soon as the Kalashnikovs sound.

My heart feels the tie to wild nature, in my guts, and that tie binds me to every other human being as well, regardless of the circumstances. That same heart feels for human suffering, loves those whom I love, brings tears to my eyes when I listen to music in a minor key, and wants to express its experience in shape and colour and words.

## Head plus heart equals whole

But it doesn't do to imagine too stark a line between heart and head. When I look at nature, and enthuse about it, write about it, represent it, share it, and remember doing so afterwards, I do so with the whole of myself. I use the rational bit of myself, and the other-than-rational bit. The scientific bit and the artistic bit. The future-focused bit and the nostalgic bit. I can't experience nature with just one facet of my cultural self, even if I try and convince myself that I am doing so.

Throughout human history we have experienced the rest of Nature with the whole of ourselves, and the creative outpourings of cultures across the world are the expression of that experience. Some aspects of culture illuminate the world for others. Some can darken it. Science is a product of culture, like any other human endeavour, and in common with the rest, science can both reveal and confuse. Its enlightening and obscuring capacity can affect the scientist, as well as his or her audience. Science can on the one hand be the most clear-sighted expression of human intelligence, and on the other, the most willfully self-blinding exercise in self-denial. When conservation begins to see itself as primarily an objective, scientific discipline, then it teeters on the edge of that self-denying trap.

I've never got the hang of the concept of objectivity. I've never understood how anyone or any group can think they are capable of being genuinely objective. What is done in the name of scientific objectivity is all too often a convenience rather than a truly defensible disinterestedness. Evidence is thrust forward when it is convenient, and hidden when it is not. Who are we trying to kid? Ourselves, mostly.

## Science and emotion – the ever present tussle

The question of whether nature conservation is primarily a scientific discipline or a cultural project is not new. It dates back at least to the 'invention' of professional conservation in the post-war years. Max Nicholson and colleagues forged the serious business of conservation in the context of the founding of the NHS, the welfare state, the mechanisation of agriculture and the great future-hope of the

wartime and post-war scientific revolution. To be taken seriously, it needed to be primarily a science, founded on data, measurable and defensible. All public policy had the same cast, despite its human motivations.

I deeply respect the work of that generation, of the original Nature Conservancy, Countryside Commission and other bodies, and the efforts of the successor agencies, despite the slings and arrows they have endured. But their work has its roots in post-War paternalistic scientific management, when future-confident (mostly) men planned a better society based on rational application of scientific truths. It feels to me like the statutory coat currently around the shoulders of UK wildlife comes from that age. It doesn't seem to be human-scale, or feel any longer like the expression of popular will. It seems distanced, coming from a scientifically-removed elite.

There are many currently working in the conservation sector who, like the Huxley, Tansley and Nicholson generation from whom they have inherited their world view, still see nature conservation in this way, albeit with respectful nods to the cultural, aesthetic and recreational needs of society, insofar as those needs are expressed in the language of public policy. But increasingly this is an elitist view, expressed by professionals only too aware they are no longer an elite. I hear between the words of some, a nostalgia for those good old days when policy statements carried weight, when a well-referenced scientific pronouncement was listened to, when authorities had authority.

## Contesting the wild in Nature

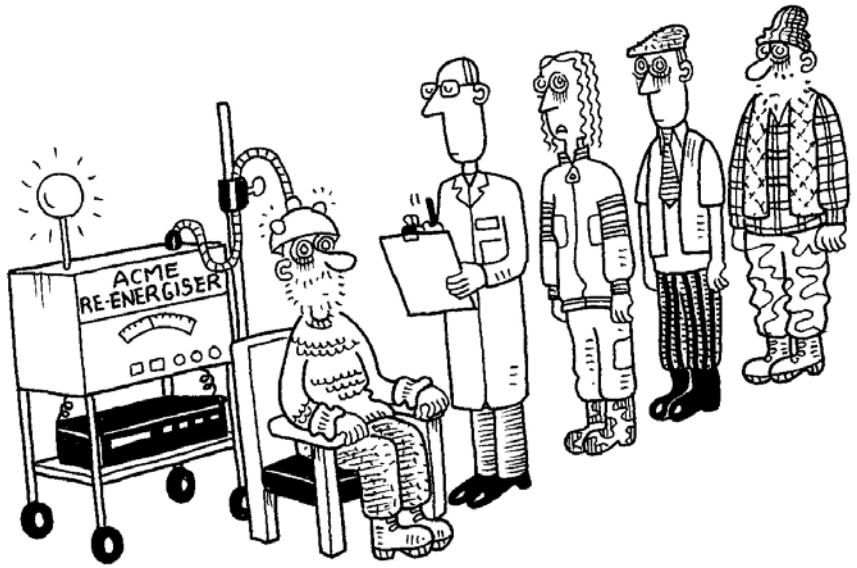
Before the post-war science-based conservation establishment took shape, there was another world, a world where science and arts overlapped – still fought, still clashed, but were enmeshed. Early lovers of nature were artists, poets, painters, as well as natural historians. The Aurelians of the eighteenth century, for example, came to butterflies for their artistic possibilities. Yes, an effete gentlemen's pastime, but it did not require scientific endorsement to be real.

But that Romantic world view had its own blind spots. One hangover from the period which stays with us to this day is the desire to see in Wilderness the untrammelled state of nature, free of human stain. Despite the allure of this notion, it tends to reinforce the sense of distance between human culture and wild Nature. I fear that today's Rewilding movement is prone to this idealist desire to allow nature to rediscover a timeless state of perfection, to say 'let's get rid of all this mistaken human meddling, and let Nature be its proud self'. But where is the recognition in that of human legitimacy, of wildness in us? Yes, say the Rewilders, once we have our wild landscapes back, then people will be able to enter them and express their wild selves. But they can only do that once they are liberated from human habitats.

I revere the example of John Muir, for expressing passion for wild nature and for being the catalyst who channelled that passion into public policy through the creation of the first National Parks in the US. Yet he chose to see those magnificent landscapes as wildernesses without human agency, ignoring the Native American culture which had shaped them. Had he recognised that influence, the presence of








NEIL BENNETT

pre-existing human culture should only have added to the magnificence of those landscapes, not detracted from it.

## A holistic approach – the benefits and risks

The diversity of the world's ecosystems is closely related to the diversity of its cultures. Both are declining. With the extinction of culture, we lose knowledge, wisdom, oral history, sense of place, sense of meaning. If we see a continuum between nature and culture, then we can begin to perceive the commonality between biological and cultural diversity, and better understand the wildness in ourselves. Songs, stories, sculptures, paintings, designs, clothes, recipes, machines, philosophies, faiths – all are part of the diversity of the collective human mindscape. They don't just mirror or bear a resemblance to flowers, insects, birds, weather patterns, rock types and land forms – they are another dimension of those things.

Conservation has both a strong scientific foundation, and a strong cultural context and drive. It is not simply an expression of ecological science, and neither is it simply poetry. Often what makes it fascinating is that it is – or can be – genuinely both. But with that dichotomy comes risks. One risk is around perceived legitimacy. Those who see themselves as 'pure' scientists or 'pure' artists may be dismissive of a discipline which appears to wear the clothes of both. I have worked alongside scientists and artists at different times and sensed that I am not regarded as 'one of us' by either.

Another risk is around actual legitimacy. Most of us within conservation's big tent enter with one or another primary perspective – scientific, artistic, educational, practical. Few of us are fortunate enough genuinely to be polymaths, comfortable

in many sets of clothes. But conservation demands us to be both scientifically grounded, and also culturally adept at communicating, enthusing, and translating Nature into cultural terms which any audience can understand. Yet not all scientists are literate in the widest sense, and not all those who are good communicators are any good at science. One small example: I know Forest School leaders who can't identify common wildflowers or even trees. And similarly I know field naturalists who can't – or don't even want to – communicate their knowledge to the uninitiated.

It's a big ask, but conservationists have to become pan-cultural, Renaissance men and women. And to revitalise nature conservation as an activity, movement and profession, its exponents have to open themselves to a deeper understanding of the nature of human beings. To spread the sense of care and wonder we have for wild nature, we have to learn to share our hearts. And it will be culture – ours, others' – that provides the tools for that. By doing so we help one another understand what it is to be truly human. And when we spend time in nature, with others, we each can give thanks for its wonders to my god, your god, their god, or no god, and it will reward our attention just the same.

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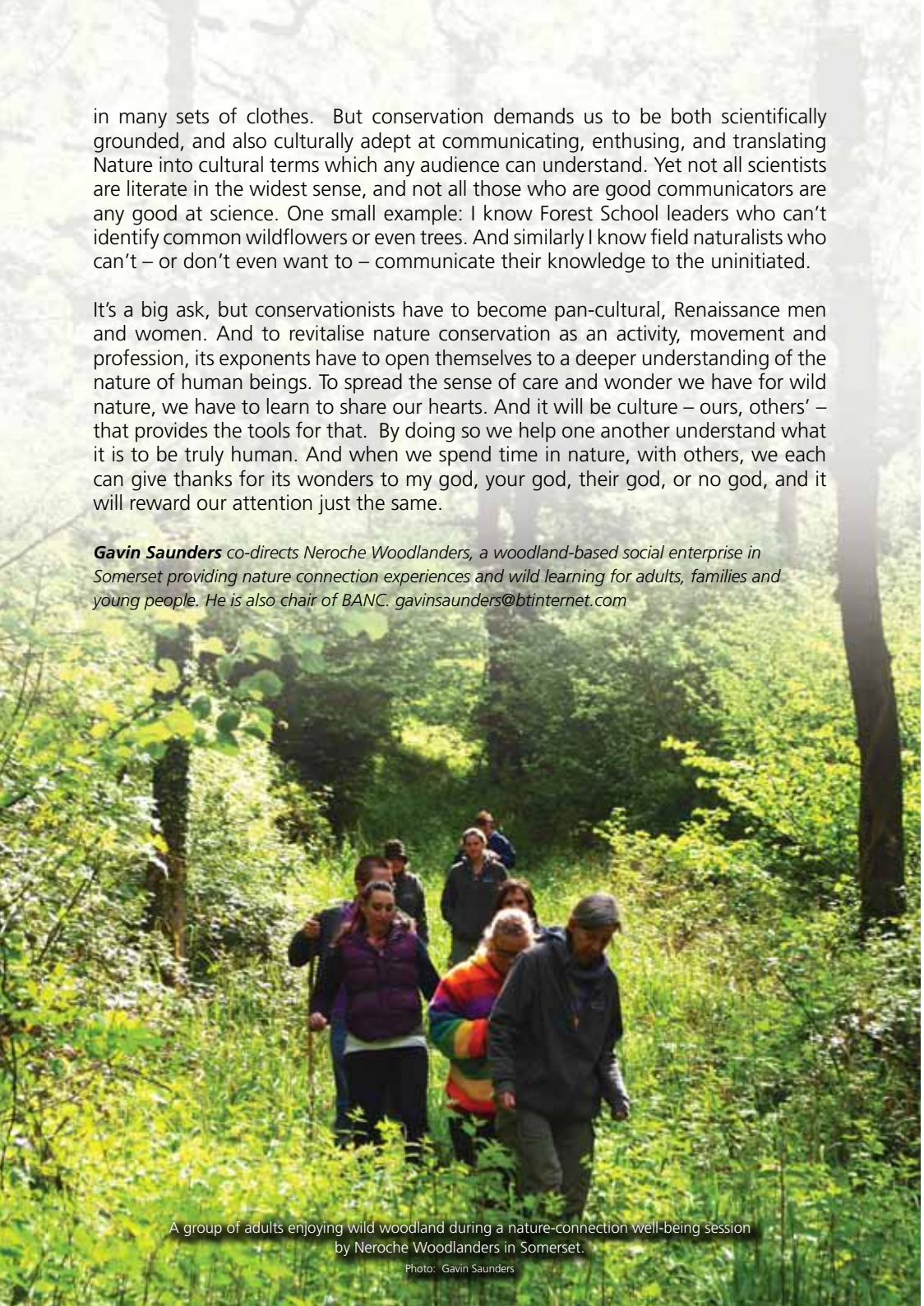

A group of adults enjoying wild woodland during a nature-connection well-being session by Neroche Woodlanders in Somerset.
Photo: Gavin Saunders



# Grounded thinking to grounded action – Steps to revitalising conservation

*This article reflects some views and discussion amongst members of VINE (Values in Nature and the Environment) on the challenges of revitalising nature conservation. Messages include the need to promote positive news, broaden the appeal of nature, link with other disciplines, and recognise a common love of the natural world.*

SOPHIE LAKE & MEMBERS OF VINE

## Conservation's roots and directions

The recent biography of Derek Ratcliffe[1] and Peter Marren's book *Nature Conservation* explain how our system of protected sites was set up to distinguish between those valued for their 'scientific' or 'scenic' attributes and the subsequent trajectory of the nature conservation movement. Both science and cultural strands have always been present and recognised, but given different emphasis.

Nature is valued in so many ways, and there is ongoing debate about the merits of valuation in terms of material benefits to humans. Views inevitably vary on this, but one view that most VINE members probably share is that nature has intrinsic value, and that our love of it is unconditional. This love is rooted in belief, often religious or pantheistic. Ten years ago, it took some courage to say 'I love nature' within the conservation workplace, but such conversations are becoming easier.

Conservation today has many strands, and they do not always weave together smoothly. Knotty areas such as biodiversity offsetting and the 'bats, newts and badgers' work of mainstream ecological consultancy seem a world apart from other conservation efforts. Both spring from the notion that a place is no more than the sum of its constituent living parts, and from financial motivations. Fortunately, there are other strands which offer more promise for the future.

## Positive trends

The *State of Nature* report[2] told us clearly that things were not, overall, going right in UK nature conservation. Nonetheless, there are some gleams in the stifling gloom created by the bureaucratisation of conservation, now a business obsessed with targets and money and entangled within its own internal language of policy, strategy and science. There is inspiring work (and in some cases this is longstanding) being undertaken by individuals and organisations who have the vision of enriching and rewilding both places and people. Examples include The Great Fen[3] project, Trees for Life[4], Wild Ennerdale[5], the Knepp Estate[6] and many more. This is not to