

Compassionate Conservation: Unnecessary Luxury or Survival Essential?

Will Travers
CEO, Born Free Foundation

I have been asked to help set the scene and I anticipate an exciting, stimulating and thought-provoking time ahead of us and I want to thank you all – our speakers, our hosts WildCRU and Lady Margaret Hall at the Oxford University, the Born Free and WildCRU teams who have put this event together, the Scientific Committee, and in particular, Claudio Sillero and Chris Draper, the driving forces that have delivered us here today – as David Macdonald said last night at the right place, at the right time and on the right subject - and you, our guests, our friends – for taking part.

However, over the last few months, as the Symposium has taken shape, I have been wondering why we are meeting at all.

After all, around the world, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of leading scientists – some of them here today – are working diligently to understand and overcome the survival challenges faced by wild species.

The other day someone said to me... ‘Don’t mistake compassion for weakness. It got me thinking.

Is that the reason why the twin disciplines of conservation and animal welfare are sometimes kept at arms length?

As a non-scientist, this is a very personal issue for me. Perversely, our interest in wildlife, nature, and conservation often starts with an individual and for many it was an individual lioness – Elsa.

The Adamson’s extraordinary story, *Born Free* - the book and then the film - triggered a totally new kind of interest and a new compassion for lions and, by association, other wild species throughout the world. As Desmond Morris said in his book *Animal Days*: “Joy Adamson’s campaign on behalf of the lion had worked. She had achieved the difficult goal of not merely providing a passing entertainment, but of actually shifting public feelings towards an animal species. Elsa the lioness had become an ambassador for her kind.”

After *Born Free*, lions would no longer be the blood-thirsty killers portrayed in *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*.

From then on, individual animals and their human observers increasingly took centre stage: Jane Goodall and chimpanzees, Biruti Galdikas and orangutans, Arjan Singh and tigers, Paul Spong and orca, Cynthia Moss and Joyce Poole and elephants...

Their stories and observations opened windows into animal worlds that had been previously been hidden or, at best, witnessed by a tiny handful of scientists and naturalists.

My family stumbled into this brave new world almost by accident. How lucky we were. My parents whose starring role in the film *Born Free* brought them into contact with the Adamsons. *From then on there was no looking back.*

My father worked on four films about animal behaviour with Jane Goodall and Hugo van Lawick, made several documentaries (*The Lions are Free* and the full length version of the You Tube sensation *Christian The Lion*). His passion for the individual was immense. Indeed it was his 3 years on the road, recording the miserable lives of individual animals in European Zoos that surely lead to his contracting pneumonia and his death in 1994.

I too have been deeply affected by individuals string of longstanding friendships with people at the forefront of their field. Arjan, Paul, Cynthia, Joyce, Claudio, Rob, Ian, Adam, the two Rons, and many, many others – have become friends, colleagues, companions and compatriots.

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The stories of individual living creatures have become a phenomenon. As much as David Attenborough or any of the great television presenters, the individual wild animal has become our guide to the natural world. And it has been controversial.

And it was another extraordinary individual, a young female African elephant destroyed at the London Zoo in 1983, that triggered a cause, a charity, a mission that is now, for some of us, a life's work. *Pole Pole*, caught from the wild age 2 and dead in the heart of London just 12 years later, was the spark (Zoo Check) that became a flame - the Born Free Foundation – 26 years young this year.

In the beginning it was all about welfare. Born Free's passion then (and today) was to try to see the captive world through the eyes of each incarcerated soul. To imagine what life would be like when stripped of its ecological meaning, pared down to the basics, when even the stimulation of overcoming the challenges of survival has been removed; the senses are blunted and daily routine becomes the pattern of a life.

Of course, that still remains the case for millions of animals in tens of thousands of zoos but it is only part of the story.

By rejecting the zoo concept, a model that, with few exceptions, wastes money, effort, time, intelligence and, ultimately, lives - by rejecting the conservation claims of a multi-billion dollar global industry – as Born Free still does today – it was incumbent on us to identify the alternative.

The answer is conservation in the wild – a far more complex, far harder but, ultimately, **far more rewarding** prospect.

You all now this far better than I but think of the variables, the factors that could influence the outcome of *in situ* conservation programmes. Multiple human impacts from habitat loss or modification, to global warming, poaching, hunting, water extraction, financial constraints, war, civil disturbance, political indifference, apathy, priority-setting, lack of knowledge, lack of care, lack of commitment, competition with human needs and economic imperatives, greed,... the list goes on.

I suppose it's surprising, given the range and nature of the challenges that there has been any success at all. Yet, against the odds - and this is a testament to the determination displayed by so many here today and thousand of others around the world - much has been achieved. Nearly 12% of the surface of our fragile planet is now designated as protected areas - designated being quite different from effectively protected. Yet the framework is there.

However, I believe we are now fast-approaching a watershed. Future opportunities to bring yet more land or even ocean into protected area status are probably slim. The pressure on land – particularly marginal land or land that has been set aside as protected - from a human population set to increase by nearly 50% by 2050, human resource consumption (recalling that the average American citizen consumes the same resources as about 10 Indian citizens) and our seemingly blind adherence to the mantra of *growth* instead of *balance* means that wild species and wild lands will be under possibly irresistible pressure.

What will this mean? An inexorable decline in the status of the natural world? A swiftly accelerating rate of species extinction? The further disconnection of human life from the rest of life?

If so, can we do anything about it?

Male WMLT3 was born on 0.4.1.1.1.9.5.8 one of 4 surviving births to Female VAT and WILT2 the most recent being 2.7.0.2.1.9.6.7. Post –reproductive male WILT2 is recorded as deceased 2.9.0.3.9.4. . WMLT3 paired with CAT1 and two surviving progeny LALT1 and WMLT4 are known to persist. At least one progeny did not survive.

Threats to the current members of the study group include: advanced age; social insecurity; resource challenges; fragmentation of social units.

What do you think that described?

In rather simple but purely factual terms it portrayed a small slice of my family history over the last 50 years.

It's accurate but it doesn't generate much empathy. In a sense, it says what took place but not what happened. The premature death of my father, the tragedy of my unborn child. It doesn't create the context into which my life fits and it simply cannot engage the reader in a way that is likely to lead to any kind of positive action.

If I'd been talking about a different species of primate or gazelle or bear, big cat or marine mammal, would we care? Some of us might - but mighty few of us I suspect.

Can we make our science work harder for species in need - with the use of Compassionate Conservation I believe it can.

The mass engagement of tens, hundreds of millions of people in the conservation effort can support of scientific endeavour, practical field-based species protection, effective land management, ecosystem stewardship and more.

Sometimes popular conservation has a somewhat hollow-sound, particularly when practiced by some of the biggest wildlife organisations. Over the years, many have become little more than alternative development agencies, out of touch with the grassroots and the individual animals they were established to serve.

And at the heart of Compassionate Conservation lies the commitment of individuals joined in common cause. Individual animals, individual plants, individual species, habitats and ecosystems

supported protected and nurtured by individual people, families, communities, towns, countries, regions, continents.

We talk a lot about scaling up projects - establishing pilots, proving they work and then 'scaling up', making them bigger and better and even more effective.

Compassionate Conservation scales up, starting with the individual. By setting individual animals at its heart, it allows each and every one of us to both understand the issues and engage in the solutions. It permits everyone of us to subscribe to an accessible agenda and help contribute, each in our way, to delivering long-term solutions.

About 6 weeks ago I had my first meeting with the Minister in the new Government responsible for zoos, circuses and the like. A lawyer, Lord Henley freely admitted that he had no experience in these areas but made it plain that he set great store by 'evidence-based policy making'.

I know what he was getting at. He wants scientific evidence to be provided in support before action is taken. Prove the animal suffers while being shunted round the country in a beats wagon from venue to venue, in and out of the ring, during performance and training, throughout the long dark days in the winter quarters.

In one sense he was right but in other his view, as I pointed out to him, was far too myopic. Evidence is important but scientific evidence is only part of the story. There are wider social, political, ethical, moral, considerations – evidence if you will – that also determine policy. The absence of evidence doesn't mean there is evidence of absence.

Compassionate Conservation brings together the most important evidence available: credible science and informed popular sentiment. An overpowering combination. That's why I am looking forward so much to the next two days. I want to test the hypothesis that adding Compassion to Conservation isn't sign of weakness but is a sign of strength.

Compassionate Conservation isn't a luxury. It isn't some slightly soppy, overly-anthropomorphic, and anthropocentric luxury or frivolous diversion. It actually may be the tool we have been searching for to help overcome the challenges – many of our own making – that threaten the natural world and modify the activities most singular of species that is both the cause of its demise and, just possibly, could be its salvation.