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Reconnecting People and Nature

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We Will Only Protect What We Value

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Based on the keynote address at the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management Autumn Conference entitled *Reconnecting People and Nature: Opportunities and Challenges*.

In my work at the John Muir Trust and the IUCN, I've picked up a narrative around a 'lack of connection' between people and nature and this is often presented as something that has been lost, is getting worse and is a root cause of the decline in the state of our countryside and biodiversity. If this is reflected in society's values, it underpins decision-making by governments and could be a downward spiral for nature and for us. If we only protect what we value – how do we ensure society values nature?

Of course, there is nothing new in this discussion – we can find parallels throughout history. Over a hundred years ago, John Muir was advocating to politicians the establishment of national parks to protect America's wilderness. He had limited evidence to draw on, but he was persuasive – appealing to the heart as much as the head. He was up against it – with speculators looking to realise the 'natural capital' nature provided.

"Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would

still be destroyed – chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns, or magnificent bole backbones.... God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools – only Uncle Sam can do that."

Assigning a positive value to these places and encouraging people to visit them, to experience them for themselves, was a good move all round. It was a solution to an enduring problem. Again in his words: *"Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going*

home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.”

Today, over 292 million people visit the National Parks in America every year, and for every \$1 spent, the parks generate an estimated \$4 dollars benefit to the wider economy¹. Protecting nature and giving people access to it is good for the soul as well as the coffers, it seems.

In the run up to the last general election, a coalition of organisations led by the Wildlife Trusts and RSPB, put forward a case for a new Nature and Wellbeing Act². Unfortunately, the government hasn't taken this up but a coherent case has been put forward linking the nation's health to the health of our natural environment.

The RSPB report *Connecting with Nature*, claimed that only 21% of 8-12 year-olds across the UK have a 'connection to nature that could be considered to be realistic and achievable for all children'. A more positive note is struck by a recent UK government report stating that 70% of children spend time in the natural environment at least once a week³. Longitudinal studies such as Scotland's annual People and Nature survey show a general positive trend in the number of visits to the outdoors and positive perceptions of the value of spending time in nature – but there is considerable variability dependent on age, background and affluence⁴. A common trend does exist – if you are poor, you are less likely to be accessing benefits from nature. So, whilst the general population might be nudged towards nature, more targeted intervention is needed to encourage and support those who might benefit the most.



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There is now a good body of scientific evidence to show the linkage between nature and wellbeing and the potential saving to the public purse. According to a study by Natural England, if every household in England were provided with good access to quality green space it could save an estimated £2.1 billion in health care costs⁵.

The overall case is compelling: whether by choice or compliance, as a preventative or prescriptive measure, you will benefit from being in nature. This will lead ultimately to people seeing the benefit of protecting nature for us, as much as for its own sake. The challenge is to enable everyone to access these benefits, make the environment relevant to everyone – and in that way society as a whole will value nature and ultimately protect it. Initiatives such as the John Muir Award and others are being used to great effect and especially by organisations reaching out to those in most need.

Judging by the change in attitude towards the environment and understanding of it in my own children's generation, compared to mine growing up in the 1970s, I think there is some cause for optimism. Outdoor learning is becoming a mainstream component of an education curriculum – particularly in Scotland – that places much more emphasis on environmental awareness, understanding and connection. I sense our kids know they are part of nature and our actions have consequences that ultimately impact on us as well as the other species we share the planet with.

Their horizons are wide, where ours were relatively narrow.

I will leave the final word to an eleven-year-old John Muir Award participant, the latest generation of nature conservationists by default rather than exception:

“Fresh air comes into your body and pushes all the bad stuff out – the stuff that makes people unwell, like angriness and stress”.



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Notes

1. http://www.npca.org/assets/pdf/NPCA_Economic_Significance_Report.pdf
2. http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/nwa_summary_document_final_0.pdf
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/childrens-visits-to-natural-environments-new-evidence>
4. <http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1471713.pdf>
5. http://www.ukmaburbanforum.co.uk/documents/presentations/statins_and_greenspaces/bird.pdf

About the Author



Following initial training as a fine artist, Stuart went on to study geography at Newcastle University where he was introduced to upland and peatland ecosystems. Stuart

joined the Scottish Wildlife Trust in 1995 supporting a European peatland project and later became their Director of Conservation. He joined the John Muir Trust, a UK charity concerned with protection of wild places, as its Chief Executive in 2009.

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