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Some Lessons from Nature -

The experience of natural heritage conservation

at the international scale

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I was asked by Simon Thurley to share with you the experience that nature conservationists have had in working together at the world and European levels. Maybe Simon – and perhaps some of you - are under the impression that we in the nature conservation world have made more progress in this regard than those who are responsible for the built heritage. To some, the grass may appear to be a good deal greener among the greens.

Which in a way is odd, because at least in the European context it often seems to us in the nature conservation world that we are very much junior partners. No continent is richer in built

heritage than Europe – 56% of all cultural World Heritage sites are in Europe; and only 11% of the 392 World Heritage sites in Europe are natural sites. Europe is also the most intensely developed of all regions of the world. Nature in many parts of Europe enjoys only a marginal or tenuous existence; it is what is left over after people have exploited the land. If you want an instant image of how dominant people are in Europe, just look at those night-time satellite photographs of the continent from space: how little remains that is truly natural!

So please don't think that I can offer experience based on a great success story. We do not have all the answers. We have as much to learn from those involved in built heritage conservation as we have to offer. But if we both approach this exercise as the sharing of experience, then maybe I can draw out some lessons from the nature conservation world about how to work internationally which are relevant to this audience.

The built heritage and natural heritage conservation constituencies have much in common. We both aspire to protect an inheritance for present and future generations. We both believe that decisions concerning the heritage should not be guided only by short-term monetary gain, but should take account of longer term and even philanthropic and non-material considerations. We face many of the same political challenges: short sighted politicians, financial limitations, a sometimes indifferent (even occasionally hostile) public opinion; and some of the same physical challenges: climate change threatens us all. We both depend for our success on public support and governmental action. And our work can be done at a variety of scales, from the most local – a cherished small church or a valued woodland – to the global scale as represented by the World Heritage Convention, or through other treaties to control the trade in endangered species or archaeological treasures.

Also we have both engaged in the same journey over the past 50 years. Half a century ago, built heritage conservation was about

individual buildings, and nature conservation was about individual species and sites. The UK, for example, enacted historic buildings and nature conservation legislation to protect very small areas. It led to some pretty odd results: historic buildings over-whelmed by their gargantuan modern neighbours; tiny nature reserves surrounded by areas of lifeless, intensive agriculture.

As a result, attention switched to the settings of buildings and monuments and to the protection of groups of buildings, rather than individual ones. In the UK, we enacted legislation in the late 1960s to establish Conservation Areas for this purpose. Meanwhile, in the nature conservation field, we became more concerned about habitats and about meeting the full requirements of endangered species; and so larger areas were defined for protection.

But even this was insufficient. We now appreciate that whole landscapes convey the imprint of past land uses, often laid

palimpsest-like, layer on layer. In many countries, historic landscape characterisation has been developed as a tool to identify such qualities in the landscape. Meanwhile nature conservationists have also adopted a landscape-scale approach to their work, recognising that wildlife conservation depends upon healthy ecosystems and that important biodiversity often occurs in the farmed countryside and cannot be conserved in nature reserves alone. It is landscape scale thinking of this kind that gave rise to the European Landscape Convention, which came into force two years ago. This enshrines the belief that countries in Europe need to protect, manage and plan their landscape *as a whole*.

So, as I said, we have both been engaged in the same journey. We have scaled up our focus and as we do so we find that our interests increasingly converge at the landscape scale: landscape is indeed the meeting ground for professions.

But I do not want to push this argument too far. In fact, the natural heritage has some distinctive features, which explain why there is so much pressure to develop international agreements for natural heritage protection. There are three big reasons.

First, nature ignores national and cultural boundaries. So nature conservation often requires co-operation between countries.

Where ecosystems are shared, transborder co-operation is required - such as that between Hungary and Austria for the protection of the Neusiedlersee/Lake Fertő. Whole groups of nations may be involved, such as those that share the Danube Basin, the Alps or the Mediterranean coast and basin. And *all* nations need to co-operate to protect the oceans and atmosphere.

Because some species – whales, birds, fish, some terrestrial mammals and even insects – migrate from country to country (or from sea to sea), they cannot be protected effectively in one

country alone. We need international co-operation if all the areas that a species needs for breeding, feeding and so on are to be protected.

Some species can be used sustainably: that is harvested and consumed year in, year out, without fundamentally affecting their status. When these migrate between countries, as whales do, or live in the high seas like some fish stocks, there is a unique challenge for international governance. This requires specialised agreements, such as the International Whaling Convention or regional fisheries agreements.

The second reason is that nature conservation is based on international scientific co-operation, and is underpinned by years of global scientific endeavour. Nature conservationists are used to working with people from other cultures and countries: in the field, with local fishermen or indigenous groups; in research laboratories with fellow scientists; and in international meetings with fellow bureaucrats. Also nature conservation is

partly driven by powerful regional or global NGOs: bodies like the WWF (the Worldwide Fund for Nature), BirdLife International and IUCN - the World Conservation Union, They have high public profiles and exert great influence on public opinion and government action; they demand that governments should work together.

Finally, there is the crisis facing biodiversity. The loss of species and habitats is occurring all round the world and at an unprecedented rate. It can only be compared with the five previous great extinction spasms of geological time. It represents a huge threat to the stability of the world, on a par with climate change (indeed climate change is an added factor in bringing about the demise of many species and habitats). Biodiversity matters because it underpins the vital services on which humanity depends – food, fuel, medicines, soil fertility, water supply, climate regulation and the cushioning effects of natural disasters. The fragmentation, degradation and destruction of forests, wetlands and other ecosystems pose the gravest threat to terrestrial biological diversity; while

unsustainable levels of fishing and marine pollution threaten life in the sea as well. The security and livelihood of millions of people are put at risk: so the human consequences of the biodiversity crisis are as alarming as those that affect nature itself.

These drivers explain why co-operation between countries in this field is so well established. You can see this even more clearly if we trace the history of such co-operation.

Human beings have always had an ambivalent relationship with the rest of nature – part destroyer, part steward. So people always try to restrain humanity's worst instincts, for example, many cultures have - for thousands of years - recognised some natural places as sacred and deserving respect. More selfishly, powerful elites have long protected nature for their pleasure, for example as hunting reserves – Bialowieza on the Polish/Belarus border, or the New Forest in England for example.

During the nineteenth century, scientists from Europe, especially, began to collect and record the natural wonders of the world that was so quickly opening up. Like their contemporaries in the field of archaeology, they collected without much regard to the consequences – shooting tigers or birds-of-paradise as trophies, and plundering Egyptian tombs were the product of the same mentality. Back home though, countries in Europe, North America and Australasia began to look at how to incorporate conservation principles into national law. The first true, modern national park was set up in 1872 at Yellowstone, in the United States. President Ulysses S. Grant signed a law declaring that Yellowstone would forever be "dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people."

The world's first international agreement about wildlife was made by the colonial powers in Africa in 1900, to protect big game animals for trophy hunting: or "sustainable use" in today's language. The first international conservation body – the

forerunner of BirdLife International - was set up in 1922. But true international co-operation began with the post war founding of the United Nations and its specialised agencies. Under its first Director General, Julian Huxley, a distinguished biologist, UNESCO was given a strong remit in the field of nature conservation. In 1948 it helped to set up IUCN – the World Conservation Union.

By the mid-1960s, it was becoming clear that nature and wildlife were under siege. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* revealed the insidious dangers of chemical pollution; Jacques Cousteau opened the eyes of millions to the beauty and vulnerability of marine life; Sir Peter Scott did the same for rare birds, pandas, whales and tigers. WWF came into being through the efforts of such pioneers.

In 1971, the Ramsar wetlands convention was adopted. This was the first of what we now call 'multilateral environmental agreements', or MEAs. The Ramsar convention (Ramsar

incidentally is not an acronym but the town in Iran where it was signed!) aims to protect wetlands, both as migratory bird habitat, but also for their value to people. By 1972, when the UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm, the nature conservation movement had become part of a broader global environmental concern, and was thus placed firmly on the intergovernmental agenda.

In the same year, the World Heritage Convention was signed. It marked the coming together of the built heritage and natural heritage movements. Its strongest champion was the United States National Park Service. This was remarkable for two reasons: first because the USNPS was (and is) responsible for the protection of both the great historic and the great natural wonders of the country (a feature which it shares with Canada's parks); but also because the commitment of the then US government to international environmental co-operation stands in sharp contrast with the indifference, or even hostility, shown by the present administration.

Threatened species received much attention in the 1970s, with two global treaties, one to control the international trade in endangered species of plants and animals, and another to protect migratory species. European countries adopted a convention to conserve fauna and flora, and the European Union's Birds Directive came into force (birds often lead the way in getting countries to co-operate: migratory birds must be the very symbol of international co-operation to protect nature).

In the 1980s, the focus broadened. The emerging issues were climate change, rampant forest destruction, collapses in fisheries and the crisis facing biodiversity (this word came into use about then). These were no longer just nature conservation problems but were seen in the context of development, especially in the poorer parts of the world. Funds from the World Bank, bilateral donors and so forth were marshalled to help poorer countries deal with their biodiversity conservation needs, by setting up national parks for example. All this came to a head in 1992,

twenty years after Stockholm, with the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, Brazil. Two new conventions were agreed: on climate change and on biodiversity. And a new phrase entered the language, which tried to capture the ideas and idealism of Rio – *sustainable development*.

In the same year, the EU adopted the Habitats Directive and began working towards a Europe-wide network of protected sites, Natura 2000. And the World Heritage Committee finally bridged the gap between the cultural and natural sides of the convention by adopting a new World Heritage category, Cultural Landscapes.

The pace continues to this day. The Kyoto protocol to the Climate Change Convention was adopted in 1997, and revisited last year in Montreal. In 2000 the European Landscape Convention was signed, the first treaty of its kind. Then the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Developments set

ambitious targets for biodiversity conservation. A full list of recent developments would be far longer.

So now we have a bunch of MEAs for natural world heritage, biodiversity, wetlands, and species that are traded and migratory. Like the Kyoto protocol for climate change, in theory these all bind governments. There are also regional conservation agreements in many parts of the world, and notably in Europe. Highly professional NGOs influence public opinion. New sources of international finance are available for conservation. And a worldwide network of scientists are involved in conservation work. Yet you will surely say: *“lots of fine words – but looking at the world around, we see precious little sign of the promised action. Indeed the condition of the natural world is far worse now than when all the talk began”*.

I would agree – but I would also say that without such action at the international level over the past 60 years, the situation would be infinitely worse. And if humanity is to have any hope of

living in some kind of balance with the natural world, then international agreements of this kind are essential. We need to make them work.

So what lessons can we draw from this account that might be helpful to an audience of European built heritage leaders?

The most obvious lesson is that those engaged in the conservation of the natural heritage face at least as big a challenge as their counterparts in the built heritage sector. Both of us need greater governmental support, more effective laws, more money and a better informed public.

But there are also some specific lessons that can be taken from the natural heritage experience. Several stand out:

- It takes time to achieve results at the international level
- Build up co-operation in a pragmatic way
- Be flexible

- Success depends upon a good campaign strategy
- You need to underpin agreements with resources
- Conservation will only succeed when it is linked to economic and social aims.

Let us take the example of making of international agreements in the conservation field. All the major MEAs took at least ten years from inception to adoption. There is a period of awareness building, to get agreement that there is a problem; then there is a period of commitment building, to get agreement that something needs to be done about it; then there is a period of negotiations, in which an agreed text is hammered out. And when the agreement is eventually signed, governments have to be persuaded to sign up to it, and then act on it.

Because it takes time to build international co-operation, it is best to start talking to each other sooner rather than later, and to proceed through pragmatic steps. For example, rather than

aiming to forge an international treaty at the outset, it may be better to create less formal arrangements between the experts of heritage agencies: in this way professional networks can be used to build political momentum. IUCN's Commissions, which are networks of experts on species, environmental law and protected areas, all worked that way in developing support for international agreements. And rather than aiming to create a global agreement, or even a Europe-wide one, it may be better to forge agreements between a few neighbouring countries that share traditions or face the same problems. Sub-regional wildlife and environmental agreements, for example in the Alps and the Baltic, demonstrate the value of this approach: they provide a framework to create networks of parks and reserves, exchange information and encourage professional co-operation.

If you are working for agreement at the international level, it is essential to be flexible: both in how you operate and in the kind of agreement you seek. Agreements need to work in countries with very different cultural, economic and political systems.

Flexibility is also important as conditions change. There is a lesson in the EU's Habitats Directive: it is, I think, so dogmatic in its requirements that local groups in many countries have resisted it, and so some governments have lacked the will to enforce it; also it was designed for a smaller EU than now exists. So strong words in agreements may not lead to strong action.

Governments will only act if there is compelling scientific evidence that there is a problem, and if there is a powerful lobby for action. So effective NGOs are vital if governments are to feel the heat of public opinion and decide that they *must* do something - think of Greenpeace's lobbying over the slaughter of whales in the 1980s, which led to the moratorium on their hunting. And campaigns need to be led by internationally recognised, media-savvy, prestigious individuals, like David Attenborough. It helps too if a few powerful countries are ready to champion international action, as the US did in the early days of the World Heritage Convention.

Resources are needed to implement agreements. The Convention on Biological Diversity is effective because it is supported by a multi-million dollar programme, which can be used to assist poorer countries to create parks and nature reserves, for example. The World Heritage Convention is supported by a dedicated World Heritage Centre and the work of three international expert bodies. Without such support, such agreements would be almost powerless.

Environmental agreements, (and even conferences like these) are of limited value unless we can break out of the box and make new allies and partners. Success in the conservation of the natural – and I suspect the built – heritage depends upon making links with broader social, economic and cultural agendas. So when conservation also helps to create jobs, increase incomes, regenerate cities or build on a community's sense of pride, it appeals to politicians, generates public support and is easier to fund. International conservation programmes that do this are far

more likely to succeed than those which just pursue narrow sectoral goals of saving wildlife (or historic buildings)

There is one final lesson that might be drawn from this review. The built and the natural heritage constituencies should collaborate more. What unites us is very often far greater than what divides us; together we are a far more effective force. This applies at the local and national level of course, but it is true at the European and global scales too. We face common international threats to our interests - climate change and unsympathetic development projects, for example – and common opportunities, such as those offered by European Landscape Convention. It is in both our interests that we should work together to confront these threats and seize these opportunities.