

The Dying of the Light: Values in Nature and the Environment

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'I so long a worshipper of Nature hither came, unwearied in that service.' (William Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*).

To the plethora of organisations involved in environmental and wildlife conservation in the UK can now be added *Values in Nature and the Environment* (VINE). This is more of a working title, with a convenient acronym, than one of precise meaning. It is curious that VINE has been formed under the umbrella of the *Forum for the Application of Conservation Techniques* (FACT), which is strongly allied to the practitioners wing of our nature conservation movement and is best known for likes of the *Grazing Animals Project* (GAP), the production of practical handbooks and a biennial conference. However, philosophy and psychology should, and do, have direct practical purpose and relate strongly to real life. Indeed, one of the group's main premises is that the conservation of nature needs to broaden out from its science base to add, in a manner complementary to good science, what lies within the domains of pragmatic philosophy and psychology. The arguments for this transmogrification are presented by Harding (2006), but the simple truth is that it is only through understanding why we seek to conserve nature that we will recognise what we are trying to achieve and what we actually need to do.

This article is written by one of VINE's founder members and is offered, not from Mount Olympus, but on behalf of a group of established conservationists who believe that the philosophical base for nature conservation needs strengthening, and that the psychology of the subject is under-explored. The account is written for everyone active in environmental conservation in the UK, professional and volunteer. It explores some of the feelings and deep thinking issues that are prevalent within and outside of contemporary nature conservation. VINE exists more to encourage individuals and the environmental community to explore the philosophy of nature than to provide answers. It would also be more appropriate for an embryo organisation to frame questions than to specify answers.

From GAEC to Gaia

At work, we rarely talk about our feelings or emotions towards nature. Yet, most of us came to work for the cause as a result of deep emotional response to experience. Some of us were motivated by positive experience, others by witnessing disaster or destruction. As Harding (2006) simply puts it: many of us got 'Gaia'ed' - as did Aldo Leopold when he watched the green fire dying in the eyes of the old she-wolf he had just shot (Leopold, 1949). In general, though, we hide our emotions, perhaps in an attempt to adopt the dispassionate objectivity that has been bred into us by scientific training.

William Wordsworth, early on in his long career as a poet, in the lyrical ballad that became known as *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, captures the essence of the relationship between humanity and nature and encapsulates Gaian thinking. If environmentalists are to be familiar with just a single fragment of verse, this may be it:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things.

Sadly, Wordsworth never quite ascended to such lofty heights again, probably because of the influence upon him of the Picturesque movement, through which he partly made his living. That movement reversed the relationship between nature and art: previously, art had merely reflected or interpreted Nature, but now nature had to be subservient to Art. Perhaps Nature is now in danger of becoming subservient to Nature Conservation?

VINE's objectives are not set in stone, rather it is intended that the group will evolve experientially within broad parameters. Also, VINE was established to help environmentalists to recognise and develop the feelings that led them into a poorly paid and stressful profession. This is no easy challenge, as it is extraordinarily difficult to perceive, accept and then fulfil individual purpose in life. Several of VINE's members have produced personal statements that encapsulate their individual philosophies of nature. A sample of these can be viewed on the VINE web site (www.vineproject.org.uk), along with VINE's objectives. VINE would like to help individual values be recognised and accepted by colleagues and even by organisational structures. Any difficulties here can be overcome by the recognition and acceptance of the premise that those of us involved with wildlife and the environment all have much more in common than we may have out of common. VINE is therefore of universalist persuasion, wherein diverse perspectives are respected. The issue of reconciling individual values and beliefs with those of corporate organisations may well be the greatest challenge the group faces: it is difficult for organisations to embrace personal views, even when widely held, and it is also hard for individuals to interpret corporate values.

Another of VINE's fundamental objectives is to nurture and communicate the belief that the Jungian 'mandala' of intuition, sensing, feeling and thinking should augment the scientific foundation of our work. This concept is developed by Harding (2006). In brief, *thinking* interprets in a rationalised (scientific) manner, *feeling* evaluates, *intuition* gives a sense of deeper meaning and *sensing* provides initial recognition. The importance of feeling, intuition sensing is summarised by Naess, 1998: 'Feelings and emotions are the source of our ideas, inspiration, and creativity.'

Most of us feel that we chose to work, as professionals or dedicated volunteers, in nature conservation. Whether we do it for nature itself, for people and nature, or for ourselves is secondary, and some of us may never have questioned why we do it. We were not attracted in by the wages, or even by the prospect of fame or fulfilment, yet few of us simply drifted in by chance. Many, if not all, of us have answered a calling. Whether we have recognised it as such is another issue, and one that may not matter unduly; for what does matter is that we have, in our own ways, answered that calling and are pursuing our vocation. The word ‘vocation’ has interesting Latin derivations: *vocatus* means a peremptory or urgent call, *vocatio* is an invitation, and *vocalis* is the ability to speak. Of course, the extent to which managing an Excel spreadsheet or slumbering through a biodiversity meeting constitutes answering a calling may be open to debate.

Nature Conservation and the Many-sided Coin

This section and the following eight short sub-sections examine the concept of nature conservation, within the context of the UK, and argue that a difference exists between the actual and desired states. These sections use the analogy of a several-sided coin, which has two major sides and several minor aspects along the edge, like a fifty pence coin. This is not an attempt to define the subject in detail, a task that merits a philosophical treatise, but is offered as a succinct assessment of what may be the key elements.

It is curious that there is no single accepted definition of ‘nature conservation’ in the UK. Even the two words viewed independently are challenging to define. Mostly, broad definitions of environmental ‘conservation’, which concentrate on the sustainable use of natural resources, have been used within the context of our discipline. Perhaps the best from this genre is by Adams (1999) who defines environmental conservation as: ‘A personal relationship, a matter of decisions about human actions in the light of their implications for non human nature.’ He adds that the most critical element is ‘the form of human engagement with non human nature.’

Many definitions of ‘nature conservation’ have been published by scientists, philosophers and free-thinkers, though, curiously, none have stuck. This may be because these definitions are largely one-dimensional and fail to grasp all the relevant aspects, of which there are many. It may also reflect the pace at which thinking and practice are developing within our movement, plus the fact that activists have little time to stop and think. Whereas many ecology and environmental courses include modules on environmental theory and principles, not all do, and people enter the environmental professions with values and feelings that they themselves may not fully recognise or articulate. Moreover, personal beliefs then become sidelined within organisations.

The Denial of the Obvious

A major philosophical dilemma exists in that, within the broad parameters of ‘conservation’, whatever we do or allow, and whatever we prevent or resist, some elements of wildlife and nature benefit, whilst others are adversely affected, if only by

the allowance or denial of opportunity. This principle is obvious; yet, incredibly, I have not encountered it anywhere in the voluminous British literature, in attendance at conferences, or even in conversation – though it would appear that some environmentalists in the USA have been thinking along these lines. Even the allowance or purposeful development of naturalistic systems falls within the scope of this principle. If we accept the principle, which is hard to refute, then the breadth and magnitude of moral choices open to us begins to become apparent.

The Significance of Value Judgements

Acceptance of (or inability to refute) this principle indicates that value judgements are fundamental to our conservation movement. What is curious, and pertinent here, is the questionable extent to which conservationists are clear about their own values, both as individuals and within organisations. And, of course, values and ways of thinking change; they evolve, largely within broad parameters that are set early. This principle would suggest that environmental philosophy is a massive subject, in terms of scope and importance, which warrants further development in the UK.

So, the conservation of nature is fundamentally concerned with value judgements, with what we value. However, our profession possesses a complex system for expressing environmental preferences, which is used to justify value judgements – though, crucially, without actually admitting them to be such. Indeed, nature conservation values are unwittingly obscured by the language of biological conservation.

Beauty, Rarity and Loss

The elements of nature valued by conservationists is a vast and complex subject, which cannot be tackled adequately here. We seem to value facets of nature, notably species, habitats and associated landscapes, rather than our relationship with nature itself. It would appear obvious that we should value beauty but, curiously, we seem to value rarity more, for considerable resources are devoted to arresting and reversing decline, with beauty at best a secondary consideration. Indeed, there is a significant relationship between rarity and funding. Maybe rarity is easier to quantify than beauty, or perhaps the real issue here is that we are unable to let go easily, or we feel that humanity's dominion over nature extends to rescuing species from the brink of (often human-induced) extinction? We also value the quirky, the species with the amazing life cycle – unless it is neither rare nor beautiful. Or perhaps it is simply the case that we are strongly motivated by loss?

Deeper still, it is arguable that our philosophy and psychology for handling change in general are grossly inadequate? This issue runs deep in westernised society, and the psychology of rarity may be a complex subject. It can be argued, then, that the first element of 'nature conservation' is seeking to ensure a viable future for features of significance, things that we value.

The Philosophy of Change

This thinking suggests that conservation in general is heavily concerned with how we handle change. As an example, the National Trust holds that: 'Conservation is the

careful management of change. It is about revealing and sharing the significance of places and ensuring that their special qualities are protected, enhanced, understood and enjoyed by present and future generations.’ (Conservation Strategy Group, September 2003). This is derived largely from a definition determined by the academic philosophers Holland and Rawles (1993): ‘Conservation is about negotiating the transition from past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of maximum significance’.

Both these definitions are in conflict with nature conservation’s frequent endeavours to arrest successional change, and other forms of change, whether natural, human-induced, or as combinations of the two. I would argue, however, that this is just one side of the coin and that the key issue is actually the philosophy and psychology of Change. Nonetheless, it can be argued that conservation, like life itself, is intrinsically concerned with understanding Change.

The Philosophy of Time

Academic philosophy defines time as being the dimension or medium in which change occurs. The philosophy of time is, therefore, like the conservation of nature, strongly concerned with the relationship between past, present and future. Although time as we know it is forward-bound, wildlife conservation idealism in the UK and the USA is becoming increasingly atavistic. This is indicated by the extent to which we seek to turn back the clock - by years, decades or centuries - to some Elysian state that may or may not have existed, and by the emphasis on recovery and restoration. The Pleistocene era is currently being advocated by a group of environmentalists in the USA (Donlan 2005), which in the UK would equate to the Ipswichian era. Perhaps we find it easier to sense the past than envisage the future? But tomorrow cannot, and will not, be all or any of our yesterdays, and the past does not need to be our sole reference point for ‘nature conservation’. Moreover, as the starting points for our actions vary in time, place and structure, so will the routes taken and the features sustained, altered or gained.

The philosophical debate over the extent to which our perception of the past could and should prime our future actions needs to reach some conclusions. Genuine restoration is obviously impossible. Indeed, the need for myth-busting in nature conservation is massive, for despite science we are strongly influenced by the power of assumption. Of course, we cannot re-wild, *sensu stricto* or *sensu lato*; all we can do is move forward, seeking to incorporate what we perceive to be analogues of past conditions or of lost ecological drivers. The enormous opportunities presented by agricultural change may help us to look more into the future.

Humanity and Nature

The relationship between humanity and nature is often given scant attention by the UK wildlife movement is, yet it must be the most important aspect of ‘nature conservation’. Here the literature canon is extensive, so much so that one can become lost in wonder amongst it. Edward O. Wilson (1994) makes the essential connection between humanity and nature: ‘We did not arrive on this planet as aliens. Humanity is part of nature, a species that evolved among other species.’ The famous quote from Aldo Leopold (1949) is also worth reiterating here: ‘There were once men

capable of inhabiting a river without disrupting the harmony of its life.’ This, of course, concerns the theory of modern humanity’s alienation from nature. Perhaps the startling truth is that the essence of ‘nature conservation’ is actually the reforging of the relationship between humanity and nature, and thereby rediscovering our true human nature.

Globuli Societatis Florebunt!

Few of us would deny that nature conservation has developed into a full-blown bureaucracy. The encompassment of the nature profession by well-meaning but convoluted governmental systems often associated with agriculture, the complexities of UK biodiversity process, and the machinations over the Public Service Agreement over SSSI condition in England are, rightly or wrongly, open to such criticism. They have developed from complex and often blunt legislation, much of which has been derived from the ethos of animal welfare or town and country planning.

But bureaucracy has an important positive side, certainly in this context, for the process of bureaucratisation is indicative of our movement coming of age and becoming registered on the political radar. What was an uncoordinated and unstructured alliance has now developed into a profession and industry, recognised by government through the creation of a Minister for Biodiversity & Rural Affairs, the Biodiversity Duty, and with access to significant if convoluted funding streams.

Moreover, the biodiversity process has determined, for the first time, where priorities should lie in terms of habitats, species and associated actions. Whether they are the right priorities, or not, is secondary. Also, of course, CAP reform has started the process of bringing agriculture and environmental conservation closer together. Finally, given the moral maze and hall of mirrors in which conservationists can become befuddled, the development of a bureaucracy may be a considerable relief, for it provides a comfort zone - it is good to rely upon the system when one’s imagination fails. Whether one’s imagination should ever fail is another matter, whilst comfort zones can result in people and organisations selling themselves and their causes short. There is, though, surely a need within any bureaucratic system for people who are prepared to push at the limits, gently: to prevent the system’s parameters from narrowing down and becoming unnecessarily restrictive, and to ensure that the system serves people and, crucially, that people nurture rather than meekly serve the system.

Reflection: the Hydra’s Head

The preceding eight sections have argued that nature conservation today *is* primarily concerned with seeking the future of features of significance, with the philosophy and management of change, with the justification of actions and the prioritisation of features and, especially, with the bureaucratic systems necessary to achieve the above. Perhaps it *should*, though, be concerned primarily with the relationship between humanity and nature, but to date the UK movement has not embraced this integral element. This may be because we have relied too much on science, which cannot deliver outside the realms of scientific verification. We surely need science to be central within a balanced, broad-spectrum approach that also incorporates philosophy and psychology.

Reverting back to the coin analogy: I believe that the two main faces of nature conservation should be, on the Heads side, the relationship between humanity and nature and, on the Tails side, the close analysis of our own values, particularly regarding the issue of change. The system, both in terms of bureaucracy and management practice, should be the coin's edge, and not one of its main faces. Unanalysed and non-prioritised, these strands form a Hydra's head.

A Question of Semantics

Professions generate their own internal languages. The nature conservation industry certainly has its own professional language, which is a complex blend of scientific terminology that now incorporates increasing amounts of modern business, legal and policy-speak. The language works reasonably well internally, but as a mechanism for external communication it can be disastrous – as those of us who have sat through irate public meetings in village halls can testify. Our professional language must be as unintelligible to the outsider as the language of cricket is to the game's non-converts.

In 2004, the Countryside Council for Wales commissioned the Susie Fisher Group to explore public understanding of *Nature reserves and the natural history concepts which underpin them* (unpublished report). Part of this exercise involved asking people to define 'biodiversity', a king-pin word of the nature conservation profession. Answers ranged from 'The environment', through 'The insides of animals', via 'Biology' and 'The interaction of nature with agriculture' to 'Washing powder' and doubtless beyond. It would be worth repeating the exercise *within* the profession.

But the language of nature conservation is changing fast, for as part of the (half-welcome) process of bureaucratisation our movement now increasingly uses the language of Policy. This seems to be a conceptual language, but it is clear than many experienced wildlife conservation activists scarcely understand it, though this may just reflect personal training needs. The language seems to lack passion, depth and breadth; to some conservationists it seems to be a convoluted way of saying as little as possible. The great poets would surely turn in their graves.

Professor Jonathan Bate, a scholar of English literature, demonstrates the importance of poetic language in the relationship between humanity and nature through his theory of eco-poetics (Bate 2000). The term is derived from the ancient Greek *oikos* (= eco-), meaning in this context 'place of belonging', and *poiesis*, or 'making'. In essence, his theory is that poetic language is the key form of expression for our relationship with nature and is, to use his book title, *The Song of the Earth*. He writes: 'I will never convince you by rational argument that the land sings, that a brook may feel pain, but by reading (John) Clare you might be led to imagine the possibility.' He adds: 'Ecopoetry is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it.' Whether we run with his theory or not, there is a simple lesson for nature conservation: namely, that we may be able to communicate more effectively to both external and internal audiences about nature by using, properly, poetic language. Mercifully, there is a deep legacy handed down by the poets themselves.

‘Whoever brought me here will have to take me home’ (Rumi)

VINE has come into being to help nature conservation practitioners maintain and develop their motivation. The need may be great, especially given that radical organisational change, so traumatic and yet prevalent in modern business, is now as endemic within our profession as Myxomatosis is amongst rabbit populations.

VINE also exists to energise the spiritual aspect of nature conservation, to clarify the link - as TS Elliot so beautifully put it in *Burnt Norton*: ‘At the still point of the turning world ... there the dance is’. The timing of VINE’s arrival is pertinent, both in relation to the challenge of climate change and to the perhaps inevitable move from product-based nature conservation (species and habitats) to a process-driven approach. It may even be that VINE’s formation is a step in that progression.

This article argues that the conservation of nature may be taking a wrong direction and is in danger of becoming encapsulated within a cul de sac of systematics, of drowning in a sea of bureaucracy that offers the pretence of achievement, rather than the actuality. Already, agricultural landscapes are, wrongly, the default-setting for nature conservation and for our engagement with nature and landscape. The recognition of a clear and full definition of the purpose of ‘nature conservation’ would provide greater clarity than the biodiversity process, which in effect, adds only to the obfuscation. Moreover, many of us have become alienated from, and now feel obliged to deny, the dreaming that brought us into becoming active in the movement. This denial will continue so long as we remain loathe to recognise the spiritual importance of Nature to us, as individuals, within our organisations and as a society. The battle needs to rage, not on the ground, at site or landscape levels, but within our minds. The light within us, collectively and as individuals, is in danger of dying. The osmosis of bureaucracy will not rekindle it. At the very least, it is vital that we recognise that nature conservation functions on a far broader front than science alone.

Whereas the concept of the three-legged stool of sustainability (social, economic and environmental) has much to offer us, it is selling the actuality short: there is a fourth leg, which can simply be termed the spiritual. This needs to be recognised, at individual, corporate and movement levels, and celebrated, even though it may be hard to clarify. It requires an adjustment of approach. A positive engagement with Nature provides far more than an endorphin kick: it needs to be recognised as a genuine relationship and as the answering of a calling. We need to recognise that spirituality, passion and love are an essential part of the conservation of nature. The alternatives may lead to the failure to understand ourselves and our cause.

‘The breeze of dawn has secrets to tell you, don’t go back to sleep’ Rumi

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