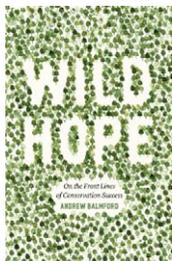


Steering conservation on a path towards hope

Wild Hope: On the Front Lines of Conservation Success by Andrew Balmford. The University of Chicago Press, 2012. US\$26.00/£17.00, hbk (264 pages), ISBN 978 0 226 03597 0

Luke Gibson

Department of Biological Sciences, National University of Singapore, 14 Science Drive 4, Singapore 117543, Singapore



Stories of destruction and doom dominate headlines in conservation. Forests, grasslands, and wetlands are rapidly being converted to fields of rice or soybeans and plantations of palm oil or rubber trees. Rising temperatures threaten to push alpine species off mountaintops and bleach coral reefs undersea. Increased rates of poaching threaten tigers and elephants at a time now considered to be the

sixth mass extinction. One thing missing from these stories might be the most important factor in turning around this dismal scene: hope.

In *Wild Hope: On the Front Lines of Conservation Success*, Andrew Balmford presents a variety of conservation success stories to restore hope to the field of conservation. These case studies represent a diverse group of conservation programs, from a small community in Ecuador protecting its forested water catchment to one of the largest mining companies in the world restoring jarrah forests in Australia after stripping them during bauxite extraction. Balmford takes the reader on a journey across six continents to highlight some of the victories in conservation and to identify the key ingredients in conservation programs.

On his journey, Balmford first visits Kaziranga National Park in India, where traditional ‘fortress-and-fines’ efforts (establishing protected areas and land-use regulations) have increased the population of rhinos from fewer than 20 individuals at the start of the 20th century to 2000 animals today. Balmford attributes this impressive recovery to two reasons: first, the devoted rangers who patrol the park and shoot to kill if they meet any poachers; and second, the support of the densely populated human community surrounding the park. Balmford suggests that this public support is partly due to religious beliefs and the respect for animals, but ignores the fact that religious statues and tokens in other parts of Asia are a major source of demand driving the slaughter of tusked and horned animals worldwide [1]. In South Africa, the world’s stronghold of rhinos, with 70–80% of the global population, a record 455 rhinos (over 2% of its estimated national population) have been killed this year (2012) to date, over half of which were killed in Kruger National Park [Anon. (2012) South Africa rhino poaching: more killed than ever. 16 October 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19966164>]. Although protected areas do not always eliminate deforestation and hunting, they represent the best

habitats we have to protect biodiversity [2], and Balmford argues that this traditional approach remains essential to conservation.

While exploring different threatened habitats around the world, Balmford unearths their histories and gives the reader a clear understanding of the threats they face. Timber harvesting for the collection of turpentine used to protect ropes on sailing ships and mechanized logging for construction materials that ‘built America’ nearly eliminated long-leaf pine forests spread across the southeast USA, home to the red-cockaded woodpecker. However, later, legislation including the Endangered Species Act and amendments to the act, such as the Safe Harbor program, convinced private landowners to protect pine habitat for the woodpeckers. Balmford eloquently describes both his observations of the endangered woodpeckers in their native environments and their broader natural history, convincing any birder that it is a species worth checking off a bird list and any politician that it is a species worth recovering and checking off the endangered species list.

Throughout the book, Balmford meets the people involved in each of these conservation programs and demonstrates how essential their efforts are to success. Fishermen on the US Pacific Coast formed the American Albacore Fishing Association, using traditional pole-and-line methods to catch tuna instead of the commonly used purse-seining methods, which not only exhaust the targeted fishery, but also kill dolphins, sharks, and sea turtles. Their technique became certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council, whose seal of approval caters to an expanding market. Unilever and Walmart, for example, have recently pledged to source their seafood products from sustainable fisheries. This example demonstrates how large companies, and consumer choice, can effect change in markets to help alleviate pressures on limited resources.

At the end of his journey, Balmford concludes that there is no unifying theme to conservation successes. Whereas community-organized actions saved forests in Ecuador, top-down government-driven approaches were vital to the recovery of rhinos in India. However, Balmford provides an appendix listing key actions that readers can take towards conservation, including using their power as consumers to support sustainable markets, such as those certified by the Marine Stewardship Council or the Forest Stewardship Council. Most importantly, Balmford cries that we must not give up. Although half of all natural habitats remain and few extinctions have been recorded, Balmford does not belittle the biodiversity crisis we face. In addition, now is not a time to be passive: Balmford argues that we have ‘at

most one generation left' to avoid a permanently altered environment and permanently extinct species of countless numbers. Although the glass is half empty and continues to drain, Balmford sees it as half full. '...Although time is running out, there is still an enormous amount of nature left to fight for.' Pick up the book and join the fight.

References

- 1 Christy, B. (2012) Ivory worship. *Nat. Geogr.* 222, 28–61
- 2 Laurance, W.F. *et al.* (2012) Averting biodiversity collapse in tropical forest protected areas. *Nature* 489, 290–294

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2012.10.023> Trends in Ecology and Evolution xx (2012) 1–2