

# THE WRITERS' SEMINAR OF WILD 11

## – HOW IT ALL BEGAN



COURTESY: WILD FOUNDATION

BY BOB BARON AND PATTY MAHER

In March 2020, Jaipur hosted WILD11, and brought delegates from around the world to discuss and take action in addressing the threats of extinction and our climate breakdown. The importance of wilderness as inspiration is primal. Mother Earth, the land, the sea and the sky are embedded deep into each of our souls. When we are in wild areas, and connect with nature, we are replenished and filled again with life's elixir. The Writers' Seminars at WILD11 gathered writers who are inspired by the natural world and discuss how we can be envoys, spreading that awareness and the love of nature, to others in our own communities.

### THE FIRST ONE

In 2005, when the 8<sup>th</sup> World Wilderness Congress was coming to Anchorage,

Alaska it was a unique opportunity to hold a collection of writers' seminars to inspire one another and to connect with like-minded writers from around the globe. It was a tradition that has been at every World Wilderness Congress since.

The first Writers' Seminars was put on by Fulcrum Publishing of Golden, Colorado who had produced (with the WILD Foundation) *the International Journal of Wilderness* for twenty-two-years and has been the leading publisher of conservation books in the United States for the past thirty. The Conservation Writers Rendezvous, that first writers' seminar, focused on: Writing and Advocacy, Writings and Readings about Alaska, Native Writings from North America, and Recognition and Encouragement of Writers. Each

afternoon the seminar ended with a discussion about a special place in the world that writers hold dear.

Thirty writers took part in the three-afternoon event. Many were from the United States like Dave Foreman (The Wilderness Society, and co-founder of Earth First!), poet John Haines (winner of the first Wilderness Writing Award), David Quammen (*The Song of the Dodo*), Doug Scott (winner of the John Muir Award), Bill Sherwonit (Alaskan writer and journalist), and Charles Wohlforth (*The Whale and the Supercomputer*). There were also Native American writers like Marilou Awiakta, and Daniel R. Wildcat, along with international writers from the UK and Germany. Several of the writers were gifted photographers as well, like Ulf Doerner, Boyd Norton, Nick Jans, and Seth Kantner.

*Man is part of nature and nature is part of us. To discover what part of nature is part of us is to discover what it is to be alive, to discover our own humanity and history.*

A survey was conducted among the attendees to see who they read for inspiration and who they felt were the most influential writers in conservation. The survey harvested 120 authors out of which came the book *Heaven and Nature Sing* (Fulcrum Publishing), a suggested reading list of books about conservation and the land, that were important when they were written and are still readable today.

Four years later at the ninth World Wilderness Congress in 2009, known as WILD9, the Writers' Seminar was held in Merida, Mexico. The three afternoons of the seminar included a more international list of panelists with writers from Europe, North America, South Africa and India. There were lively discussions about using your writing to spark inspiration in others, because if people love the natural world, they will work to protect it; and about getting your message out through the various media that was available, and how to engage with your reader; and there was also a session on learning from the experts, where we heard from editors and other writers about how to connect and get published. This session featured a live feed from the US to Mexico with Les Line, the editor of *Audubon* magazine (from 1966-1991) who interacted with the audience on the large screen of the movie theater, where we met. Les took their comments and questions in real time. It became clear that these writers needed an organisation like the International League of Conservation Photographers (launched four years earlier in Alaska) so the International League of Conservation Writers (ILCW) was born at WILD9.

### AN INCLUSIVE FORUM

The difference is, ILCW members do not have to be only writers; our membership includes all who use the creative arts to inspire a love of nature and a passion for her protection. We have artists, cartoonists, photographers, sculptures, actors, and of course writers of all kinds. Currently, we have 325 members from 42 countries. To apply for membership, visit the iLCW web page at [www.ilcwriters.org](http://www.ilcwriters.org) and click on membership for a link to the application.

In 2013, WILD10 was held in Salamanca, Spain, and the Writers' Seminars were again available to all interested. We had a strong turnout with attendees spilling out into the hall. Panelists were from Russia, Mexico, the U.S., Hungary, Africa, India and Germany and spoke about using one's writing to complement their creations – such as photography, music, painting and filmmaking. The reason being, good writing is needed to inform the public about an upcoming art show, or for the article that will accompany award-winning photographs, or for the script for a film that will move the public to action. There was a seminar that looked at the art of writing through the eyes of an editor. Several editors led the discussion on the ins and outs of good writing. Another seminar addressed the geography of writing – dealing with language barriers, governmental censorship, personal safety and cultural challenges.

### CONVERSATIONS ON CONSERVATION – FILMED INTERVIEWS

While attending a World Wilderness Congress, you will be inspired and overwhelmed by the amazing and

passionate people who will be there speaking and attending. At Fulcrum Publishing, we wanted a way to savour these experiences and share them with others after we returned home. So, we interviewed 18 people at WILD10 in Salamanca, Spain. These interviews tell how these amazing people got involved in working for the natural world. It may have been a memory as a child of a small corner of their yard, it may have been from seeing toxic abuse to a waterway, or it may have been the sheer beauty of the outdoors and trying to protect it for their own sons and daughters (and their sons and daughters) who will follow once they themselves are long gone.

These 18 interviews spawned others once we returned from Spain. We filmed more inspirational people at other gatherings like Wilderness 50, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference of America's Wilderness Act. Several that were recorded were from suggestions from the interviewees themselves. They would say "have you filmed so and so?", and we would go do so, until we had a total of 106 filmed interviews that show special people who love the natural world and are taking action to protect it. Perhaps they



ABOVE British author and environmental journalist George Monbiot at WILD10, in Spain. Through seminars and workshops, the iLCW promotes nature protection with help from the world's finest writers.

FACING PAGE The Congress hosts a multitude of legendary conservationists, like Jane Goodall, who spoke on 'Conservation Heroes and Hope for Our World' at WILD9, in Merida, Mexico.

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volunteer in their local community and take kids on walks through the woods, or they are writers, forest rangers or elected government officials. This collection of 106 interviews is called 'Conversations on Conservation' and is at the Denver Public Library in Denver, Colorado where anyone interested may go and view all or a few of the collected interviews.

## THE WILDERNESS WRITING AWARD

The Wilderness Writing Award is presented every two years. This occasional award, a collaborative project between The WILD Foundation, Fulcrum Publishing, and the International League of Conservation Writers, was launched at the 8<sup>th</sup> World Wilderness Congress in Anchorage, Alaska (2005). The award is for lifetime achievement and is in recognition of a living writer's published body of work relating to meaningful and significant writing on wild nature, the environment, or the land. Published writers from anywhere in the world are eligible. Nominations are to be in English, but the body of work does not need to be in English. Members of the ILCW are eligible to nominate candidates. The 2020 winner will be announced at WILD11. Past winners include: Gretel Ehrlich, U.S. (2017); Kenneth Brower, U.S. (2015); Joaquín Araújo, Spain (2013); Michael Frome, U.S. (2011); Ian McCallum, South Africa (2009); Bittu Sahgal, India (2007), and John Haines, U.S. (2005).

The Writers' Seminar at WILD 11 featured some exciting panelists. There were conservation writers, photographers, and filmmakers who were interested in honing their craft, meeting other like-minded people and learning from others in the field. Afternoon sessions took place from March 23-25 and included:

- A Tribute to Asian Writers: Past and Present.
- From the Editor's Desk: Writers and publishers discussed the key elements needed in every good story, and how to pitch nature stories.
- Exploring the Land: Four diverse wildlife and nature professionals explored the place of culture and geography in nature writing.
- Communicating the Climate Crisis: Climate change communicators broke down how to decode the climate crisis and trigger action, not fatalism.

## INDIAN INK AT WILD11

Organising an event at the scale of WILD11 was a monumental task, and for many weeks, the Sanctuary office had been abuzz with preparations. Amidst the many vital cogs that comprised this global gathering was the Writer's Seminar. At Sanctuary, we have the pleasure of reading talented Indian nature writing on the daily, and so the task of identifying writers to match the pressing themes of the Congress was exhilarating. It allowed us to step back and appreciate the depth of English nature writing in India, and feel reassured by its presence and power to impact change and evoke awe. The schedule for the Writers' Seminar involved a mix of workshops and discussions. Here's a glimpse of the remarkable speakers who shared their experience and thoughts on the art of nature writing: Much-loved children's book author Bijal Vachharajani paid tribute to master storyteller Ruskin Bond; conservationist Prerna Bindra shared why the late Billy Arjan Singh's writings must be cherished; writer and conservation biologist Neha Sinha explained the key elements to a good nature report; anthropologist Dr. Sahil Nijhawan reflected on the place of culture in nature writing; travel blogger turned climate reporter Neelima Vallangi decoded the climate crisis; and *Indica* author Pranay Lal brought alive the natural history of the sub-continent!



Over three days, ILCW events at WILD11 included a series of exciting workshops and talks that were open to writers and artists who interacted, collaborated and created content that will make a difference to the future of our biosphere.

- The Many Outlets for Writers: Journalism, features, poetry, books – there are innumerable outlets for nature writers. Panelists shared their personal and varied experiences with nature writing.
- A joint seminar with the iLCP: The most powerful stories are born from the union of words and visuals. Experts gave us a glimpse into the art of impactful storytelling about the wild world.

The sessions were organised by the Sanctuary Nature Foundation, the Fulcrum Group and the International League of Conservation Writers (ILCW)

and were open to those who were attending WILD11. 🐾



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