

Nature conservation in an era of indifference

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Abstract

A pre-condition for successful nature conservation projects is the presence of committed individuals, largely from the volunteer sector. As environmental and conservation issues multiply, thought must be given to growth of the conservation sector in society. An informal survey of conservationists and their formative experiences suggests that traditional school and park nature programming do not meet the criteria for formative experiences. A series of fundamental social changes is required before growth in the conservationist sector becomes a reality.

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Introduction

One follows the Behr's hairstreak. Another advocates for the *Jeffersonii* badger. A third defends the Garry oak meadows. The well-being of a surprising number of British Columbia's endangered species and spaces has quietly come to rest in the hands of individual conservationists. Indeed, many aspects of nature conservation—recovery, restoration, preservation, stabilization, and education—now depend on individuals and small groups, largely from the volunteer sector.

In this paper, I use the collective term “conservationist” to refer to those people actively involved with nature conservation and to a second tier who are generally interested in nature and who attempt to live an environmentally aware lifestyle. The presence of both groups is a pre-condition for all successful conservation work. Legislation and government programs can protect species and ecosystems to some degree, the private sector comes on board occasionally, but the long-term fate of these organisms will be determined by conservationists, the ones who commit hard time to the intricacies of species biology, the ones who are there for the long run, and the ones who consider it a bonus if they get paid for their work. These people are also the locals, with jobs and families, and who provide the necessary grease and glue to reconcile the needs of nature with the reality of local economies.

The trouble is that there simply aren't enough of these working conservationists in our society. There are already too many species and too many projects to go around, and the size of the conservationist sector is tiny compared to the magnitude of the ecological problems we face. Cast your mind back 20 years to a time when nature conservation was not on anyone's public agenda. Now project 20 years forward—are we going to have enough people to cover all the conservation needs and issues? Not bloody likely.

This is not just an academic concern. In British Columbia, we face several unmistakable moral watersheds regarding threatened species—the Selkirk caribou, several coastal salmon runs, the Kootenay white sturgeon, the *Jeffersonii* badger, to name just a few. The same is true for some threatened plant associations such as the semidesert grasslands of the South Okanagan. Will we invest the effort to save them, or will we give up and let them go? Our generation stands to be judged on how we respond to these moral watersheds.

The fundamental issue in conservation is not the lack of science, it is our collective social attitudes about nature, environment, and natural resources.

As a data-hungry society, we need to remind ourselves of a simple fact: the lack of biological knowledge is *not* the fundamental problem in nature conservation, nor is legislation or government funding. Additional knowledge is always valuable, but science alone can't bail us out. The fundamental issue in conservation is not the lack of science, it is our collective social attitudes about nature, environment, and natural resources. With the proper attitudes in place, appropriate science, legislation, and funding will surely follow.

We Know, But We Don't Care

We live in what I call the “era of indifference”; that is, we know, but we don't care. There was a time when ecological ignorance could be claimed as an excuse for the damage we do to nature, habitats, and species, but not any longer. One of the outcomes of the Information Age is that detailed documentation of our consumption excesses is instantly available. Splendid graphs and tables abound that provide minute detail on how we degrade our atmosphere, pollute our rivers, deplete our energy sources, overflow our prairies, overcut our forests, overbuild our cities, and overdrive our roads.

Here's an illustration of the era of indifference taken from my own experience. A few months ago, I was invited to a climate change workshop, and I drove 700 kilometres in an SUV to get there. The incredible irony of taking a gas-guzzling Ford™ Explorer to a meeting devoted to greenhouse gas emissions is somehow emblematic of a larger social phenomenon: we know about our negative effects on nature, we see where the slopes on all those graphs are headed, but we simply don't care. Or we care, but not enough to modify any of our consumer or lifestyle priorities.

Look at all the pleasures and inducements that the consumer lifestyle provides. On the other hand, the conservationist lifestyle appears drab, has none of the perks and, to top it off, comes with a whole suite of

negative social labels and stereotypes. Let's see, there's the tree-hugger, the lab-coated science nerd, the Birkenstock™ ecologist, the ivory tower academic, the hippie environmentalist, the liberal do-gooder, the aging nutbar, the Goretex™ preservationist, the granola-crunching protester, the cappuccino conservationist. Can you think of a positive stereotype of the conservationist? I can't. My local Ford dealer probably has as much public profile as any conservationist in this province. The one possible exception is David Suzuki, but he is the exception that proves the rule since he has a dual career as conservationist and media personality.

This may be anathema to some, but I believe a practical solution to our dilemma is to create more conservationists. How do we do this?

The Making of a Conservationist

I have the privilege of frequent contact with some of British Columbia's leading conservationists, and I stand in awe of their knowledge, patience, and fortitude. One characteristic that marks them is a certain lack of ego, which is good because, as a society, we certainly don't recognize and honour their efforts. Stan Rowe, one of my conservationist heroes, passed away recently after a long life as an ecologist, activist, and social thinker. I've often wondered what it would be like to walk in Stan's moccasins, putting forth lucid "eco-centric" arguments day in and day out, year after year, and seeing so little come back in return. The conservationist sits far down the list of luminaries in our popular culture, well behind the corporate executive, the media personality, the professional athlete.

The task of creating conservationists has traditionally been the job of the public school system, particularly in the primary grades. If we follow this theory, all we need to do is wait one generation while the teachers do their thing and, *voilà*, we evolve painlessly to the conservationist society. Although I greatly admire what the schools are attempting to do, I believe that relying on them to create conservationists is a profound and shameless cop-out. Schools cannot inculcate values that the larger society itself does not hold. Besides, relegating everything to the schools very conveniently leaves us adults with no responsibility for personal or societal change.

I've done an informal poll of several conservationists, asking them to describe the sources of their motivation and the trigger for their interest in nature. Every one of them reported one element in common. There



was a period in their childhood or young adulthood when they had prolonged, intimate, and interactive contact with nature. Some examples they provided include working in the bush, spending summers at a cottage or camp, or being part of a naturalist club. Prolonged contact with an adult mentor, such as a naturalist parent club leader, was another common element. None of the nature programming that I am aware of, whether offered by an educational institution, government, or non-governmental organization, really meets these criteria. If we wish to franchise these individual, formative experiences to create more conservationists, we cannot rely on any of the traditional quick-hit models like the nature walk, the field day, the interpretive trail, or the slide show.

Another characteristic that these committed conservationists shared in common was a devoted, almost fierce, attachment to a particular place. A variant of this nature attachment is a kind of "species-centrism" in which conservationists become attached to place through concerns for the habitat of their favoured species, be they bears, owls, or mosses.

If we accept the importance of formative experiences with nature in creating conservationists and wish to make these experiences more widely available, we face a major barrier. The population of British Columbia is urbanizing rapidly. Almost by definition, the opportunities a young person has for intimate contact with nature are reduced by living in large cities as opposed to smaller rural communities. As we plan our cities, we need to provide the wild and semi-wild spaces necessary for that prolonged, intimate, and interactive contact with nature.

This is not discretionary—I believe it’s simply part of the price we pay for becoming an urban society.

Think Bioregionally, Act Locally

If this is beginning to sound a bit Rousseauvian—that the human being is automatically ennobled by contact with nature—I make no apologies. Actually, I am updating Rousseau by saying that contact with nature is essential for human survival. On a material level, a connection with nature means we are more fully aware of the impacts of our natural resource transactions. On a spiritual level, I think the human psyche profoundly benefits from wrestling with the complex, ambivalent, and everchanging entity that is nature.

To reiterate, the root issues here are social rather than scientific, governmental, or economic. Any proposed solution that is framed in the context of what “government must” do to promote nature conservation is doomed to fail. Governments are not committed to nature conservation because we aren’t. And, in truth, even if governments were, there simply isn’t enough tax

money available to fix all the problems. It is up to us, the people of British Columbia, to renegotiate the terms of our social contract with nature, to make its needs more central to our daily life. If we take that lead, government will follow.

Nature conservation rests on a perilously narrow social base in British Columbia. If we are to change this, we need to examine ways to franchise prolonged, intimate, and interactive contact with nature for young people. We cannot leave schools and parks to carry the entire burden of inculcating nature-positive values into society. We need to elevate and enhance the public profile of the conservationist. We need to create and maintain wild and semi-wild spaces in urban areas. And finally, we must begin to think bioregionally, and enhance the social value of attachment to place.

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