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## Conservation is not about "Nature"

***Dr Joe Zammit-Lucia ([www.theintersectionist.com](http://www.theintersectionist.com)) argues that if conservationists are to maintain and accelerate their success they need to shift their focus from nature to people.***

"Conservation is all about people".

This statement is found on the web site of IUCN's Commission for Education and Communication. It is a vital statement that should guide the efforts of the whole conservation community - yet it is widely ignored. The vast majority of the expertise and rhetoric of the conservation world is focused on "Nature" rather than people. Why? And does this need to change?

### From Species and Spaces to People

Years ago, a friend of mine working on a conservation project in Madagascar was puzzled that the local people did not seem engaged in efforts to develop sustainable use of the local forests. Only by chance did the team come across an explanation - some sociology research that explained that the local culture is rooted in its past with little concept of planning for a future.

This anecdote highlights the reality of conservation - successful conservation is about understanding how to focus people's behaviours - from the behaviours of those earning a living in biodiversity hotspots to the behaviour of consumers in developed countries to the investment choices made by businesses, industries and global market makers, to the political decisions made at local and international levels. Yet, while our team in Madagascar had a great deal of accumulated expertise in biology, endangered species and ecology, they had no expertise in matters of human behaviour, cultural

studies, economics, business management or politics. Though the team understood these needs, such expertise was not readily available to them.

### **The Conservationists' Culture**

The situation described above bedevils much conservation work. It should go without saying that successful conservation efforts are purely a question of human behaviour - be that behaviour at political, industrial, community or individual level. Yet the bulk of the expertise that has been accumulated within the conservation community is not about human behaviour - it is focused on "nature" and the know-how and science that underpins that nature. While this know-how is essential to conservation success, it is becoming blatantly obvious to all that it is an insufficient basis on which such success can be built. At least as important is a capability to understand and focus on the needs of individuals and communities and to work to improve people's lives in a manner that is consistent with conservation aims.

Today's conservation culture and rhetoric are primarily focused around "nature" and its conservation. This culture encourages a negative and destructive dichotomy between the Human and the Natural - the Natural as romanticized ideal that we are trying to preserve and the Human as the interloper that is wrecking our imagined idyll. On a quick review, I calculate that 80-90% of press items related to conservation are negative - painting people, their economic activities and their search for self improvement as a destructive influence on "nature".

### **.....and it's not about "Communication"**

Whenever I talk to conservationists about changing people's behaviours, I am met with nods of agreement and then quickly pointed towards "the communications people". This betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the issues. Changing behaviour is not about developing our own agenda focused on "nature" and then trying to find some slick "marketing" wheeze or "educational programme" to convince people that we're right and they must change their ways. Success can only come through

putting people first and framing what we do as being about finding ways to improve their lives. It requires much more than communication of our established ideas and approaches - it requires a re-framing of what conservation projects should be about.

### **A Framework For Success**

I would like to propose both a shift in mindset and approach and the building of new capabilities within the conservation community.

#### *1. People First*

People should claim the centre of conservation rhetoric and individual conservation initiatives. Here there are two components to success - and they are applicable to both developed and developing countries.

- We should stop telling everyone that they are bad people because of their search for development or self-fulfillment or because they want to improve their lives, or because they enjoy their consumption - like we all do - even those of us who preach conservation.
- Every conservation statement or project should ask: how am I going to improve people's lives through this work? And 'improve' should not be defined in narrow economic terms. There are many non-financial ways to improve people's lives such - as giving people a sense of pride and achievement, creating a sense of community with shared goals, providing aesthetic or recreational benefits, and many others.

We are starting to see [examples](#) where success comes from a focus on improving people's lives.

#### *2. Develop the expertise*

We could all benefit significantly from expertise that helps us understand the drivers of human behaviour and think through conservation agendas with people behaviour in mind. This expertise needs to be built within the core of conservation

strategy and activity - not as part of some separate function, off to the side while proper conservationists get on with their science of nature.

### *3. Work with others*

Who, today, is providing people with jobs, a living wage, the ability to build a life and the ability to have the products and services that they need or want? Largely these functions are provided by industry and business. Industrialization has led to a massive improvement in people's quality of life in the past 150 years and most people continue to look to industry as the most likely source for meeting their aspirations. Unfortunately, industrialization has also led to the environmental degradation we are now trying to slow down or stop.

The conservation agenda simply cannot be achieved without the deep involvement of industry. Industry has the resources, expertise and political clout that, well focused, can achieve the sort of behaviour changes that we all seek. And industry has shown itself able to achieve widespread behaviour changes at all levels - from the individual consumer to the highest levels of political decision-making.

And, at a practical level, we can achieve little without industrial involvement. From the development of alternative energy, to finding ways of managing forests sustainably, to changing consumer behaviour, we are dependent on those respective industries to move forward - and to do so in a way that still provides jobs and meets people's legitimate aspirations.

### **Moving Forward**

Conservation cannot be framed simplistically as the task of "conserving nature"; or using grand slogans such as "saving the planet"; or to speak in tongues - using terms like "biodiversity" and "ecosystem services" that regular people don't understand, much less care about. Neither is conservation merely a science or a technical discipline. Conservation is a cultural construct and a set of values; values that should be focused on improving people's lives in a cultural framework that is consistent with maintaining the

many, varied benefits of a well-functioning natural world. In a world of 7 billion people - and growing - this is purely a matter of human behaviours.

Our conservation success depends on human behaviour first, second, third and last. Conservation is as much about sociology, psychology, cultural studies and the humanities as it is about biology and ecology. It is about politics as much as it is about climate science. It is about industry, finance and economics as much as it is about NGOs and philanthropy. It is about people as much as about nature. And it should be about aspirations and improvement more - much more - than about guilt and austerity.

We have had the Year of Biodiversity. We are having the Year of Forests. How about The Year of the People as our next effort?

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