

## What makes a conservationist?

I have often wondered, as I suspect many readers have also, what makes a conservationist? Perhaps if we knew that we would be able to make much more progress in our efforts towards conserving the world's species.

Conversations with colleagues about why they opted to work in the field of conservation generally reveal that they felt certain childhood experiences were crucial. An uncle buying a small nephew a vivarium, a mother who liked painting flowers, a school-teacher with an infectious enthusiasm for natural history. All these things and many other similar events and experiences served to foster and support a developing interest in the natural world. As Gary Meffe indicates in his *Savannah Perspective* (pp. 2–3), many young people are fascinated by nature. Some are encouraged; others are not so fortunate.

A keen interest in nature does not alone make a conservationist. It is just a start. Connections have to be made – between animals, natural communities and habitats, between humans and the effects of their activities on other living things. An appreciation has to be gained of the complex processes that support life. Knowledge alone, however thorough and advanced, of ecological processes, does not make a conservationist. It is not rare to encounter even practising ecologists who are unconcerned about conservation issues.

What seems to be needed to make a conservationist is one more step. To the interest and the knowledge must be added a deep concern for the safety and future of the natural world and all its inhabitants, including the human species. A conservation ethic must be adopted.

What opportunities are there for people to take that critical step? Today conservation is at least on the curriculum in some educational systems and establishments, which was not the case 50 years ago. The fact that it is still missing in some is worrying and where it is covered it usually lacks the prominence that it deserves. There is also far more awareness of the issues among the general public – and an increased need for this of course. The climate

is much more favourable for the development of a conservation ethic than it was when the politicians and business leaders who govern so much of what is environmentally damaging were growing up. Young people today have much more opportunity to grow up recognizing the need for conservation and it must be our hope that they will not pass it over.

People often ask me if I find compiling *Oryx* depressing. The ingredients are all there to make it so: gloomy stories about impending species' extinctions, examples of human folly, carelessness and greed, and a sense of fighting a losing battle. While I obviously care and find these things sad I can always find cause for optimism. In the News and Views section alone in this issue there is news of successful efforts to conserve the ibex in Saudi Arabia, accounts of relevant authorities in Kenya and Tibet struggling to resolve human-wildlife conflicts in ways that will benefit wildlife and people alike, news of local initiatives to manage seahorse populations in the Philippines to counter unsustainable exploitation. In the Briefly section, amid the items that report negative impacts on wildlife, there are those that give reason for rejoicing – people protesting against unwise developments, people reintroducing endangered species, people carrying out wildlife surveys and establishing protected areas. The authors of the articles in this issue include those who care deeply about mountain tapirs in the Andes, wild mammals in Tibet, primates in Guinea Bissau, and amphibians in the former USSR.

Humans will always cause problems for wildlife. It is up to conservationists to do their best to devise remedial measures and take action. *Oryx* does carry bad news, news that some people would rather not read about, but it is also full of examples of people involved in the conservation cause and fighting hard for their particular areas. It is those people – the conservation scientists, the public protesters, the people who care enough to donate their time and money to conservation – that give me hope and do something to dispel the sadness I sometimes feel.

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