

Conserving nature: How best to impassion our community?

John H. Harris

Harris Research Pty Ltd, Sydney

To revolutionise nature conservation, I believe we must change community values. Ordinary people must come to value the conservation of nature more than they value their sport or their cars. Conservation must become a community passion, and it must be clear to politicians that their constituency is passionate about conserving natural Australia.

This is the challenge for us, living in the most urbanised nation of all, where large and increasing proportions of the community – especially the young people – live in cities and have little or no personal interaction with nature. Presently the vast majority have no concept that natural capital (including for example soil, biological diversity, water, trees or air) and ecosystem services (for example regulation of water flow from catchments, carbon and nitrogen fixation by plants, breakdown and assimilation of organic materials, or forest pollination by animals) are the fundamental sources of our comfortable lifestyle. There is little understanding that our spiritual, emotional and material welfare are inextricably tied to interactions with nature.

So how can people be impassioned? Is it really the answer to try to create a zoo in every suburb? I believe the answers lie instead in helping people to know about natural capital and the other truly important issues, and also to understand our innate psychological dependence on nature. It's about a truer education for their kids so that sport and entertainment are less important than the processes of life on Earth. And about recognising the degraded condition of so much of natural Australia.

In my view, the answers will come from the popular media, where we get most of the information that shapes our attitudes. From the press, radio and television. Not the biologists preaching amongst themselves but the new generation of Attenboroughs, Ehrlichs and Suzukis, fed with knowledge by the biologists, conveying their understanding to the world. I see

biologists' responsibility as promoting and facilitating that knowledge transfer. There have already been great changes driven by television. Look at what Cousteau achieved – a world brimming with dedicated, skilled and enthusiastic young marine biologists, all bursting to find employment and to help save the oceans. Cousteau made such an impact because he impassioned people.

What about this idea that getting people to make pets of native fauna could lead somehow to nature conservation? Is this a slightly whacky notion? I have no philosophical problem with the use of native fauna in this way. But the benefit of 11 years' experience in veterinary practice taught me that people will choose as pets those animals they can bond with – animals that are biddable, house-trained, placid. Animals that stay awake with us in the day and sleep like us at night; that won't fang and claw the kids or the neighbours. And if it took centuries or millennia of habituation and selection for the dog and the cat to become generally desirable domestic companions, how long would it take for quolls, lizards and bandicoots?

Then there are fish. People choose fish for their aquaria that behave nicely with one another, that are pleasant to watch. Those that are like the majority of Australian native fish, which spend endless hours pursuing, terrorising and eating every smaller aquarium resident, do little for tranquillity. People want gentle, calming aquaria - not aquatic versions of the Colosseum.

The genetics of native animal propagation for large-scale distribution is an associated issue. For freshwater fish, techniques for mass propagation are now well established, and there is a significant industry breeding native fish and selling them to farmers for dams, and to angling groups for stocking in reservoirs and rivers. But the genetic quality of these fish is suspect. Schemes have been drawn up by fisheries agencies to ensure diversity and representativeness in hatcheries produce, but

such schemes are costly to implement, are not driven by popular pressures and have little added value for the commercial fish-farmer, so there have been few successes in entrenching good genetic practices. The end result is that millions of fish of dubious quality are released into the wild each year. Some of these are stocked heavily into the habitats of relict wild populations so there is a very real chance of the wild stock becoming extinct and replaced by propagated fish with low diversity, poor adaptability and viability that is suspect. It is not difficult to see a smaller-scale, parallel scenario developing in the proposed world where large numbers of native mammals, reptiles and so on are bred to be pets.

August bodies such as museums are in an especially privileged position with regard to their media access and public influence. They are presented with important opportunities to change public

opinion. We need to ask whether it is right to squander such opportunities with notions — like the proposal to conserve native fauna by making pets of them — that might be regarded at best as hotly debatable and at worst as ill-considered and slightly whacky. There is a need for us to find a degree of expert consensus about important conservation initiatives before going public. We should pick our public-opinion targets with great care so that we help kindle strong passions for conservation and enhance community values.

To conclude, I feel the best way to impassion people is by promoting the flow of ecological knowledge through the press, radio and television so that we sharpen their understanding of biological diversity, ecosystem services, human effects on natural environments, and all the other great issues in nature conservation. We need to show people that there is much for them to be optimistic and passionate about.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

DAN LUNNEY: Thank you indeed, John. That's certainly open to questions. If you're wondering where John Harris and Pat Hutchings fit in, they're council members of the Royal Zoological Society.

ANNE MARTIN: Anne Martin, I'm a veterinary student. This question is actually for both you and Harry. Basically, I'm one of your future generation of conservationists again. I'm passionate about it, but I find myself feeling incredibly depressed about it most of the time for the reasons that everybody has brought up here. I fluctuate in thinking what is it that I, personally, as an individual scientist can do for it. What do either of you have as a recommendation of some of the best paths for individuals to take in this field?

JOHN HARRIS: I think that's a critical question. I believe we can make links with the community through the media, especially the press and TV. There are many ways to contribute to those links and I think that's the true path to follow.

HARRY RECHER: I concur. It's not difficult to get on the media and get publicity, particularly as a young person you might find it quite easy. You might have to start with community radio or community television, but if you do a good job you'll get picked up.

The other thing that I often suggest to people of your age with a commitment to the environment who want to make a real impact, why don't you consider a career in politics? Let's short-circuit the education system, let's put environmentally educated people into parliament. So there you go. It's a good salary too, I understand.

KIRSTEN BENKENDORFF: I just wanted to make the comment that as a young scientist considering either approaching the media or politics you're always labelled as a greenie, as an environmentalist. I mean, environmentalist is better than a greenie; but you come with this sort of negative connotation and they don't want to listen to you. It's really hard.

HARRY RECHER: Don't think that I don't get labelled as a greenie or an environmentalist when I talk to the media. I get labelled as even worse. It's interesting; the minute you stand up and speak for the environment you get labelled as being some sort of crazy person. On the other hand, if I stood up and said, "Let's all invest in the current float on that new wild animal park," I'd be a financial adviser, I'd be looked up to and I might get into the media; I'd certainly get into *The Financial Review*.

You've done a very good job of getting media coverage and you do it very well. I think more people your age could be doing it is what I'm saying. But it's hard work and it can be very, very stressful. Don't ever think that taking a stance on environmental issues, where you're challenging social attitudes, necessarily means that you're going to get a promotion or that next research grant or anything else; you might just go the other way. I can get a long list of people who have lost their jobs, lost their career opportunities. One of the things we talked about in the professional scientific societies is the importance of supporting the people who do speak up when they do get victimised by the system. But you've got to take that. If you're committed, if you're passionate about it, you're going to do it.

JOHN HARRIS: I think there's one more thing that could be added. My experience has been that the opportunities for having an effective input to broad-scale community debates have been very strong when they've come through either professional societies or through the cooperative research centre group that I belong to, and I see it happening in a parallel way with other people.

I've been a part of the CRC for Freshwater Ecology, and it, like many other public organisations, has a well-developed structure which enables it to be influential in spreading ecological knowledge. It's just astounded me the success that we've had in the CRC in accessing politicians and the media and in changing public perceptions. I think that working through an established organisation in your field is the way to go.

DAN LUNNEY: John, thanks indeed.