1 Us

History is shaped . . . not by the cunning of Reason but by the cunning of Desire.
Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (1959: 16)

The destruction of creatures with whom we have long shared the Earth is accelerating, despite the efforts of conservationists to slow or stop it. Whole ecosystems are being buried under asphalt, concrete, subdivisions and domesticated monocultures at an exponential rate just as surely as great tides of Hollywood lava once consumed whole cinematic villages of noble savages – only this is real, not a movie. Despite efforts rooted in rural communities, in centers of world power, and everywhere in between, conservationists have been unable to stem the cancer that is inexorably devouring grizzlies, wetlands, dry forests, raptors, butterflies, tropical forests, boreal forests, tundras, and caribou.

What can conservationists do differently that will make them more effective? This book is written for those who care enough about the natural world to examine their assumption and the current way of doing things. It is written for those who understand that extinction is irreversible and that alongside the tyranny of swelling human numbers and demand for even more stuff, are conservationists who are wedded to business as usual. This book is not for those who think things will somehow work out in the end, or for those who think they can magically have Nature and the equivalent of 6.5 billion American consumers. It is for those who are willing to look squarely at current practices and to dump approaches that aren't working for more promising approaches. It is for those for whom Nature is more important than cherished ideas or the need for recognition from other humans.

Effective political and social change begins with those who seek to make change and ground themselves in what works.

What's not Working

Thomas Patterson (2002: 13) echoes the observations of many social scientists when he states that if all those eligible had voted in 2000 the electoral outcome would have been very different. Having the presidency and both houses of Congress

in other hands would have not halted human-caused extinctions in their tracks, but it would have been far better for the natural world than the actual outcome. The point is that a lack of action on the part of potential voters made a difference for conservation. Action is what counts. Action changes outcomes. One action damages Nature, another nurtures it.

There are many reasons conservationists have not been effective in getting people to act. Some of the most salient are related to their assumptions about what motivates people to act. Conservationists know that what people think and feel counts, but not how these thoughts and feelings generate action. Why do some thoughts and feelings move people to action and others don't? What happens when people's hearts tug in one direction, but their calculations in another? What causes people to publicly espouse one view but act contrarily? The relationship between emotions, values, and views of the world on one hand and action on the other, are complex and not always obvious. It is difficult to gain insight, however, when one already possesses insight.

Conservationists are fond of quoting Margaret Mead on how small groups of committed people drive change in the world, but Mead lacked a full understanding. A small group can start a snowball rolling down a hill, but the group needs a hill, a way to get to the launch place on the hill, the right kind of snow, and much more. For the conservation snowball to become a daunting boulder a good understanding of the sources of political action are needed. Such knowledge is not innately mysterious or hard to come by, but much gets in the way. Conservationists too often:

- Focus not on generating action but on the precursors to action.
- Focus too much on the cognitive and on education as transmission of knowledge.
- Fail to follow through when they have emotionally energized people by involving them in a community or organizational structure that can nurture their energy and sustain it.
- Do not understand or do not want to understand what causes decision makers to act.

Zeno and Conservation

Conservationists often aim not at instigating action, but at some intermediate point in a process that is supposed to lead, in some vague way, to action. If loving Nature leads to action, and experiencing Nature causes people to love Nature, then conservationists focus on hiking programs. The other elements that determine whether or not people act – the need for constant encouragement, the

overwhelming importance of collective reinforcement in sustaining action, the role of organization – are never addressed. Similarly, conservationists sometimes treat lobbying like the unmet demand for contraception. If one provides information, states a preferred outcome along with some poll numbers, things will work out. In the case of contraception there is often a preexisting motivation, but for most objects of lobbying the motivation must be provided.

In each of these instances conservationists become trapped like Zeno's hypothetical arrow; they only get half of the rest of the way toward their goal. In the case of instigating action, there is often no understanding of the need for creating a conservation community – something which has empowered many other movements.

Conservationists may limit their activities to those short of directly generating political action because it is less risky. Action can create controversy. Action draws the attention of sometimes powerful and violent opponents. Whatever the reasons, There is a lack of recognition that half-steps will not stop extinctions. Action can run contrary to some countries' laws that limit the political activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have charitable tax status – a status many rely on to raise funds.

Education and Emotion

The focus of conservation NGOs on education as provision of knowledge is not just a reflection of tax laws but of a pervasive belief that if people are given good information they will do the right thing; they will act rationally in their long-term interests and with generosity toward the natural world. Those conservationists trained in the natural sciences seem particularly susceptible to this Enlightenment predisposition. But the predisposition often goes beyond faith in the cognitive and the notion that people reason through issues and act accordingly. Perhaps they regard appeals to emotion as inherently manipulative – the province of the wealth and power driven. Perhaps it reflects living in one's own head too much. Ted Brader (2005: 21–3) reports that political scientists share this problem: they acknowledge the importance of emotion in political behavior but don't study it, whereas political practitioners hold political action to be essentially emotional and operate on that basis. Certainly many scientists have an abhorrence of irrational behavior, a reticence about delving into the emotional which is often identified as irrational, and a faith that people learn from their mistakes. Yet there is little support for such faith. Often enough people's emotions are irrational. In the United States, for example, 19% of Americans believe they are among the richest 1% of the population and another 20% believe they will be in that 1% some day (John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, 2004: 307–8). Most who believed the Bush

administration's misrepresentations about Iraq's involvement in the 9/11 attacks and possession of weapons of mass destruction, still believed them three years later, despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary (Steven Kull, 2004: 3–6). Just as some people fall in love with those who abuse them, sometimes repeatedly, so do people embrace and make excuses for political leaders who ill-serve them. If people can't get basic economic self-interest or security issues right, are they likely to get ecology right based on emotion?

Good information might be of help if bad information caused irrational emotions or bad political choices. But it does not; bad information, emotions ungrounded in reality, and bad decisions have a common cause. This is why proffering and even instilling more accurate views of the human impact on the natural world has not paid off with commitment and action as anticipated.

As we will see a range of views about reality and a range of values can contribute to the actions conservationists desire and conservationists are most successful when they can work across a range of beliefs. People may act to save a species, protect a wilderness area, have small families, and limit consumption because they are ecocentric, theocentric, and for a variety of anthropocentric reasons including aesthetics, quality of life, humility, a love of wilderness solitude or recreation, and so on. Few people, however, who chose to have one or no children do so because they have "correctly" reasoned that another human life in a developed country adds yet another straw to the camel's back. Reproductive decisions are usually associated with the quality of one's own childhood experience, peer pressure, calculations concerning the cost of children, the existence and desirability of other options besides motherhood, which are related to self-esteem, selfishness, and attitudes toward birth control (Laurie Mazur, 1994: 111–299; Alan Durning and Christopher Crowther, 1997).

Thus, although the natural world is real and operates as it does regardless of what we believe to be true, people's views of how the world works need not be strictly accurate in order to give rise to desirable action. It is not necessary to understand evolutionary biology to act to protect a species, though clearly it informs how to achieve protection. People often work hard to conserve a place without understanding its biological value. Indeed, humans are seldom in possession of complete knowledge about the world around them and so fill in the gaps. Whether one avoids lightning because it's lethal or one is frightened by Zeus's anger makes little practical difference if people are similarly motivated to stay off hilltops.

Not all views similarly motivate, however. Elizabeth Barber and Paul Barber (2004: 13) observed that people are predisposed to explanations for events that are both deterministic and purposive. Such explanations are more economical than the usually more complicated reality. Deborah Keleman (1999: 283–9) noted that both children and adults use their own intentionality as a model to explain causality in the larger world. Most observers of human thought and behavior,

she goes on to say, see this approach as so widespread because it is adaptive. Though literally mistaken, it organizes experience in a functionally successful way. A central feature in most religions is a purposeful god(s) or Nature and this has caused some believers to reject biological evolution because of its random elements. But recall that Einstein dismissed quantum mechanics with the statement that god does not play dice with the universe.

Of course mistaken views do create problems for people and society, but successful conservation depends on right action, not purity of motivation. Indeed, many of those who cannot accept that the universe lacks purpose increasingly evince strong support for conservation on the basis of their religious views. Conservationists who cut their teeth on Lynn White's (1967) essay on Christianity and conservation may have a tough time with this, but if conservation is really the priority, then both the religious and nonreligious need to focus on conservation goals and not on perceived imperfections in each other's world views and motives if they are immaterial to outcomes. Conservationists would do well to heed anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1974: 56, 1999) who observed that "(i)t is not merely that adaptive behavior may be associated with understandings which do not accurately reflect material conditions, but that some adaptive behavior may be elicited only by such understandings." Marvin Harris (1974: 11–32) documents many instances of this as well.

Most people will reject factual information that seems to contradict their values or what they find meaningful, and that is worth keeping in mind. Neither conservationists nor scientists are immune from the effect of values, beliefs, and their emotional underpinnings on the acceptance of knowledge. Values, beliefs, and emotions do change, but less as a result of contrary knowledge than their failure in the face of generational change or values and emotional orientations that are more functional. In the context of mobilization to address near-term issues it is inescapable that a wide variety of views must serve conservation. Grizzly habitat, for example, will more likely be protected for clean water and for fish than for the great bear. Beliefs and rational thought are for the most part after the fact justifications or strictly utilitarian, that is, in the service of securing emotionally determined goals. Critical thinking is rare.

The Russian psychologist Luria Vygotsky (1962: 150) wrote many decades ago that "Thought itself is engendered by motivation, that is, by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency, which holds the answer to the last 'why' in the analysis of thinking." More recently neurobiologists such as Antonio Damasio (1994, 1999) have demonstrated not only that human needs and emotions guide people, but that reason cannot function without them. The options people face, especially when making complex social decisions, are too great. Emotional filters, shaped by genome and experience, whittle the universe of options down to a few that conscious intellect can

manage (Damasio 1994: 165–201). Even then emotions influence choice. That's why successful advertising is aimed at the heart, not the cortex.

The conservation reticence to fully engage emotion in mobilization is ironic given that conservationists are so plainly motivated by their own passions. The conservation literature is full of passion and emotional epiphanies. Aldo Leopold's (1987 [1949]: 130) is a moving example: having shot an old wolf and her pups because fewer wolves meant more deer, he approaches to finish the job, only to see a fierce green fire fade in the dying wolf's eyes. He realized in that wolf's eyes "something known only to her and the mountain." That something encompassed a more profound and larger view of life than more deer for human hunters. For Mike Harcourt, the former British Columbian Premier who created many protected areas, the moment came when he visited an enormous clear-cut in the heart of Vancouver Island. It looked to him like a massive bomb had exploded, leveling the great forest for miles around. Harcourt saw the wrongness of this intentional destruction and knew he had to try and stop it. Peter Illyn, the founder of Restoring Eden had a gentler epiphany: rising early one morning he saw through the mist an elk grazing near his tent. It is perhaps trite to say that Illyn saw the "miracle of the ordinary": another creature breathing, eating, living; a creature so much like him, yet different, and no less remarkable. People see most deeply with their hearts.

The eminent biologist David Ehrenfeld (1979: 142, 224) noted that emotions have been around for many millions of years in the mammalian line and have been long tested; our "higher" cortical functions are much more recent and still an evolutionary experiment. Rachel Carson (1984: 24) argued that "it is not half so important to know as to feel." It is our emotions that connect us to others, and to our selves. Our needs – for survival (food, shelter, and sex), for love and belonging, for making sense of the world – impel us to meet them. Our reflexes, our pleasure/pain responses and our emotions fit us to the world in ways most likely to meet our needs based on evolutionary experience. Only by touching people at this level will they be moved to act on behalf of the Earth and all of its life.

When conservationists do use emotion in their campaigns it is often to good effect. But frequently campaigns demonstrate a superficial understanding of emotions. Fear is a powerful motivator, as governments and political candidates know. Both regularly and successfully use fear to mobilize support or draw attention away from their own weaknesses and misdeeds. Conservation has been less successful for a number of reasons: they have sometimes overstated or exaggerated threats and industry has pounced on the slightest error or misprognostication, undermining conservationist credibility; threats to biodiversity, unlike threats to human health from polluted air and water, are not experienced by most people as salient; fatigue sets in, especially if the threat is distant in time or place or emotional ties to the natural world are weak or absent.

Conservationists often appeal to people's concerns for their progeny. Certainly most people express great concern for the lives of their children and grandchildren, but psychiatrist Harold Searles (1979) has questioned reliance on these statements. He argues that given the level of human inaction and apathy in the face of biological meltdown, people do not hold their children in such high regard. They are not willing to sacrifice to give them a better world, in part because they resent their own parents for passing on a world of problems. Certainly there is some corroboration for this view in the United States where increasingly education and similar services are underfunded.

In later chapters we will devote significant space to how conservationists can make better use of emotion to reconnect people with the natural world and each other and motivate more committed action.

Conservation as a Tease

It is the rare conservationist who has not attended a conference or other meeting where some inspiring speaker thoroughly excited hundreds of people, priming them to act. Invariably members of the audience ask the speaker what they can do, only to hear vague and general answers. Write a check. Fill out this form, so we can inundate you with pleas for money and the occasional request to send a postcard or letter to an official. The crowd goes home, and in the noise and distraction of day-to-day life, the positive energy dissipates. Meanwhile the subdivision and strip mall developers, and oil drillers are highly energized and organized. Conservationists have failed to *involve* people in a setting that sustains sympathizers' energy and commitment. Doing so requires creating a home for the whole person. It requires facilitating the creation of a conservation community and organization that involves people on a regular basis over time.

Except for a small portion of conservationists – professional staff and committed volunteers – there is no conservation community. Most NGO members live lives in which their social networks have little or nothing to do with conservation, important events and rituals have little or nothing to do with conservation, conservation is not routinely celebrated, nor its value routinely experienced. There exists no conservation equivalent of Black churches or White universities that provided the substrate for the thick webs of friendship and mutual support that sustained commitment in the US civil rights movement. Within the movement people made friends, met their spouses, socialized and relaxed together, shared risks, disappointments and euphoria, and found common meaning. The web of relationships contributes enormously to making a cause central in people's lives. That's because relationships and the venues that support them meet people's

needs, just as conservation meets the need for meaning. When these needs are intertwined the ties that bind are strengthened.

Organization is also critical to sustaining, building, and deepening commitment to political action. Apartheid was not brought down with organizations of check writers and postcard signers. Nor did such people bring down the Berlin Wall, create strong unions, achieve suffrage, or topple corrupt leaders. Organizations of check writers and postcard signers will neither halt the extinction crisis nor slow climate change. Broad-based and strong political organizations will do that. Organizations that have a place for all of those who become excited hearing a speech for the first time and want to do more. Organizations that involve people regularly and nurture their involvement. When people are left hanging, when their contact is a quarterly newsletter or even a glossy monthly, they are not drawn to greater involvement and they are not available down the road when they are needed.

The reality is that getting involved in politics is not most people's idea of a good time. Most of them need strong encouragement to act politically (or to act to restore an ecosystem or boycott a product) and consistent reinforcement to sustain action. By involving people in regular activity and making an organizational place for them encouragement and reinforcement can be provided, relationships built, and reticence about taking action overcome. People gain experience and mutual trust. The activities in which people are involved do not need to be directly political, for example, monthly visits to the state capital or quarterly rallies, or regular visits to a local wetland to cull exotics. They can be social or educational activities. The purpose is that they involve and make people part of the organization in a way writing a check usually does not. People are then available for political action when the time comes.

One approach to organization is to organize the already organized – those who are self-conscious and have political experience and clout. They bring more to the table than the unorganized although more of an investment is required to bring them to conservation. On balance the investment pays off more than organizing the merely sympathetic.

Science and Crassness

Many conservationists believe or want to believe that decision makers, at least elected officials in democracies, are responsive to scientific findings and otherwise persuadable by reasoned arguments. They are shocked when non-science (non-sense) or pseudoscience holds sway (Paul Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich, 1997; Todd Wilkinson, 1998). They should not be shocked. Politics operates by a different rationality – one that is focused on getting and keeping power (Johns, 2000:

226–8). Politicos *are* concerned with the substance of policy in a few areas that are priorities for them, but their position in these areas is usually consonant with their more powerful supporters – that is often the basis for successful campaigns. When scientific findings support a policy position being backed they will certainly be cited; if not, they will be ignored, denigrated, or the "tobacco company doctors" rolled out in support. Science does find a receptive audience when elected officials genuinely care about problem solving. As with other audiences, if a legislator values the natural world the science important to protecting it will be valued. Science can also play a pivotal role in a crisis or when decision makers are closely divided. Scientific findings or lobbying by prominent and high-profile scientists can provide one more hook to put one's position over the top. Scientific findings are more often probative before courts and before agencies in some circumstances.

An old proverb provides useful direction to conservationists: good does not triumph over evil because it is good but because it is strong. That's the reason for this book.

There are other problems within the conservation movement that limit its effectiveness and are within the power of NGOs to change. Dependence on foundation largess limits organizations in many ways: many foundations are conservative and action-averse or seek to set recipients' agendas; being a tax-exempt entity limits political action; and foundation support in total is inadequate to support a movement of the size and strength needed. Ultimately the most reliable support is self-funding. That's a different book.

Increased effectiveness also depends on conservationists' understanding of what they are up against. In politics illusions about opponents can be mortal. We turn to that now.