

the  
**science chronicles**

an unofficial monthly for the science conservationist

April 2010: volume 8 issue #4



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*On the cover:* Photo by Marcel ter Bekke

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## Letter from your editor

Readers,

What is conservation about? The answer will be different depending on who you ask. We scientists often pretend it is science that reveals our goals. But that is a lie. Deciding to protect the last pandas and condors is less based on rational considerations than on emotive ones. What many conservationists see as obviously right might to others be irrelevant.

In my work I come across many conservationists who are unable to accept that conservation is not high on everyone's ethical agenda. They are morally outraged about the evil anti-conservationists in the world. I am beginning to believe this self-righteousness and intransigence interferes with getting conservation done.

For example, I recently did some work for a much criticized plantation company in Indonesia. To my surprise, I found indications that their management is having a positive impact on conservation, and it least in some places. But most of my conservation colleagues do not like to hear me tell this story. How could such an evil company possibly do something good?, they ask.

How open-minded are we as conservationists in looking for solutions. Our minds tend to operate in binary terms: forest conservation is good, deforestation is bad; you are either with us or against us. But reality is grey, and practical solutions require compromises. A working landscape with patches of protected forest, timber concessions and plantations, and agricultural plots might not quite give us that idealized sense of wildness, but it might be the most optimal conservation solution. We readily accept such landscapes in North America and Europe, but find it much harder in tropical Asia, Africa and South America.

Unless we find some shared bandwidth with others, we will remain vastly outnumbered by people that cannot afford to care about conservation, or simply have other priorities.

E Meijaard

## Letters

### Science, the Truth and the Press

Science was knocked off its pedestal with the various climategate scandals. But I would argue that it should never have been on that pedestal. Science isn't always about telling hard facts. It's about struggling towards establishing what those hard facts might be, and the journey is messy.

The mess of science isn't just in the hard work of sifting, finding, theorising and modeling. Scientists are also human, the same class of organism as lawyers or politicians, and used car salesmen. They

are "fed" by funders with political agendas. They advance their cause through journals that demand breathless claims of novelty and surprise.

So scientists do twist the truth and bias the results. Not all scientists, but enough to have an impact. And some very good scientists—for example, Gregor Mendel, catholic monk and father of modern genetics is widely believed to have fudged his data (they were too clean and clear-cut to be "honest").

Thankfully there is no cabal, no conspiracy, with all scientists working on a single agenda, in fact we do best by challenging the work of others. So we edge towards understanding through a slow process of gradually refined theories and rejected hypotheses.

Of course the errors and the dodgy science in the IPCC reports shouldn't have got in, but so what if they did—these were only a tiny fraction set against the tidal wave of truth in those same reports.

Thankfully there is no cabal, no conspiracy, with all scientists working on a single agenda, in fact we do best by challenging the work of others. So we edge towards understanding through a slow process of gradually refined theories and rejected hypotheses.

Why on earth are the press so naïve as to believe us, unquestioningly? And why do they never use the cautious, careful language of good scientists—correlation is not causality, likelihood is not certainty? For decades now, the press has fed the intelligent thinking public a strange diet of overblown truths or unjustified challenges, never getting the straight-line course towards understanding by argument, testing and consensus. How can we scientists close the gap—where can we meet the public?

I think the scientists must continue to speak as scientists. We need to press hard to make it clear when results are weak or indicative. I'd love it if the fields of funding and peer review gave less air time to politics and hyperbole.

But what I think we really need are a whole new class of champions who will take up our causes, with a bit of science and a lot of rhetoric. We need powerful speakers who can bring audiences with them. Maybe our best example is Al Gore. His climate change talk was only part science. He got some stuff wrong too. But it was good enough to get the talk-show hosts huffing. If we use charismatic spokespeople to take on the similarly charismatic class bullies in the playground, the press might get their "interesting stories". Then when there's a call for a more sane debate the scientists can be wheeled in.

M Spalding

## Essays

### **Forgetting Our Roots: the Grassroots**

TNC, CI, WWF and numerous other conservation organizations increasingly work “*inside the beltway*”, trying to influence the US Congress and Washington DC-based policy leaders. Climate legislation is the biggest focus. How is that working out?

We all know the answer. So what can we change to bring success to this high-leverage policy approach?

To me the answer is simple—invest more in a grassroots effort and directly promoting social change and conservation thinking. Rachel Carson created the modern environmental movement through her book *Silent Spring* and by speaking directly to the people on a Sunday evening television show that set records for viewership: *CBS Reports*. Earth Day began as a populist movement. TNC might never have been an advocacy group—but it has always relied heavily on its volunteer base for everything from annual donations, to voting for State bond issues, to Saturday work parties that remove invasive species from nature reserves. There is increasing evidence and speculation that the key to a happy conservation outcome is changing the public’s attitude and behavior. All of the policy wonkishness in the world will not gain traction without broad and deep public support.

Insofar as we cannot save the world by buying the world, conservation must stand on three legs—each necessary, and none sufficient by themselves. Those three legs are: policy work, partnership with business, and changing public behavior and attitudes. We have never really gotten all three of these efforts working well together.

Today we lack the grassroots efforts. But when grassroots environmentalism was strong in the sixties, it suffered from an excess of anti-business sentiment. We cannot do conservation without business as our ally. And for sure we need governments and financial policy that is pro-conservation—hence the policy investment. But I am wondering if the fate of cap-and-trade and the Kyoto agreement is a signal that it is time to boost our investment in social change and marketing of conservation ideas. I am not talking about marketing TNC’s brand in order to build a better donor base. I am suggesting that reaching out to a broad constituency and changing their behavior and attitudes is the one critical missing ingredient of our global conservation strategy.

P Kareiva

**A Measures Workshop: The Most Exciting Thing that's Happened to Me Recently!**

It is entirely possible that I very badly need to get a life, but a Strategy Effectiveness Measures workshop is the most exciting thing that has happened to me recently. I'm not kidding. Before writing me off as totally hopeless, please give me a moment to try to explain.

It was the most exciting thing I have done recently because I came away with the management tool I have been searching for ever since I joined the Conservancy eleven years ago.

For a good deal of my almost 30 years in the world of finance I railed against quarterly earnings. To me they represent the single most powerful disincentive to sensible long term planning and management. If a company doesn't hit the quarterly earnings estimate that market analysts expect, the company's share price falls—and with it the bonuses, stock options and career opportunities of all the most senior managers. Little wonder, then, that their primary focus is on meeting short term objectives. Little wonder there is a major financial crisis every 10 years or so.

It is rich in irony, therefore, that ever since joining the Conservancy I have been searching for a conservation proxy for quarterly earnings.

The reason is simple. Conservation outcomes are achieved over years, often decades. Conservationists think and act at that timescale. We have to. But to achieve 5 or 10-year goals we need consistent and reliable indicators to measure whether we are hitting—or missing—the short term milestones essential to reaching those ultimate goals. If we don't hit milestone 2 or 3, we surely are not going to get to milestones 10 or 11. "Adaptive management" is a term much used. But in reality, far too often gets little more than powerful lip service.

And the reason for that is also simple—at least in my case. It may just be that I am woefully slow and behind the pack (and I'm really sorry that I wasn't able to attend the big Measures workshop in Long Island last October), but until the workshop this week I didn't have at my disposal a clear, logical and disciplined process for (i) highlighting essential outcomes that have to be achieved for a strategy to be effective, and (ii) putting tripwires in place at regular short term intervals to force appraisal of whether those essential milestones are being hit—with obvious implications for the entire strategy. The Conceptual Model and most especially the Results Chain processes I was introduced to this week, if applied dispassionately and with discipline, make it much more difficult to keep plowing on regardless with a strategy that isn't working or is in need of an important course correction.

In one example we worked through this week, using an actual strategy from the Berau Forest Carbon Project now being launched in Asia-Pacific, the process made the point jump out that if one particular political outcome was not achieved early on, or the prospects for achieving it were not persuasively positive in a limited period of time—in this example it happened to be milestone 2—the next two or three years of investment in that strategy would more than likely be wasted. The same applied to another outcome at milestone 5.

Disciplined implementation of the Results Chain process forces “go/no go” decisions. In our example, if we had not met milestone 2 but still decided the strategy was a “go”, then clearly continuing with the *status quo* was no longer a viable option. Either we needed to adjust the entire strategy to a different timeframe, or find a different approach to meet that particular milestone quickly. And if we couldn’t find a compelling alternative, we would have to think long and hard about whether continued investment in that strategy remained justified.

In many cases, I suspect the honest answer will be no. At which point you seriously have to consider the viability of the entire strategy. In many cases, I suspect the right return on investment decision should be: “No go”.

I am far from alone in my concern for the millions of dollars wasted in pursuing failing, or failed, conservation strategies. I completely concede that the type of conservation in which the Conservancy is and should be engaged, is in many cases as much art as it is science. In that context failure, on occasions, is a given. But how we fail, what we learn from failure, and what the cost of failure is, is entirely up to us.

In railing against the absence of a conservation proxy for quarterly earnings, my driving motivation has been a desperate need to learn, if a strategy is failing, how to fail early, and fail fast. This past week at the Strategy Effectiveness Measures workshop I think I took an important step forward in learning how to do that.

For that I am most grateful to Craig Groves, Mauricio Castro Schmitz and Lynne Eder for the superbly designed, facilitated and managed workshop in Thailand for Asia-Pacific Region staff. I am convinced that as a result of this workshop, conservation return on investment in the Asia-Pacific Region will be significantly enhanced.

R Leiman

## **Beyond Protected Areas**

I recently visited the Farming for Wildlife project in the Skagit Valley in Washington. In this field study, farmers were paid to flood their fields for up to several years to create habitat for shorebirds. The benefits of this flooding include more use by other waterfowl, raptors, coyotes and amphibians and increased soil fertility; in addition, the three farmers involved use the project to transition to organic farming, which will reduce conventional herbicide and pesticide inputs into the river system. In a similar project in the Klamath Basin of California, wetland rotations control harmful pests and plant pathogens. The Conservancy is careful to emphasize that they are not creating new wetlands; these wetlands are analogous to another crop rotation. The habitat they are creating is ephemeral. But the goal is to create a critical mass of this type of habitat throughout the delta on an annual basis. Imagine if farmers throughout the valley or the region included flooding as part of their crop rotations. These temporary wetlands would form a shifting mosaic of habitat patches that would

greatly increase the total habitat available in any season. This project provides a model that could be applied in many ways as a complementary means of approaching and enhancing conservation in populated landscapes.



Photo by  
Kirsten  
Morse

Certainly, there is no substitute for protected areas. In many cases, protected areas offer the best hope for conserving biodiversity, especially endangered or heavily harvested species and rare or fragile ecosystems. But globally only 11.5 percent of the land and less than one percent of oceans are protected, and many of these areas are only parks on paper with protection poorly enforced.

Accepted species-area relationships tell us if we protect 10 percent of each habitat type—the Conservancy’s goal—we stand to lose approximately 50 percent of all species. This assessment might be true if all of the non-protected areas were paved. Thankfully that is not the case!

Promoting biodiversity in working forest, agricultural, marine, and urban environments is a key to landscape scale conservation in addition to protected areas. Living fences and hedgerows in agricultural landscapes provide important habitat and corridors for wildlife. Forest management practices that promote species and structural diversity of forests can create important conservation areas. In urban and suburban areas, planting native flowering and fruiting plants in yards, open spaces and in green strips along streets and highways provides food and habitat for insects, birds, and bats. Green roofs can become oases for native plants and animals while reducing energy costs.

Farming for Wildlife is an excellent example of integrating conservation with the ways people live and work. One participating farmer challenges local Conservancy staff by saying, "We (farmers) have never met a crop we can't over produce. If the Conservancy can develop incentives and projects that meet our bottom line needs, we will add wetland rotations to our list of commercially significant crops in the Valley." We need to expand on this approach, modify it for different regions, and come up with entirely new strategies based on the underlying principles of taking every opportunity to increase habitat and promote ecosystem services benefits to practical, modern human life.

J Aukema

## The Methods Forum

### **Problem: How Much is Annually Spent on Global Biodiversity Conservation?**

Problem Statement: For a paper I am working on I need an estimate of how much is globally spent each year on biodiversity conservation. Despite a thorough search of the literature I couldn't find any comprehensive answers to that question. It would be good to have an estimate, for example, to have some idea of the percentage of total global GDP that is spent on biodiversity conservation, to understand trends in conservation funding over time, changes in the role of different sectors in conservation funding (GO, NGO, commercial), or to assess regional variation in conservation spending.

Objective: The objective is to estimate the global funding for biodiversity conservation in 2009, with the ability to break down this estimate by funding sector, region, and other factors. The challenge would be to differentiate biodiversity spending from other related funding (e.g., climate change, development aid etc.). If indeed no global estimates exist, it should make an interesting short paper for a high impact journal.

Methods question: Apart from looking for data from and adding up the thousands of governmental, non-governmental and commercial sources of funding that are allocated to biodiversity conservation, is there a simpler way to estimate this? Are there any databases that have compiled at least part of the information?

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## Science Shorts

### **Changing Human Behavior as a Conservation Strategy**

Hunt Allcott and Sendhil Mullainathan. 2010. Behavior and Energy Policy. *Science* **327**: 124-1205.

When I first showed up at Duke University, one could still find segregated public restrooms in North Carolina. When I attended my first faculty party in 1980, I think half the faculty drove home alcohol impaired. Smoking in bars?

Given information, people change their behavior, and these changes could be good for conservation— except we do not ask—or we do not ask in the right way. Allcott and Mullainathan’s article in *Science* reports on a remarkable study that examined the effects of simply displaying on gas and electricity bills a few tips about energy conservation plus each household’s energy consumption along with the consumption of similar households. Compared to controls (bills lacking the comparison), energy consumption was reduced on average by over 2%. Nothing heavy-handed—just tapping into our competitive nature (surely we can do better than our neighbors in energy conservation). Now 2% might not seem like much—but what is impressive was how easy and fast it was to get that change. And then there is the economics of it all. There are a lot of energy technology choices and options being discussed for the US—all designed to reduce our carbon emissions. These approaches cost between \$15 and \$44 per ton of CO<sub>2</sub> abated. In contrast, the little energy bill “trick” does not cost anything per ton of CO<sub>2</sub> abated—to the contrary it saves \$165 per ton CO<sub>2</sub> abated.

Human behavior is adaptable and can be smart. It is up to conservationists to take advantage of that possibility.

P Kareiva

### **The Key Role of Human Nature in Conservation.**

Johnson, D., and S. Levin. 2009. The tragedy of cognition: psychological biases and environmental inaction. *Current Science* **97**:593-603.

Just like the above, this is an interesting paper about the importance of psychology in conservation. Much effort by environmentalists is focused on explaining and disseminating scientific facts. This papers suggests that the greater struggle should be to make facts more relevant to a collection of largely uninterested, distracted and biased human brains. One reason that this psychological dimension has been overlooked in conservation is the pervasive dominance of rational logic in academic and journalistic reporting. Conservationists are reluctant to discard the clean rational-choice paradigm for the messier and more complex reality of human nature.

Johnson and Levin point out the systematic biases in judgment and decision-making that we are all subject to. The bad news about psychological biases is that they lead people to downplay the probability and danger of environmental change, and their role in it, while increasing their perceived incentives to maintain the status quo, and to blame problems on others. Discounting plays a huge role: people are relatively insensitive to long-term and hypothetical dangers such as future environmental degradation and climate change, and much more sensitive to immediate and concrete personal experience such as floods and earthquakes.

The authors call for a better understanding of human psychology in conservation, and an adaptation of conservation approaches that are more accurately attuned to the psychological biases that we are all subject to. If beer, women, and money drive the average middle-aged western man, then a new sitcom about riotous, beer guzzling, gorgeous and rich conservationists might do a more effective job in raising grassroot support than another show about suffering orangutans.

E Meijaard

### **Missing the Obvious**

Paul West, G. Narisma, C. Barford, C. Kucharik, and J. Foley. 2010. An alternative approach for quantifying climate regulation by ecosystems. [Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment](#)

Conservationists vigorously argue that protecting forests is good for humanity because forests absorb CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere and thereby slow down global warming. This is true. But conservationists have largely overlooked another “climate benefit” of intact vegetation—direct regulation of climate by altering albedo, heat fluxes, and evaporation. City dwellers who are lucky enough to live in cities with abundant trees and parks can benefit from a cooling effect that is as much as 5 degrees Fahrenheit during the summer. All vegetation has the capacity to alter temperature and humidity directly, with the magnitude of this impact being as much as 3 degrees Fahrenheit in boreal and tropical regions. In the boreal regions vegetation warms the local climate, and removal of the vegetation causes cooling. In tropical regions vegetation cools the local climate and a removal of it causes local warming. The effects are significant enough to have impacts for agriculture and human comfort.

Paul West and colleagues provide a global map of the direct climate regulation conferred by intact vegetation. Their index of climate regulation is only a first approximation because it essentially contrasts intact vegetation to bare ground. Even so, the direct ameliorating effects of vegetation on climate are substantial enough that they warrant more attention when evaluating land use change. Plants do a lot more for us than simply absorbing CO<sub>2</sub>.

P Kareiva

## Orgspeak and News

### Coda Global Fellows Program Seeks Quantitative Monitoring Candidates

The Coda Global Fellows Program is well on its way to meet its target of more than 50 Fellowships for FY10. Last year's total of 37 Fellowships was already double the number of any previous year. Part of TNC's Conservation Methods and Learning team in Central Science, the Fellows program deploys staff on short-term assignments to meet program and project needs in all areas of technical and organizational expertise and anywhere that TNC is working.

Currently, the Fellows program is seeking staff who have expertise and experience in quantitative monitoring to serve on future Fellowships. If you are interested in being a Fellow, please contact Fellows Program Director Jolie Sibert at [jsibert@tnc.org](mailto:jsibert@tnc.org) and fill out [this brief questionnaire](#). If your program could use a Fellow to help fill any short-term expertise or capacity gap, please visit [the Fellows Program intranet site](#) and complete the [request form](#).

J Sibert

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*NOTE: New additions in red; TNC affiliated authors highlighted in bold.*

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