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Nature's Solutions: The IUCN Perspective

An Interview with Julie Marton-Lefèvre

Julia Marton-Lefèvre is Director General of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, completing her second term later this year. Allen White of the Tellus Institute interviews Marton-Lefèvre about IUCN's evolving mission toward a holistic approach to restoring the Earth's species and ecosystems while enhancing the prospects for human well-being.

IUCN was founded in 1948, a moment following the Second World War when a number of path-breaking global institutions and charters emerged. Was there a connection?

There may have been. But primarily, the founders of IUCN were people who loved exploring nature and hunting, and many of them were, I believe, quite wealthy. Some of our founders were members of aristocratic or royal families who enjoyed safaris. The war was finally over, and they wanted to return to the recreational activities to which they were accustomed. This patrician motivation, interestingly enough, was among the early drivers of the post-war environmental movement.

IUCN's work today, however, is expansive, including such issues as food security and poverty reduction, in addition to traditional environmental concerns. How did this evolution occur?

It took IUCN a few decades to realize that fulfilling its mission of influencing public policy required it to be present on the ground where environmental and social change actually occurs. Furthermore, IUCN came to realize that the love of nature was not limited to the elites, but included all of us, and especially the communities living in and around the natural resources that are critical to their livelihoods and their well-being. In 1980, IUCN, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the World Wildlife Fund collaborated with UNESCO to produce the

World Conservation Strategy report, which introduced the concept of sustainable development. The report stressed the importance of viewing conservation through a socio-ecological systems framework.

IUCN membership includes over 1,200 governments and NGOs from across the globe. How do you forge a unitary, influential voice in the face of such diversity?

Every four years, our members convene for the purpose of adopting a framework program for IUCN. We have six commissions of experts involving some 12,000 individuals: Species Survival; Ecosystem Management; Environmental Law; Protected Areas; Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy; and Education and Communications. The framework program is discussed in regional meetings a year prior to the quadrennial congress. By the time deliberations occur at the congress, we have reached a strong consensus. In order to further facilitate such consensus, our system requires that a simple majority of both the NGO members and the government members approve every proposed action.

A central theme of IUCN's recent work is that nature and natural systems can provide solutions for many of the world's greatest challenges. How does nature's genius as a problem-solver work in practice?

We do indeed believe that nature provides the key to solutions for many global problems, such as climate change, food security, and development. Currently, the United Nations is in the midst of establishing the Sustainable Development Goals, a new set of international social and environmental targets to follow the Millennium Development Goals, which expire next year. When we provide input to the negotiations, we stress that a natural systems framework should be the inspiration and foundation for both setting goals and finding solutions. We know, for example, that forests, wetlands, and peatlands capture and store carbon, thus offering an important solution to climate change. Likewise, managed ecosystems can help increase food security.

When I arrived here eight years ago, I was not happy with the tone of our communications. They were overly gloomy, long on identifying problems and short on providing solutions. I wanted to strike a more positive and optimistic note, and nature provides the basis for such an approach. It inspires both hope and joy. Thus, in the IUCN framework adopted two years ago, we included a chapter called "Nature-Based Solutions to Global Challenges."

Although "nature-based solutions" is a new phrase at IUCN, it has already been adopted by other organizations, such as the European Commission, which attributes the concept to IUCN. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the UN initiative for academic collaboration around sustainable development, also refers to nature-based solutions. People increasingly understand that mobilizing public opinion requires a solutions-oriented message and specific tools for moving forward.

The Red List, IUCN’s inventory of endangered species, is one of the most well-known aspects of your work. Its simplicity as a metric of species’ health worldwide provides both experts and the public with a compass for measuring progress, or lack thereof, toward preserving biodiversity. How has the Red List evolved?

This year, we’re celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Red List. It is an inspiring story because the members of the Species Survival Commission—some 9,000 in total—donate countless hours to measure the state of species. We have been able to track the status of 73,000 species, a large number but still only three percent of the number of the total known species worldwide.

In my public speaking outside the scientific community, I describe the Red List as a health check on the planet. For example, we estimate that twenty-two percent of mammals, our closest relatives, are facing extinction. If a quarter of your body parts were threatening to fall off, you would urgently seek medical attention. Our message, however, is one of hope and restoration: implementing conservation policies can actually allow species to regain viability as long as they haven’t reached (or passed) the brink of extinction.

We are now working on a Red List of Ecosystems, which would cover not only the health of individual species but also the habitats in which they live. We are also launching a knowledge-based product that we call a Green List of Protected Areas. What areas are high-functioning for nature, for human beings, for conservation? We envision the Green List as a solutions list.

In 2011, in cooperation with the German government, we called for the restoration of 150 million hectares of deforested and degraded lands by 2020. In collaboration with the World Resources Institute (WRI), we estimated that two billion hectares of degraded land exist on the planet. Our goal is practical and action-oriented: to contribute to several existing international commitments aimed at restoring degraded land. Governments have been making pledges, and many are enthusiastic about it. Rwanda was one of the first to sign a commitment. The return on investing in such restoration is huge in terms of carbon sequestration (an additional 1 gigaton of carbon dioxide emissions per year) and economic livelihoods (an estimated \$85 billion dollars per year). Restoration can thus be an instrument of both hope and solutions, a mechanism for rolling up our sleeves and getting on with it rather than simply bemoaning the sorry state of the planet’s natural systems.

There is an increasing strain in US politics that ignores or questions sound scientific evidence. Do you see this phenomenon in other countries as well?

In the other major countries, including China and India, scientific evidence seems to be more respected than it is in the US. Whether such skepticism and denial will influence the rest of the world, I don’t know. But I certainly hope not.

Part of the problem is that the scientific community hasn't adequately explained the consequences of the degradation of the species and natural systems which we so often take for granted. We need to articulate nature's positive contribution to human well-being. At IUCN, we know very well how healthy ecosystems support climate adaptation and mitigation. However, such explanations can only go so far when they confront corporate lobbies as powerful as they are in the US.

IUCN has a set of principles for engagement with corporations. In the real world, how do you ensure that IUCN's integrity and independence—which are essential to the very soul of the organization—are maintained when working with the corporate sector?

To begin, our mission states that we are to influence society about the use of nature and natural resources in a sustainable and equitable manner. Society includes business; it is not limited to the "good" guys. So we feel we must find ways to engage corporations as part of our mission.

We don't call our work partnerships. We have an agreement to work on specific issues with business. We've been around long enough and are respected enough—both for our knowledge-based work and for the understanding that nobody can buy our soul and alter our science-based beliefs—to ensure that we maintain our integrity. Corporations need us more than we need them.

We work on very specific issues with business and keep pushing forward. If we feel that we are getting nowhere, we terminate the relationship. For example, we have contributed to discussions to encourage companies to adopt a Net Positive Impact for biodiversity. In simple quantitative terms, this is achieved when measurable biodiversity gains occasioned by a company's conservation activities in a specific location outweigh (or equal, in the case of No Net Loss) the measured biodiversity losses caused by the company's operations in the same area. An increasing number of companies are adopting such strategies. Since 2001, thirty-two companies have made public commitments or aspirations towards either Net Positive Impact or No Net Loss goals, or their equivalent, and eighteen of them specifically reference biodiversity.

What reflections on the future can you offer as the head of one of the world's leading global environmental organizations? What are the imperatives over the next ten years for reversing the most perilous trends that face us?

One of them is the urgency of escaping the silo mentality that dominates our education systems, governmental institutions, and multilateral organizations. We need to reorganize ourselves to see the world's problems holistically and systemically—that the climate is related to biodiversity and biodiversity to desertification and so on.

In my prior position as rector of the University of Peace, I tried to combat such siloization in

the environmental and peace/security communities. In the environment community, we would talk about the need to ensure clean water in our wells in villages worldwide. But we never considered the risk to women going to the well who may be killed, raped, or kidnapped. Our one-dimensional approach led us to conclude, "Well, there's clean water so everything is going to work out." In fact, personal security and clean water supplies needed to be addressed concurrently. I continue to believe that bringing different perspectives together around a common goal will help us reach solutions faster and more effectively than approaches designed by interest groups working in isolation.

Along with such holistic thinking must also come a much greater spirit of collaboration. We have one planet, notwithstanding deep cultural, religious, and ethnic differences. It is our shared home, ever more so in an increasingly interdependent world. So we have to work together more effectively, to tap our shared humanity, and to build values and institutions that align with the realities of a planetary civilization.

In order to do that, we need to provide hope and practical actions for people to pursue. I always seek situations that illustrate the possible. I'm hoping that the Sustainable Development Goals offer a workable platform for our common future and that commitments to action will be courageous and enduring. Some people see the goals and say, "Oh, it's just another UN way of creating endless meetings and debates." But the goals will be adopted, and they must be translated into actionable steps. The goals are for all of us, everywhere. In the best of outcomes, they will act as a compass for real action that the world so desperately needs.

About the Interviewee



(photo: Laurent Villeret - Dolce Vita)

Julia Marton-Lefèvre is Director General of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the world's largest conservation membership organization, which brings together states, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and scientific experts. Previously, she served as Rector of the University for Peace, a graduate-level international university, mandated by the UN, that provides education, training, and research on issues related to peace and conflict; Executive Director of LEAD (Leadership for Environment and Development) International, a program to improve the skills of mid-career leaders from all parts of the world; and Executive Director of ICSU (International Council for Science).

About the Publication

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