

Conservation and hope? How on earth...?

Scenes such as this are very familiar to anyone who gets around God's good world these days, but for A Rocha particular places carry particular griefs. The scale and rapidity of change in many of them is unprecedented, and most of us could tell of our own personal encounter with environmental degradation and loss. Not long before my last visit to Kenya, just seven years ago, there were an estimated 125,000 giraffes in the country, now there are just 8,000. 'We are eating our way through them,' I was told. I saw just two vultures in the four weeks we were there compared to hundreds on my last visit to the same places, and raptor expert Simon Thomsett is one of many local conservationists in frank and personal despair at their decline.



Pineapple plantation on some of the former Dakatcha Woodlands.

So what does hope mean for A Rocha? The question matters as we give an account of our own Christian calling to care for creation. As the Chair of the Species Survival Commission, Simon Stuart, said in his [excellent response](#) to Dave Bookless's powerful paper on [Biodiversity and the Bible](#), while those Christians working in secular organizations have no mandate to impose a Christocentric view of conservation on their colleagues, there is an increasingly urgent need to be able to articulate our own convictions and the hope to which they give rise. But where is that hope? Is it, as often in very rough seasons of history, in a final future only? It is typically when present realities are intolerable that a more radical eschatology that lifts our eyes from those realities to a future elsewhere has flourished. We see it vividly in 14th century Europe after 30% of the population perished during the Black Death, and in the believing slave communities of North America, and even in the writings of the persecuted church in Nazi Germany. Deep pessimism about the possibilities for any redemption for our places and times takes a reasonable hold when life is intolerable.

In the western world, we have the privilege, for a relatively short season while the biosphere proves resilient, of being clear-eyed about the devastation of creation and at the same time of practicing Simon Stuart's vision of hope. He urges us to work for signs of the coming Kingdom despite our casual and profound abuse of its very fabric. Our final hope in that the coming Kingdom can find provisional shape, here and now. These signs of the Kingdom serve to make clear who Jesus really is, the Lord of Creation who is loving in all his ways. They also serve to relieve the suffering of both human communities and the wider creation which is under the curse of our rebellion against God in direct ways that call us to action. The future hope that encompasses all of creation is real, and of practical comfort, but we also believe there is something worth living out now. And that permits joy and peace to mark our working lives, even amid devastation and loss. So it was that the early Christian martyrs sang in the arenas, and so it is that those dying in Christ know a deeper joy even in their great suffering.

None of this prevents a sober analysis of what is at the root of creation's groaning. Christians are clear that people's fractured relationship with God wreaks environmental havoc, a fact that [the prophets have announced](#) with remarkable power and prescience for three millennia. However, in

our own times, we are living a unique and perfect storm. Whereas in previous centuries there were reservoirs of both biological and social integrity from which collapsed cultures and ecosystems could draw their renewal, unrestrained neo-liberal economics and the power of technology have conspired to ensure that the phenomena of environmental devastation and rapidly growing social division are global. In consequence, wealth resides in the hands of a tiny few, however philanthropic their intentions, and increasing billions live in absolute poverty. One example may serve as metaphor for this obvious point. In the early 17th century the Portuguese landed goats on the island of St Helena and in just 100 years they had reduced to bare rock nearly all its lush and prolific landscape, which had been home to hundreds of endemic and unique species. As it was an island, nowhere else was home to them all, and so now most are now completely gone, leaving in some cases bones, and in some cases fragments of writing about their beauty, as their only trace on our failing memory.

Now we have made the world itself into an island where the goats of hyper-individualism, corporate greed, and short-term political ambition, are roaming more or less unchecked. No gully is safe from their ravenous descent and no heights are beyond their reach. Over it all the spectre of climate change brings everything together into one apparently insoluble and slowly unfolding catastrophe – first for the biosphere, then for the poor, but very soon for us all, however financially wealthy or protected we are. A theory of everything that is merely a theory of personal satisfaction or happiness is a woefully inadequate preparation for consequences that are common to all, and caused by all. Meanwhile the Christian gospel in many parts of the world has been co-opted by the same pursuit of personal economic prosperity, and so even within the church we can see how the bright and shining biblical vision of shalom is quenched. Even in its subtle western form of psychological or spiritual fulfilment, this diminished gospel will take our attention from the essential calling to know Christ as Lord of all things.

So where is A Rocha's hope? It surely lies in Christians recovering the true gospel that inspires us to live faithfully with creation and within our local communities. It could be seen in good work that demonstrates, in particular places and times, what that very gospel can do as we creatively re-shape business and finance to serve their proper ends. Historically, those were understood by Christian business owners, not simply as the creation of



personal wealth, indifferent to the social and environmental costs, but as a force for a better world. Our hope could lie in Christians honouring the practice of the applied biological sciences that help us understand places before we change them – they can teach us how to grow our food and fish the seas, and even to find our energy, in ways that can endure. Finally it will lie in our certainty of the coming Lord Jesus in glory because there is no guarantee that for a short while evil will not prosper. And there is maybe quiet joy in living life well wherever the Lord leads us, with a true song in our hearts for company. We could learn from the albatross which by its ease and grace shows us that the rest of creation has always known how to do that.

Peter Harris, February 2015