

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.

Gavin Saunders co-directs Neroche Woodlanders, a woodland-based social enterprise in Somerset providing nature connection experiences and wild learning for adults, families and young people. He is also chair of BANC. gavinsauanders@btinternet.com

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 Ratcliffe¹ 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* report² 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 Fen³ project, Trees for Life⁴, Wild Ennerdale⁵, the Knepp Estate⁶ and many more. This is not to

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

Photo: Gavin Saunders

detract from the focussed habitat and species work that has been such a mainstay of conservation, but we know more is needed. There are also inspiring habitat creation schemes such as RSPB's Wallasea Island project⁷, which has been expertly designed, including provision for species that may colonise in the future such as the black-winged stilt. These projects are usually centred on a particular place. The love of place (including the human and non-human beings and the rocks, water, earth, and air that in many cultures are also ensouled) is something we have struggled to articulate within conservation, and it is an aspect much discussed in VINE. However, we are edging towards a clearer-sighted conservation, in which we recognise that conservation is not solely rooted in science (although excellent conservation science is nonetheless needed) but in values, and that these values are conditioned by our culture. We are also confronting our fear of losing control and our need to 'steward' the land and are learning to embrace change and uncertain outcomes.

We are also moving towards a better understanding of the values and frames underlying conservation. Common Cause⁸ has brought this to the fore and presents succinct recommendations that all conservation organisations need to take on board. They revolve around using integrity in the values that we promote. We need to be inspiring people rather than scaring or depressing them, empowering them to become active by helping them to undertake tasks that are proportionate. We should not be appealing to people's intrinsic values (such as care for the natural world) through conflicting values connected with materialism and self-concern, because it is likely to backfire.

Although not new (remember RSPB's Young Ornithologists Club?) the agenda of 'nature connectedness' has gained much momentum recently, and its own jargon. Connection is a great starting point, but it needs to lead on to ecological literacy – the ability to understand how nature sustains life and how to live accordingly.⁹ We urgently need to get ecological literacy into mainstream schooling – people need to be empowered to take nature conservation forward for themselves.

Digital conservation – slave or master?

A recurring topic for VINE is the use of screen-based media (social media, film, apps, digital images and the like). Sometimes it seems that wildlife films are more enjoyed than wildlife itself, that engagement with the natural world is more likely to be through a screen than experienced first-hand with all the senses. There is some ambivalence within VINE about this, but mindful use of such media can help make the natural world accessible, particularly for people who might not be attracted initially. Technology is neither good nor bad, it's a question of how it is used, and it could be used to consolidate understanding, to stimulate and inspire.

But, despite all these positives and potentials, places, species and habitats are still being lost and degraded, and that is in spite of the money being poured in, through agri-environment schemes for example.

What is going wrong?

Nature conservation is not compatible with current western levels of consumption, world population increase rates, and with a growth-based paradigm. But, at the



moment, many people are scared to voice this, scared of alienating those in places of power, scared of alienating the public by appearing too radical. VINE is a place where people can explore these issues personally, rather than in their organisational role. The support of others gives us more confidence to speak out.

Linked to this is the issue of language. It is often argued that we need to speak the language of those we seek to influence, but it is important that we do not forget that it is not our native tongue. We need to speak with bravery and passion, we need to use evocative language that captures the hearts and minds of the public, and we need to stop hiding behind weasel words when trying to defend some of the paradoxes of conservation.

Our willingness to fall back on science is another obstacle. Sound science can be a powerful way of understanding the world around us, but science is not helpful in distinguishing right or wrong, and it is not necessarily good at engaging people. We need to increase our knowledge of other ways of exploring the world and increase our work with artists, musicians, and performers.

A shot in the arm for conservation?

Conservation needs to celebrate how beautiful nature is and what it means to us. We need to do this both to revive ourselves, and to engage others. As individuals, we also need to make it a priority to go out and seek those reflective moments when our personal connection with nature is not veiled by the everyday business of conservation. Conservation needs inspired, creative people who will look forward to what could be. Conservation action needs bravery and integrity - we should stop churning out jargon and second-rate data and get out there to make a difference on the ground.

Acknowledgements

VINE (Values in Nature and the Environment)¹⁰ is a group of people working in or with an interest in nature conservation, who are brought together by their interest in the underlying values of nature conservation. VINE (a not-for-profit organisation) has no single voice and does not take 'positions' on issues - it has as many voices as members (some 250 at the last count). So this is not a VINE response to the key questions raised by BANC about revitalising nature; it is a discussion informed and influenced by the myriad voices of VINE. Individual members of VINE may not agree with some (or even all!) of the points raised, but the comments have all been informed or influenced by VINE's (mainly online) discussions.

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References and notes

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- 10 www.vineproject.org.uk

Sophie Lake is a founder member and current Secretary of VINE, and works for Footprint Ecology. She is co-author of Britain's Habitats, a guide to, and celebration of, the habitats of Britain and Ireland. *WILDGuides, 2015*. sophie@vineproject.org.uk

Conservation wisdom

Looking back to look forward

People helping wildlife have worked the land for generations with commitment, passion and wisdom. State conservation action has been well intentioned but its formulaic processes have stifled initiative and endeavour. The best of the old needs to combine with what we trust in the new.

DAVID BLAKE

I live and work in an ancient landscape. I can feel its vintage qualities every day. Its Early Medieval links are written in place names and are tangible in the grasslands, woodlands and trees. In the first half of the Twentieth century, some of the early movers and shakers of what was to become the conservation movement lived in this area. They were an eclectic bunch: academics, soldiers, writers and landowners. They had been through a world war or two and learned the value of life. They had enthusiasm for and fascination about our wildlife, our heritage and our nation. Many of them were deeply conservative and mistrustful of change, challenging the policies and accepted wisdom of the day. Their passion for nature led to the formation of some of the progressive organisations we know today, including the Soil Association. Amongst their cause, they strove for an acceptance that a responsible government should look after our environment on our behalf.

State wildlife support - a process not a passion?

Following the founding legislation, government started to take a lead, and provide action for nature. Thus people were encouraged to leave it up to 'them'. An elite cadre was created of people and organisations entrusted with making policy, and who were uniquely qualified to turn it into action. On the whole, everyone else was happy to let them get on with it and it certainly worked well in many respects. In hindsight, two things went wrong. First, most nature reserves and protected areas for wildlife are owned by farmers and charities. Thus the designation of protected areas has limited influence. Certain activities are discouraged or regulated within them, so government limits the extent over which those restrictions to private enterprise apply. If we had gone the other way and made protected areas into zones of opportunity, where special tax reliefs or incentives applied, we would be in a different place now. Second, we came to rely on paying farmers to help wildlife through tax-payer funded schemes and regulation. The result is that, for many land owners, nature conservation is no longer the great passion that it once was. They are invested in the process and not the outcome.

Government money and regulation for nature conservation is packaged as a scheme, not a vocation; it's a deal to be brokered, not a personal responsibility. Every pro-nature decision on the farm needs financial justification through a payment scheme;