

Perspective

Conservation plc

WILLIAM M. ADAMS

The 10th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 10) to the Convention on Biological Diversity will be held in Nagoya, Japan, from 18 to 29 October 2010. This is the world trade fair of conservation, the opportunity for conservation plc to show off its latest gadgets and innovations, for old established organizations to show their capacity for reinvention, for new arrivals to make their pitch. It will involve thousands of delegates, hundreds of thousands of air miles, hundreds of tonnes of CO₂, countless hotel suites, receptions, report launches, press briefings, canapés, sushi and wine. How will this meeting be viewed in future years? What will conservation look like in 2 decades' time? What state will nature be in? Below is an attempt to imagine one possible future, in the form of a speech made at a future CBD COP. All the elements described already exist in a nascent form. The point of this fictional future is to draw attention to the importance of choices about the future shape of conservation as part of debates about the future shape of nature.

The Conservation Chief Executives Dinner CBD COP 2030

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I welcome you, the chief executives of the greatest conservation organizations the world has ever known, to this event to mark the conclusion of the 20th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. Once we would have met in person but today we do so virtually although, if I may say so, our conviviality and sense of occasion are no less.

Before we continue I would like to bring you a message from the more-than-human Patron of our joint project of wild land protection. Ladies and Gentlemen, I ask you to welcome Compassion, the oldest orang-utan in the world. Compassion was saved by YourForest, one of our newer members, in 2015, and now lives in a special care facility in the *Last of the Wild Complex*TM VII, in Kalimantan.

VIDEO FEED STARTS

The film pans across the rainforest habitat, and focuses on an old orang-utan. Compassion stands, holding a liana, looking straight to camera. The voiceover says:

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Greetings. I stand before you as the last representative of my species, in the last piece of the earth left to us. And I want today to express my thanks to you for all your work. Thanks to your vision and generosity my family and I are here today to communicate with you. Thanks to your engineering and biological skills we, the last orang-utans, can continue to live in the wild, protected forever against all outside threats. Our specially constructed home encloses and sustains the forest, roofed against atmospheric pollution and climate change, protected from all human disturbance by 24-hour security and veterinary surveillance. Here, nature lives on, unbounded in its wonder and diversity. Here our lives hold out a precious truth for the watching world. Whoever you are, whatever you do for us, we thank you.

APPLAUSE

Thank you, Compassion. Your sufferings, and those of all your people, move us greatly. [WIPE A TEAR.] Your survival makes us feel fully human. Your future is our most precious hope. You speak for all of us in our hopes for a more diverse, humane and caring world.

SUSTAINED APPLAUSE

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.

It is now my privilege to introduce our speaker tonight, Professor Normal Talk. Professor Talk has had an enormously distinguished career, both in academia and the banking industry. In the second decade of this century he pioneered the field of Post-Ecological Economics, and he holds the Nobel Prize for environmental accounting. He was President of the World Bank during its controversial and highly successful privatization, and founded the Chagos Carbon Exchange that has seen the value of biodiversity and carbon derivatives soar in the last 10 years. His current position, the BP Cost of Everything Chair in the University of the Sixth Extinction in Washington, is funded by the Deepwater Trust. He is a Trustee of both Conservation and Community International (C²I) and The Wildlife Commemoration Society.

PROFESSOR TALK RISES TO ADDRESS THE GUESTS

Thank you sir for your kind words. Thank you ladies and gentlemen for your welcome.

Now, after such a successful COP, you don't want to hear too much from me. You will be eager to get back to your work, your staff and your shareholders. There is so much to be done.

It is just 15 years since we came together as one federation of global conservation organizations: a tangled bank of diverse entities linked together into a single consortium, adapting continuously in a changing world. Since then, thanks to you, conservation has grown to become a major industry, employing millions of people in every country of the world. Research by the Centre for Post-Biodiversity Science shows that, year on year, more people list the loss of biodiversity top of their environmental concerns, and increasingly it comes near the top of all their concerns. This is a new world and we represent a movement that cuts across country, race, age and class.

Yet, as we celebrate tonight, we must remember those who have gone before us, in dark times for conservation. Let us not forget that the 20th century was a period of extinction and failure, and the 21st started no better. Do you remember the failure to meet the 2010 Target that caused such soul-searching at Nagoya, 20 years ago?

Remarkably, we turned this failure into success. How have we done it? There were five critical elements to our success.

Firstly, in the years following Nagoya, we made security the centrepiece of conservation. As more and more habitat was lost we declared more and more protected areas. As they were degraded and destroyed we learned to focus on the most secure, and we developed new techniques to make them secure. New public–private partnerships with the security industry, noticeably the Panda4You Biodiversity, Peace and Security Initiative sponsored by Haliburton, have transformed the way conservation is done. Once parks were managed—often very inefficiently—by national governments, nominally for the interest of their citizens. Now they are managed by private security conglomerates in the interests of global humankind. Management goals are clear, based on world class computational science, and delivered competitively through cost-effective, logistic solutions. We have learned that conservation is not something that can be done by citizens but must be done for them. It is not something that can be done with people but, rather, in spite of them. The protection of nature is no longer optional. It must be absolute.

Secondly, since Nagoya in 2010, we have started to develop the technologies of conservation. Everywhere, the old Biodiversity Hotspots have disappeared from our computer screens. But all has not been lost. Ecosystem by ecosystem, the last fragments of this precious heritage have been brought under protection in innovatively engineered Biodiversity Habitats. Each of us has such assets secured for the present and the future. There is a loss in this transition, to be sure. No longer does wild land exist without conservation management. But think how much has been gained! In particular, we must take legitimate pride in the global series of fully engineered biospheres of the 34 Last of the Wild™ complexes, where nature is kept safe from human

harm. Back at the start of the 20th century Ray Lankester called in the journal *Nature* for all worshippers of uncontaminated nature to work to save the precious living relics of the world as it was, before man destroyed it. Astonishingly, at long last, we have done it. We have gone beyond mere protectionism, for technology is also being harnessed to the task of recreating nature. The idea of ‘reversing extinction’ has transformed the re-wilding movement, and has led us to embrace biodiversity engineering from the level of the genome to the ecosystem. This has radically expanded the prospects for re-terraforming earth. It is invidious to take one example, but surely Fauna, Flora & Carbon International’s innovative Reverse Engineering Biodiversity and Ecosystem (REBEL) programme is one whose success we would all applaud, if only for its brokering of such an innovative partnership between the banking, carbon and biotechnology industries?

Our third innovation, a real achievement of Nagoya in 2010, was to put measurement at the centre of all our work. The skill with which our predecessors turned their failure to hit the original 2010 Target into a vast family of targets, a veritable ecosystem of endless measurement, was a stroke of genius. As Frederick Winslow Taylor, high priest of efficiency in manufacturing, would have said if he had worked in the voluntary sector, ‘if you can’t measure it, you can’t get it funded’. As biodiversity has disappeared, we have been able to measure its decline more and more precisely. And in the last 2 decades we have started to learn the true value of measurement: that the more we measured, the more important our work was seen to be. The more accurate our measures—of biodiversity change, of conservation effort, of targets hit and missed—the more citizens, governments and corporations have understood and supported our work. It is ironic, but true, that as nature disappears the value of what is left rises: the less habitat remains, the more precious it is deemed to be. This calculus is now the secure basis of many of our businesses.

The fourth transformation of our work since 2010 has been the integration of conservation into the everyday working of the world economy. At Nagoya in 2010 we managed to sell mainstreaming as a core element in conservation work. As the years have passed we have first paddled, then waded, then swum in that mainstream until we have learned to make it our own. It must be said here—but speak it not outside these virtual walls—that we have been astonishingly successful. More and more government departments, more finance houses and banks, more trading companies and resource corporations, and more religious organizations, have come to build their core business around the idea of conservation. Quite simply, by positioning ourselves at the interface between destruction and protection, we have found a critical market position. Biodiversity has become a commodity, and increasingly we set its price and control its supply. Once our organizations

were societies, funded by the subscriptions of our members. By 2010 the era of corporate partnerships had begun, transforming our scope and ambition. By 2020 the most successful conservation organizations were full public-private partnerships, and today most are public corporations. Their stock is traded on the market, and, for some, listed on the Dow Jones and FTSE. In ways beyond our wildest dreams, conservation has become part of the core of the world economy, an integral element of the DNA of enterprise, trade and corporate business.

Last, but not least, we have learned since Nagoya how to bring nature into the hearts and lives of the people of the world in astonishing new ways. The possibility of virtual tours has opened global nature to consumers and citizens as never before, with no carbon-squandering global travel, no con trails in the stratosphere, no local environmental impact. To take just one example, the open source *Nature-Real™* software (particularly its capacity to speed up and slow down natural processes, and to zoom from cell to biosphere) now offers people the chance to engage directly in the lives of wild animals and plants in an intimate way. Through both public and private service providers, consumers can dive to hunt squid with sperm whales, soar above the rooftops of Madrid with swifts or explore the towering mud labyrinths of tropical termite mounds. Holidays at home, enforced by the end of cheap air flights, no longer depend just on virtual gyms, city tours and gaming. Now vast numbers of people, whose lives are irrevocably detached from old, half-remembered and impoverished ecosystems of field, garden or forest, can

experience the full magic of nature in thousands of novel and traditional combinations. Truly, nature has never been so real for so many people. People do not have to travel the earth in search of rarity or beauty—indeed they cannot. But they do not need to, for nature is not out there any more, it is in here, just a keystroke away, protected forever.

Ladies and gentlemen, truly, the world has changed in so many ways since 2010. We have, as I have said, enjoyed great success. Now, for the first time in our history we can honestly say that no significant area of habitat exists outside our protection. Yet, as ever, the challenges facing us are very great. Climate change has indeed come, as the scientists at the start of the century predicted and the environmentalists feared. Large areas of the planet are now uninhabitable, and in many countries human life is possible only in enclosed urban complexes. Despite huge efforts to eradicate poverty, the poor are still with us. Nature everywhere is in retreat.

My message to you, conservation's corporate leaders, is that your work has only just begun. You must rise to the challenges ahead, redouble your efforts and grow further in influence, capacity and ambition. You must measure nature's decline, document what is lost, create new messages for new markets. You must build new partnerships, invent new technologies, dream new dreams. The fate of nature lies in your hands.

Therefore, to all of you here, leaders, fellow travellers and co-workers, I offer you a toast: *to the future of conservation and the future of our enterprise!*

APPLAUSE