Part I

The Experience of Nature

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1.1 Perspectives on the Meaning and Significance of Nature

Why Conserve Nature?

Why do we[1] want to keep anything? Surely it is because it means something to us? Isn't it because we value qualities like usefulness and the ways in which we can cherish memories and meaningful associations? We may keep things which make life easier, help us in day-to-day living and might assist us in some future difficult time. We may also value those things with enriching associations – something we found on a memorable day; something which appealed to us for its form and beauty, its intricacy, diversity or simplicity; something inherited from an ancestor or given to us by a friend or parent. Or it can be something we did not know about but which we found out about in the media or which a teacher, parent or mentor told us was rare, valuable, a privilege to have. Thus, the meaning can be discovered by yourself or a meaning can be given to you by someone else which then becomes significant to you. Whatever the many reasons for keeping something, it is the value and the meanings which make us cherish it: the meanings vary widely, but meanings there have to be. Hence the subtitle of the book: *Perspectives on Meanings and Motivations*. Meanings are the key.

[1] When I use the word 'we' or 'our' in a text, critics and reviewers often rightly ask 'who is this we you are referring to – which society or group of people? Do you purport to speak for all of them and are you speaking with their endorsement?' This is highly relevant in particular contexts but there is a clear distinction between statements of opinion which can be contested such as 'we need to spend money on our own problems rather than those of others', where all the questions posed above are germane, and those which actually do speak for the whole of humanity without the need for further contextualisation, such as 'we need oxygen to breathe' and 'the evidence suggests that we evolved about two million years ago in Africa'. Thus, when I use the term 'we' the intention is to make reference to humanity – the human animal – in the context of the human relationship with nature. Any differentiation between particular sections, groups, societies or cultures of humanity will be indicated. In other places in the book, reference to the reader as in: 'we have already seen in an earlier chapter. . .' should be clear by context.

The very act of asking the question: 'Why conserve nature?' indicates that there can't be one universally agreed positive meaning of nature which motivates people to cherish it. Surely if nature meant something good to everyone – something significant, something valued – then people would all act to conserve nature and this book would not be needed. However, the view that conservation is needed is one that is not universally shared, despite all the exhortations which abound in scientific writings and the media. One person's idea of utility might be another person's idea of irrelevance; even if others seek to tell them that something is useful and with meaningful associations. One person's meaningful associations might be another's indifference if nature has no meaningful association for them. So, the interesting question might equally be: 'Why don't people conserve nature?' The answer must lie, if we follow the thread of the argument so far, in that a lack of personal meaning and significance means there is no sense of value and no motivation to cherish. Is this the case, and if it is, why should this be so? Is it that people don't see nature as useful? Is it that they have no associations with it? Is it just irrelevant, or at least not an important consideration for people? Are the meanings of nature too many and too complex? Do conservationists fail to get their point of view across? Or is it that people actually agree that nature should be conserved but they don't have – or feel they have – the means to do it?

One aspect of this discussion is that conservation could be made more engaging by heeding the approach of those who say that an answer lies in meaningful stories about practical situations and involving people in positive outcomes. There is a quotation attributed to Samuel Johnson (1709–1784, most well known for his dictionary of the English language): "Nothing has more retarded the advancement of learning than the disposition of vulgar minds to ridicule and vilify what they cannot comprehend." This starkly condescending condemnation, I would stand on its head. Rather than a failure of people to grasp the situation, maybe any failure to comprehend lies in a failure to involve people in a meaningful and relevant way. While telling, showing and demonstrating are important, it is finding your own meaning through being involved which is always more effective.

Organisations such as Action for Conservation (AFC) stand out in this sense (www.actionforconservation.org/about-us). AFC believes that all young people should feel moved and empowered to protect the natural world. It feels that if children and young people lose contact and involvement with nature, they are less likely to fight to protect it as

they grow older. AFC's egalitarian belief is that a passion for conservation can flow through anyone's life. It has five core values that define its approach to creating the next generation of conservationists: Diversity, Wonder, Hope, Action and Change. It aims to effect this by creating a sense of wonder and fostering ongoing engagement through stories of hope and through direct involvement with nature. The importance of childhood experiences is emphasised by many studies, for example Daitch et al. (1996) and Vining (2003). Chawla (1999) found childhood experiences to be far more effective in formulating a positive attitude to effective environmental action later in life than the other subsequent experiences investigated. Significantly, such childhood experiences are now seen as lacking, with the media meme derived from surveys that 'prisoners now spend more time outdoors than children' and Louv (2005) lamenting the idea of the *Last Child in the Woods* in the title of his book and promoting the idea of positive childhood nature experiences in *Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* in the subtitle.

Involving people in nature means that there can be a more effective position of being able to argue that if we progressively lose nature, we then lose something of ourselves – mentally, emotionally, spiritually – and indeed, if we make conditions untenable for ourselves, maybe even physically. We can thus see that with nature there can indeed be aspects of utility and of having something inherited and given to us. We can also realise that meaning and significance can vary widely with the observer, the context and the situation – and indeed be highly contested – as well as realising that some people are just indifferent. Hence, the discussion in this book is justifiably about the way in which knowledge, attitudes, values and beliefs interact in cultural contexts to influence the connections between meanings, motivations and actions in nature conservation. This has to be both positive and negative about conservation – the reasons why people don't care are as important as the reasons why people should.

So, this is not a book on how and what precisely to conserve – there are many other books in this Cambridge University Press *Ecology, Biodiversity and Conservation* series which discuss these topics. In this volume the discussion is on the ways in which the meanings of nature matter for motivating us to conserve nature at all. The key proposition is that without meanings, we have no motivation. Botanist and ancient woodland expert Oliver Rackham (1991) promoted this idea when he wrote on 'Landscape and the conservation of meaning', discussing how we can cherish meanings which have evolved over time and are still evolving.

Thus, we focus in this book on the connections between the varied and diverse meanings of nature, the origins of motivations to cherish it and the taking of actions to conserve it. We also have to think what we include when we use the term 'nature'. This includes life forms and the environments in which they live and involves the consideration of the status of the actual life forms themselves and the dynamic processes and interactions between the life forms and between them and their environment. We find that the meanings are a complex fusion of scientific knowledge, pervasive myths, psychological perceptions and cultural contexts.

The scientific knowledge we have about plants, animals and environment is fundamental to giving us a set of ideas and associated values about how nature works and is thus essential to the conservation endeavour. However, this knowledge is produced by a society which holds a set of cultural values and, equally, any proposed action is nested within the context of that society and its values. Writing in *On the Future*, Astronomer Royal Martin Rees (2018: 227) concludes that, "Now is the time for an optimistic vision of life's destiny .... We need to think globally ... rationally ... long term – empowered by twenty-first-century technology but guided by values that science alone can't provide." So, while the knowledge is necessary, it is not sufficient. We have to understand that it is the cultural concepts of meaning and significance in relation to our emotions which actually lead to our actions involving nature.

There is a popular quote from Gus Speth, US Advisor on Climate Change, which is often cited as:

> I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. (variously sourced, e.g. https://ncipl.org/environmental-crisis-not-environmental-spiritual)

This quote has been taken up by some as meaning that science doesn't have the answers but that a more spiritual approach does. To believe that, however, would be as limiting as the converse belief that as soon as science has a solution, then the problem is solved. Neither is true. Without science and technology we have difficulties proposing a viable solution but without due regard to cultural contexts – including psychological, economic, social and political factors – we have difficulties in

implementing a solution. It should also be realised that scientific knowledge itself is produced in cultural contexts and is not value free in the way questions are framed, investigations formulated and answers derived. Many scientists are indeed aware of these contexts – and also many would find Speth's assertion somewhat pejorative in that they are indeed culturally and spiritually aware. The book edited by Brian Moss and Otto Kinne (2012): *Liberation Ecology: The reconciliation of natural and human cultures* springs to mind here as one example of the science–culture awareness.

Another notable milestone on this road to a wider view is to be found in a special issue of the 2018 journal *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* on qualitative methods for ecologists and conservation scientists, led by Sutherland et al. (2018). They use the self-evident though often ignored wisdom that "conservation of biodiversity involves dealing with problems caused by humans, by applying solutions that comprise actions by humans" (p. 7). They add: "Understanding human attitudes, knowledge and behaviour are thus central to conservation research and practice." There are papers from a range of disciplines (ecology, human geography, political science, land economy, management) and the authors feel that the ways forward involve "incorporating human values, perceptions, judgements and knowledge into conservation decision making". Of particular significance in the volume is the paper by Moon et al. (2019) on expanding the role of social science in conservation through an engagement with philosophy, methodology and methods.

Additionally, lack of conservation action is not just about "selfishness, greed and apathy", as above, it can also be about poverty and survival. Jane Goodall, the primatologist well known for her work on chimpanzees, expresses the situation well in an interview for *Deutsche Welle* (Baker, 2019). While the interview is entitled: "'The biggest problem is greed" says conservationist Jane Goodall', this, I submit, is not her key message. When asked "Why do you think it is that some aren't moved to take action to protect the environment?" she indeed replied, "The biggest problem is greed." However, more tellingly, while making reference to corporate greed, she went on to make her insightful observation on poverty and survival.

The interview focussed on the link she had made between connecting social justice with conservation efforts. She said how she learnt of poverty, the lack of good health and education and the destruction of the environment. The quote from her is: "Because when you're very poor, you cut down the last trees to try and desperately grow some more food or make

charcoal." She recalled how in 1990 she flew over what had been a great equatorial forest to see that Gombe National Park was now "just a tiny island forest surrounded by completely bare hills and people were struggling to survive. That's when I realized if we don't help the people to find other ways of living than destroying the environment, then we can't even try to help the chimps." She then went on to engage people in simultaneously aiding the conservation effort and making a living – not only without cutting down further forest but also protecting the remaining forest and its wildlife. This theme is, for example, very much central to the discussions by Stocking, Perkin and Brown (2014) in 'Co-existing with nature in a developing world', a chapter in the key book edited by Morse and Stocking, *People and Nature: Development for the future*. People are seen as part of the solution rather than part of the problem. But there has to be some impetus – some leadership and structure – to make this possible, and to ensure that for the people involved conservation is not part of their problem but becomes a solution.

In this context, recently Ngwenya et al. (2020) have usefully made 'A call for collective crisis leadership': "To scale up conservation efforts … we need an inclusive, enabling approach involving everyone – from health and finance ministers to Indigenous Nations, grassroots organizations, NGOs, businesses and heads of state" (p. 432). They continue that, as conservationists, "Standing alone, we are being set up to fail …. Collectively, we must deal with the root causes of environmental crises. Only then will we see transformational change unfolding, perhaps with more ease than we ever imagined."

An additional point on motivation which can be usefully noted here is that Jane Goodall also said that she does not believe in aggressive activism, as explained in an interview on the power of reaching people's hearts (Hirsh, 2015). What she feels is that the way to get people motivated is through the emotions as revealed in stories. This is not the same as 'being emotional' but that something moves us – it has meaning. "With storytelling, you have to get to people's hearts. It's not about engaging them intellectually" (Shea, 2015). She feels that the trick to helping people understand that we can all make a difference is pretty simple: telling stories (Figure 1.1).

She said: "If you [get] aggressive … you don't get anywhere." She feels that if you watch two people talk from opposing sides, one just tries to refute the other, with neither listening, "and they get more and more aggressive, and nothing's accomplished at all. Except possibly to make it worse." She makes her key point: "Being angry and pointing fingers, you

Figure 1.1 Chimpanzees in their natural forest habitat. Jane Goodall on key aspects of conservation, caring enough to act and being practical: "It's not about engaging them [people] intellectually. . . . You just have to reach people's hearts. And the best way I know is to tell stories" and "If we don't help the people to find other ways of living than destroying the environment, then we can't even try to help the chimps" (guenterguni / E+ / Getty Images)

won't get anywhere. You just have to reach people's hearts. And the best way I know is to tell stories."

In a different discipline, in 'Earth stories: Context and narrative in the communication of popular geoscience', by Stewart and Nield (2013), the first author, having worked in television for some time, promotes exactly the same conclusion. He feels that people are not necessarily motivated by ideas alone, but they do tend to listen to stories which involve these ideas and they can find the narratives very engaging and motivational (Box 1.1).

The relationship between scientific evidence, the stories told and the motivations for human response and reaction are complex and interesting. But, simply put, a story is a way of making sense of something – a way of finding meaning – an explanation. "What is that?" or "Why is that creature doing that?" we might say. "Oh, it is so-and-so" comes the answer. "Ah, yes", we say. And, thus, something is understood through the answer which often conveys a meaningful sense of purpose and reason that is very attractive.

Box 1.1 *The importance of narratives*

Our ideas can often be effectively expressed as storylines – or narratives – which bring meanings to events and observations. As seen in the book description of *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*: "[S]tories have come to be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (Herman, Jahn and Ryan, 2010). The American literary critic, Kenneth Burke (1941: 253) put it as: "stories are … equipment for living" and as such they are bound up with our identity (as discussed in Brockmeir and Carbaugh (2001), *Narratives and Identity*).

The analysis of narratives is common in cultural and literature studies but such analyses are less common in ecological science – but they are there nonetheless, especially in the field of conservation motivation. This is evidenced, for example, in the writings of Cronon (1992), 'A place for stories: Nature, history and narrative' and Rose et al. (2016) in 'Honest advocacy for nature: Presenting a persuasive narrative for conservation', published in the *Biodiversity and Conservation* journal.

In *The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks*, Lejano, Ingram and Ingram (2013: 56) feel that environmental narratives reach from how we think things are to how we think things should be: "[N]arrative is the means by which we bridge the gap between describing the events … and prescribing." Narratives of the environment are also discussed by Palmer (2011) in terms of their fundamental involvement in the history of places; Satterfield, Slovic and Gregory (2000) in the context of policy judgement and Shanahan, Pelstring and McComas (2010) in terms of their significance to environmental attitudes and behaviour.

Human cultures do indeed have many stories about nature. We use these stories very effectively to make sense of nature, often giving meaning, value and purpose to the way we see things. Some of the stories don't necessarily stand up to closed scrutiny, so there is a possible dilemma of having something which is motivational but wrong. However, what is interesting is that the more that people can relate nature to their own human feelings, the more effective – the more motivational – the stories become.