

# WILDERNESS

is

# Life

VISHNU VINOD

Between rumination, abstraction and analysis, **Vance Martin** and **Bittu Sahgal** share their world view and solutions to the great challenges that lie ahead for our biosphere. On the eve of the 11<sup>th</sup> World Wilderness Congress convening in Jaipur, India, both writers affirm that love, reverence and concern for our astonishing planet fashioned the vision, purpose and wilderness mission of the WILD Foundation and the Sanctuary Nature Foundation.

The birth of the Himalaya 65 million years ago coincided with the most dramatic mass extinction ever to have taken place on earth – the death of the dinosaurs. Every twisted rock stratum, terraced valley or craggy cliff advertises the evolution of these, the highest mountain ranges in the world. Fish fossils, gneisses and schists speak of a landmass that was once under the great Tethys Sea and which, when it surfaced, was sculpted by Earth's agents of change – ice, wind, rain and temperature. Slowly, life forms adapted and adjusted, and occupied every

available niche with astounding diversity that we have not yet fully catalogued.

The dinosaurs died, but life cycled on. Around two million years ago, a new agent of geologic change made a dramatic appearance – ancestors of *Homo sapiens*. With an enthusiasm born of new discovery, humans instigated change at a speed and scale to which millions of species were unable to adapt. River courses were altered, massive lakes created, oceans tainted, hills levelled, coastlines remodeled and soil biology modified. All in the span of a geological wink. A new epoch emerged... the Anthropocene.

## NATURE NEEDS HALF

Our technological advances are nothing to deride. The pioneers of yesterday had managed to carve a niche for humankind from an environment that was far from hospitable. That said, the biosphere is signaling that it's time to curb our enthusiasm and give the plants and animals that comprise the wilderness half a chance to adjust to life in our "fast lane".

After years of struggling to keep our biosphere functional in the face of its steady decline, a decade ago, the

WILD Foundation helped set in motion a series of events that culminated in world leaders asking for the very first time, "How much wilderness do people need to survive?".

Earth is a planetary green engine that supports all life. Each time we remove a landscape or species from that engine, we tamper with a sophisticated set of relationships responsible for the foundation of human well-being and livelihoods. The scientific consensus informs us that destroying more than 50 per cent of Earth's wildlands and seas will result in a tipping point with catastrophic effects on climate, biodiversity loss, and human livelihoods.

Imagine a planet shared equally and equitably by people and nature, a world in which nature has ample space to exist and evolve, and people enjoy a healthy lifestyle that allows such a world to thrive.

The values in this society are based on reciprocity, or partnership, between

humankind and nature, rather than a world based on a one-way system from natural storehouse to human well-being to the landfill.

Nature Needs Half (NNH) is both a vision and a common sense, a practical approach to living on an increasingly crowded planet, based on state-of-the-art scientific analysis and time-tested traditional knowledge and wisdom. The goal of NNH is to ensure that enough wild areas of land and water are protected and interconnected (usually at least about half of any given eco-region, depending on the type) to maintain nature's life-supporting systems and the diversity of life, to support human health and prosperity, and to secure a bountiful legacy of resilient, wild nature. NNH requires a shift in our thinking – to recognise that we humans are part of nature, not separate from it.

Nothing less than a bold vision and committed action at all levels is the

*The Nature Needs Half movement asks that we protect at least half of the world's wild areas such as the biodiverse Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala. This is vital to maintain nature's life-supporting systems and the diversity of life, and to support human health and prosperity.*

formula to turn around the juggernaut of human development.

We can live with the Earth much better than we can live on it.

## THE SURVIVAL REVOLUTION

That understanding is what gave rise to the Survival Revolution, which is not an issue concerning morality alone. It's not that a tiger or a giraffe have some special sanction to life, denied to the chicken or lamb that winds up on some human tables. It's a numbers game. When there are too few representatives of any particular species left, then people get together to "nurse" the populations back to safe numbers. The process is expensive, time consuming and fraught with difficulty. Prevention would be infinitely simpler. But this requires many, many more aware and concerned people to join what has become the most important resistance movement ever.



*The biosphere is signalling that it's time to curb our enthusiasm and give the plants and animals that comprise the wilderness half a chance to adjust to life in our "fast lane".*

ANOOPE RONALD



*Every creature on earth, including this majestic Indian gaur, is involved in a sophisticated set of relationships responsible for the foundation of human well-being and livelihoods. To protect this sanctity, we need to imbibe the values of traditional cultures, based on the ethic of giving back to the our biosphere.*

That we are at a crossroads for life on earth is obvious... the litany only increases, of glaciers melting, wildfires, mega storms, rising seas, and so on. This is not a secret... all of us reading *Sanctuary* know this. So, what is lacking? First... political will. For most "leaders", argument, self-interest, and political calculus are the order of the day. Second... the entrenched status quo. Powerful elites are caught in the self-created web of self-emolument and are afraid to change the structure. This severely impacts the vast numbers of underserved humankind caught in a web of disempowerment, inequity and lack of opportunity, with no real ability to carve their way out.

But this we know: all of us depend on wild nature and the resources of Earth. There is no Planet B. Most of us have children or grandchildren

and realise we need a movement as wide as it is deep; as committed as it is informed and in love with the wilderness. Scientific data alone will not "move the needle" to get the results we need. It is our hearts and our passion to act now for change. Our imperative is to give our politicians the message they can't ignore; to push businessmen to understand that saving the earth creates jobs, sustains profits, and makes people happy. This is the Survival Revolution. This is what engages the young today. It is the greatest adventure of all times and a great time to be alive.

That said, wilderness areas – intact and high-functioning ecosystems – are essential for the health of all life on earth. Wilderness attributes and benefits are also some of the key elements in a newly emerging, spatial

approach to understanding how much of nature to protect, in the form of "global Protected Area targets." Nature Needs Half (launched in 2009) is based on the best contemporary and traditional science, and in 2016 it was joined by Half Earth, an initiative of Professor E.O. Wilson of Harvard. These initiatives present a new global paradigm for Protected Areas – vastly expanding the amount of protected nature based on both modern and traditional scientific knowledge, rather than being based on political possibility and outmoded thinking. This new paradigm is now being debated as part of the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity's (CBD) Protected Area targets (both terrestrial and marine) that will be reset (and increased) in 2020 when the national "Parties" to the CBD convene in Beijing for COP15.

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These and more issues, driven by hard science, will be discussed and debated at WILD11 in Jaipur between March 19-26, 2020. But it's not all and only about science, as important as that may be. Other values will help frame our thoughts and inform our actions. Traditional cultures around the world are based on an ethic of reciprocity, of respecting and giving back to the Earth that supports us. We will listen to their wisdom and their stories and learn from them how to make peace with the rest of life on Earth.

### BACK TO THE FUTURE

And peace there will be! There is exquisite beauty in the functionality built into virtually every living creature by evolution. Some can form thermal images of the warm-bodied prey they hunt. Others migrate thousands of miles using compasses in their heads, tuned to Earth's magnetic fields. Camouflage enables some lifeforms to hunt and others to hide from hunters.

Humans have survived this long by studying nature and emulating its strategies. Everything in nature has a purpose. And because nature is self-repairing, fortunately, we have solutions to all the vexing problems we face, including our climate crisis. The solutions often lie hidden in the dark and sodden leaves of untrammelled wildernesses. Such emerald carpets jealously hold back precious water... slow the rain and feed it to cavernous subterranean aquifers engineered by nature over billions of years. Wise people in bygone days worshipped and protected the forest sources of streams and rivers. For all our engineering skills, humility, awe and worship of wild nature is probably the ingredient we most need to imbibe today when polar vortexes in America, fires in Australia, droughts in Syria and floods in India hint at lessons to follow.

Nature never went wrong... we wronged nature.

The bottom line? The best habitat for tigers and all the living wonders of the world lies snugly in the human heart. Those who have no place for

tigers, turtles, or termites in their hearts will leave them no jungles in which to endure either. Fortunately, with nature on our side, we don't really need to roll up our sleeves to actively repair past damage. All we need do is stop causing further damage and nature's built-in, automatic repair procedures will take

over. Unless they have already been pushed over the brink, dwindled species will multiply. Forests too, will regenerate. Nature's plan will unfold as it was meant to. Outside our comprehension perhaps, but within our life spans, the damaged regions of our world could, once again, become sanctuaries for life. 🐾

### STORIES MOVE PEOPLE

Too often when developing communication plans, we become fixated on the technology, forgetting that without a good story, no amount of technological support will move an audience. Before we consider anything, we must consider the heart of our message and its impact on our audience. We must find the story.

What then are the component parts of stories with the potential to transform the public and change the way society relates to the wildness surrounding them? Experienced storytellers will tell you that a good story has only two requirements: a hero or heroine with deeply ingrained desires and objectives, and the obstacles they confronted as he or she attempts to achieve his or her heart's desire.

If this is the way to move the public, then the implications for committed conservationists are clear: we need to change the way we talk about nature. That doesn't mean abandoning science, far from it. We need science where science has the most impact – in planning for better land management. But getting to that point requires leaders to first prioritise nature, and there are few incentives leaders appreciate more than a public unified in support of right decisions.

Talking about nature effectively must include talking about nature's heroes, the people on the ground who are taking responsibility for their desire to defend our wild world, and confronting the obstacles between them and their goal. These heroes can be experts, scientists, and adventurers – everyone enjoys tales of risky enterprises in exotic locales – but, more often than not, communications that are engaging (and therefore effective) talk about the everyday man, the business leaders, office workers, moms, and dads using their time and energy to change the world, one small action at a time.



ABHIJIT NANDI