Why Conserve Nature?

How we view nature transforms the world around us. People rehearse stories about nature which make sense to them. If we ask the question 'why conserve nature?', and the answers are based on myths, then are these good myths to have? Scientific knowledge about the environment is fundamental to ideas about how nature works. It is essential to the conservation endeavour. However, any conservation motivation is nested within a society's meanings of nature and the way society values it. Given the therapeutic and psychological significance of nature for us and our culture, this book considers the meanings derived from the poetic and emotional attachment to a sense of place, which is arguably just as important as scientific evidence. The functional significance of species is important, but so too is the therapeutic value of nature, together with the historic and spiritual meanings entwined in a human feeling for landscape and wildlife.

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Perspectives on Meanings and Motivations

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In memory of Mum, Dad, my godfather 'Uncle' Henry, Ted Ellis and Janet Smith who taught me so much about natural history, art and literature.

Contents

Foreword

As this magnificent living planet we are privileged to call home whirls through time and space, humanity's relationship with it has become ever more complex. Although we have been inhabitants of Planet Earth for a mere 300,000 years of its 4.5 billion-year history, in that minuscule time we have literally transformed the face of the earth. People are ingenious, creative and driven beings. Our large brains combined with dexterous hands and an overwhelming desire to improve our lot has seen us grow in number and transform the earth's resources into goods and services. Other life on earth has had to either fit into our agenda or be eradicated. In the blink of an eye it has taken to transform us from cave dweller to city banker, we have carried out a systematic re-shaping of the surface of the earth. Science now tells us we are at a tipping point where the natural world's ability to adapt to humanity's demands may be fatally compromised. As ecosystems collapse, so too will humanity. This oft-told story is being heard with increasing urgency. Not a single one of us wants this to happen – we are survivors not self-destroyers – but our sheer numbers and demands have been too much. It is clear that if we are to have a future, we have a collective job to do to turn this around. The big question is – how?

Like so many of us, I worry and ponder on this question of survival. When I read *Why Conserve Nature?* my angst-ridden soul stopped fretting for a while and jumped up and down punching the air. The words rang out true and bright from the first page. I found myself agreeing with every sentence and every quote. This book is about engagement, about positive collaboration, about drawing deep on our collective love of story and meaning and turning that into action. It is about recognising the validity of the many different perspectives we have on the world and bringing them into union to create solutions to the earth's ills. As the art historian E. H. Gombrich observed, "There is no reality without interpretation; just as there is no innocent eye, there is no innocent ear."

At heart we are creative problem-solvers. There is nothing humanity likes more than a challenge, and we always have, and hopefully we always will, get to grips with what needs to be done. But the clever truth that this book explores is that the motivation to make good is not just found in explaining the problem through facts and science, it is embedded in touching our souls. Ever since we sat around fires as hunter-gatherers and told each other what was important, we have used metaphor and simile, we have woven tales that are as fantastical as they are true. We constantly play with words, image, movement, sound and meaning and we present them in ways which delight us, scare us, shock us or humour us – all of them make us think. And humanity loves to think. We love to dream. We love to present reality in non-real terms. As the author surmises from his wide-ranging research, to get people involved you have to tell stories that reach into their hearts and ignite the spark that will light the fire of action. People don't always react to ideas alone but to stories that incorporate those ideas, and those stories come in very many forms.

To ignore the cultural aspect of our nature is to deny a huge part of what makes us human. Yet, so often, we present the problems faced by the earth as being solvable by technology and equations alone. While telling, showing and demonstrating what needs to be done are important, it is finding our own meaning which is always more effective at producing action. The key proposition of this book is, "that without meanings, we have no motivation". What we need now more than ever are clever motivated people who act from both their souls and their heads. Not a single one of us is merely a processor of fact. We are not a collection of Mr Spocks from Star Trek; we rarely act on purely rational grounds. Everyone is a mixture of many different roles – child, sibling, parent, lover, consumer, believer, activist, friend and neighbour. We are spiritual beings as much as we are scientific and very often it is our relationships, culture, traditions and beliefs that dictate our actions, not pure logic. It is why conservation needs "collective crisis leadership" that draws on a range of experiences and world views that is both inclusive and enabling to a wide range of people.

No one has the single answer to the environmental crises we face. Our continued presence on earth requires that not only conservationists and scientists tell their truths but also artists, poets, musicians, writers, financiers, indigenous teachers, grassroots organisations, business leaders, religious leaders and politicians. It is imperative that young and old from

every sector of society find who they are in the stories we tell. The route to success is to gather these ways of seeing the earth, and then act.

It will need a near-miracle to save many parts of the world from destruction, but then the interplay of science and culture has always created magic. It is an honour to be asked to write the foreword to this most important book.

Mary Colwell

Producer and writer; author of *Curlew Moon*. Chair of the Steering Group and a trustee of New Networks for Nature, an alliance of scientists, conservationists and artists. 2019 WWT Marsh Award for Wetland Conservation, 2018 David Bellamy Education Trust NGO Award, 2017 BTO Dilys Breese Award for Outstanding Science Communication. Books: *Beak, Tooth and Claw: Living with predators in Britain* (William Collins, 2021). *Curlew Moon* (William Collins, 2018). *John Muir: The Scotsman who saved America's wild places* (Lion Hudson, 2014).

Preface

This book derives from my part in The Social Engagement with Nature course which I used to lecture on in the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge. I can't thank enough the other lecturers on the course and the students who took the course. Your inputs helped to shape my ideas.

In an earlier book I acknowledged the debt I felt to Robinson College Cambridge, a place where I became a Fellow in 1996. I was given a room for teaching and study which was neither home nor University Department but, while independent of either, gave me elements of both. This helped me to produce my *Terrestrial Biosphere* book on science, attitudes and values (Trudgill, 2001b). I had hitherto kept my more cultural and literary interests about nature and art at home as part of my personal life. However, now I managed to combine my arts interests with my scientific work from the Geography Department (where I started by teaching physical geography in the guise of soils, water quality and environmental management as well as some geomorphology) and brushing shoulders with other College Fellows in the arts and sciences alike helped enormously. When writing the *Terrestrial Biosphere*, as I recorded in the acknowledgements for that book, I was greatly encouraged by a review of my earlier *Barriers to a Better Environment* book (Trudgill, 1990) by Ian Simmons, then Professor of Geography at Durham. He had kindly written a piece (Simmons, 1993b) indicating that I had moved from physical to social science in a particularly seamless way handling "a wide variety of material with a facility many of us would envy". A Cambridge College enabled me to build on this further and it was, I feel, not something I could have done without an appropriate 'neutral' space of a College room in which to operate – and the stimulus of the breadth of interests which surrounded me.

Some years on, I now have to acknowledge a debt to Cambridge Geography Department and especially Bill Adams who enabled me to emerge in the Department as an environmental geographer – even

allowing me to be some kind of human geographer – and join the course which Bill had invented called The Social Engagement with Nature. Here he, together with Tim Bayliss-Smith, Gerry Kearns, Phil Howell, Piers Vitebsky and me, formed a varied association exploring the themes of the social construction of nature.

I rapidly emerged with a term's worth of lectures on the representation of nature in art, poetry and other literature and explored how this related to the social construction of nature in ecological science – and then how both of these influence what we do to nature in gardens, nature reserves and the wider environment. Earlier in the development of the course Gerry Kearns talked about North American constructs of nature and Bill Adams lectured on ecology and literature and later Piers Vitebsky contributed from his knowledge of Arctic peoples and their relation with nature. For many years Phil Howell lectured on the social construction of animals, including his famous talk on dog cemeteries, and Tim Bayliss-Smith lectured on Paradise and other such constructions in the Pacific. Tim, Phil and Jim Duncan were always admirable colleagues on the Mallorca Field Trip where I learnt so much from them and it was during one of those visits I coined the term psychobiogeography (Trudgill, 2001a). I also greatly appreciated the visits to Wicken Fen with Tim Bayliss-Smith and Steve Boreham, teaching second-year students about conservation. Our field trips were greatly enhanced by the competence and efficiency of the late Adrian Hayes, much missed. I must also mention Laura Cameron who helped me with her many insights in the world of Sir Arthur Tansley and of course Keith Richards who, while we were standing on Scolt Head island in Norfolk, brought to my attention a lectureship available in my area of interest in Cambridge. All these colleagues have of course influenced me greatly and I am grateful for that experience.

I am no less grateful to the students who coped with the first line of my first lecture each year when I looked out of the window and said: "That tree doesn't know it is Tuesday." Inevitably two students would leave but those who stayed rapidly caught on to the point about the tangible existence of something which we call 'tree' and the constructed world of concepts like 'Tuesday' – and I am grateful that they stayed and joined in the fun of exploration in lectures and supervisions.

In terms of personal friendships and support, apart from those in the Geography Department mentioned above, I can but turn to College and village. Mary Stewart has been an especially invaluable friend to me during the past twenty-five years. Prior to being in College I certainly

would not have guessed that I would have become interested in oncology, family law and theology – but thanks to Gary Doherty, Brian Sloan, Simon Perry and Morna Hooker for that. Gary has also been great in the way that, as Chair of the College Visual Arts Committee, he curated an exhibition of my artworks and also an exhibition of my father's paintings. I have also greatly appreciated working as Chair of the Gardens Committee with Guy Fuller as Head Gardener and with Helen Cornish and Sarah Westwood as successive Heads of Development in my role as President of the Robinson College Alumni Association (Pegasus). Lord Lewis and then David Yates as the Founding and Second College Wardens have both provided fundamental support for me and my interests. At this stage I am now conscious that I should mention about another seventy people in College which space precludes except to say thank you to my former students who continue to stay in touch in such a supportive way, especially Nikolai Koval-Radley and Josh Lomax. Nikolai's love of art and nature has been especially motivational.

In the village I can but mention my colleagues on the Parish Council on which I served for twenty-three years, especially the late Willy Brown and Jane Chater (who shares my interest in natural history), and also Mike Boagey, our village newsletter editor, together with those who work on the Wellcome Trust Liaison Committee, especially the Hinxton Sanger Centre Wetlands Nature Reserve Management Committee. I certainly wish to celebrate those wonderful people of the Village Hall Committee. They have given me some of the best moments in committee work, especially by all volunteering at once to make the onion gravy for a sausage and mash meal at the village history evening. In my immediate neighbourhood, I have usually had a yearly meal in my house with those who live more or less next door. Many have come and gone except Jill-next-door and it has been such a privilege to be surrounded by such good people who are so happy and willing to do things for other people. There are also then all the other lovely people in the village, all of whom seem to know me and are tolerant when I inevitably forget some of their names.

I cannot express my debt enough to the Field Studies Council (www.field-studies-council.org/about-us/) and especially my PhD supervisor Dingle Smith from Bristol Geography Department (and then ANU Canberra) who introduced me to the Executive Committee of the Council. My memorable experiences have often been at Malham, especially when Adrian Pickles was there, and very much at Slapton

Ley Field Centre. The people I have met in and around there have given me many treasured memories, like the late Keith Chell, Jim and Di McPetrie, Tim Burt (together with Liz Burt and my godson Tom Burt), Nigel Coles, Hilary Gibson, Ali 'Crash' Cadle, Liz Cole, Tim Mitcham, Keith Orrell, Tim Orrell, Karen Scadeng, Mark Ward, Maggie Jarman and Sue Townsend now Dancy. Many of these people have been friends for life, especially Nigel who got me into cycling in France and Spain, often happily with Alistair Kirkbride, and particularly Hilary Gibson who has encouraged and inspired me and my art in so many ways. I started attending Hilary's art courses and ended up running some with her, which has been one of life's enriching experiences. For many years I was a member of the Executive Committee of the Field Studies Council. Special thanks to Neil Emery who, aged nine, attended one of my family natural history courses at Slapton and then found me out years later to say how much it had meant to him. And I still try to raise money for the FSC Kids fund: www.field-studies-council.org/about/fsc-kids-fund.aspx. Slapton Ley Field Centre has been a special place for me, particularly in helping to run the National Nature Reserve and working with Nigel Coles and Tim Burt, not to mention the pivotal input of Jimmy McPetrie ('Jimmy the Farmer') who challenged my talk on nitrate years ago and has made me think about what I was doing ever since – the times in Jim and Di's kitchen are treasured memories. Without knowing Tim Burt as both president of the FSC and a friend, I may well not have met Des Thompson and put this book forward for this series. I have had the benefit of Des's enthusiasm and of the wisdom of Series Editor Michael Usher, especially with his invaluable comments on the first draft, and the insightful feedback on the book proposal from the Editorial Board – together with the inputs of Dominic Lewis and the efficient help and guidance from Aleksandra Serocka from Cambridge University Press.

For help in my endeavours to write, I am grateful to David Stonestreet for his guidance during an earlier version of this book and to Nuala Johnson for positive comments on that earlier version. I am also grateful, as ever, to my sociolinguist brother Peter Trudgill and Jean Hannah for their support and especially to Simon Perry who, in return for me reading the draft of his book on Christendom and atheism, read though the draft of this book for me. There is much in this book which reflects his challenging inputs to what I had written. For help on specific sources and other aspects of this book I am particularly grateful to Terry Hartig from Uppsala Psychology Department for sharing his work on

restoration with me, Miles Burnyeat for his insights into Bernard Williams, Tom Lynch for discussions of ecocriticism and Mary Colwell for encouragement about the spiritual aspects of nature and, not least, for her work on the emblematic importance of the curlew. Lucy Rhymer of Cambridge University Press is thanked for her invaluable advice and encouragement during the early stages of the writing of the book. Sharing an Emeritus Fellows Room with Morna Hooker and Mary Stewart has been an interesting experience and has meant that there is usually someone around to comment helpfully on what I am doing.

I thank Rogelio Luque-Lora of the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge (and Ben Peacock for introducing us). Not only am I very grateful for his proofreading skills, he has helped me with his challenging and thoughtful questions, insightful discussions, suggested readings and constructive comments on this book – and this together with his much appreciated companionship on nature walks as we looked around us together. With encouragement from Chris Sandbrook, we had thought that he would contribute a section to this book on the results of his work on why people conserve nature but pandemic travel restrictions curtailed his fieldwork on this. However, this means we can hope to look forward to reading about his work at some future date in another publication.

The endeavour of the current book is to examine a range of ideas and to neither stress nor deny the importance of science or of culture and to highlight the significance of values and the affective emotions. I can't claim to be uniquely placed to cover the entire science–culture/arts spectrum but enough people have told me that my ideas and my approach of examining narratives has changed their way of thinking to encourage me that this book is worthwhile. This is especially in relation to the reaction to my Psychobiogeography Guest Editorial in *The Journal of Biogeography* (2001), published with the encouragement of editor Philip Stott. I had positive feedback from many, including John Parker, former Director of Cambridge Botanic Gardens, ecological scientists at ecological institutes (including ITE Monkswood), attendees at geographical and ecological conference and emails from many countries. I would like to thank Tim Unwin for helping me to become an editor of *Ethics, Place and Environment* for a while. I would even like to thank the bean-counting morons who invented the RAE/REF (Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework) stuff which made me think that taking advantage of the University early retirement scheme looked like a very good idea, thus giving me more time to write this book.

I would never have got anywhere I have without my parents' love of nature, art, poetry and literature, and I especially value the bird and nature books I inherited from my godfather Henry Smith, particularly his books by the Norfolk naturalist Arthur Patterson (who often wrote under the pen name John Knowlittle). Patterson and Henry corresponded with each other and the family kept some envelopes illustrated by Patterson with bird drawings as sent to Henry; the envelopes are now in the archives in the Norfolk Record Office in Norwich. My A-level learning from my Geography, Zoology and Botany teachers helped to enrich and consolidate my knowledge and my youth was imbued with nature trips and childhood memories of being on Blakeney Point and other well-known Norfolk places for nature. Many of my mother's ancestors came from North Norfolk and Dad, as manager of Jarrolds Colour Publishing, produced several books on local natural history, including *The Birds of Norfolk* by M. J. Seago, *The Flora of Norfolk* by C. P. Petch and E. L. Swann and many by Norfolk naturalist Ted Ellis. Ted had transcribed the books of Arthur Patterson when he was younger and I read, cut out and kept cuttings of Ted Ellis's nature column in the *Eastern Daily Press*. I thus grew up steeped in a love of nature, and Blakeney Point, Mum, Dad, Teddy Eales and Reggie Gaze all seem inextricably linked with childhood, as does adolescence and bird watching at Cley with people like Robin South, Michael Seago and Richard Richardson. Especially valuable were the Norfolk Naturalists outings led by Ted Ellis and where we were with a family friend and local librarian who did so much to foster my interests in natural history: Janet Smith.

At Bristol University I am pleased that while I studied Geography and Geology, I also wanted to study Botany but the timetable precluded the latter and so I had to study Sociology instead: this insight into society proved to be invaluable. The debt one owes to the lecturers, especially my tutor and then PhD supervisor Dingle Smith, is immeasurable. The same goes for the experience with the University of Bristol Speleological Society and the president E. K. Tratman – not forgetting Oliver Lloyd (brother of the garden writer Christopher Lloyd, with his tales of growing up in Great Dixter). Trat was a truly remarkable gentleman who inspired me greatly, especially his philosophical approach to life after surviving time in Changi prison. My time on Aldabra Atoll, Indian Ocean, for my PhD fieldwork was very formative – and I am grateful to David Stoddart and The Royal Society for the opportunity to spend a total of seven months in such a wild place immersed in nature and with the company of

geologists and biologists Roger Gaymer, Tony Diamond, John Taylor, Colin Braithwaite, Jim Kennedy and Jack Frazier.

Finally, thank you to those who have been helping me through lockdown like Jill and Simon, Sarah, Sarah, Sara and the rest of the village – and especially Pete and Amy – and also other friends particularly Rogelio Luque-Lora, Simon Perry, Mary Stewart and Hilary Gibson.

Stephen Trudgill
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