

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner airs his views on funny achievements that make people think, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

The 28th annual Ig Nobel Prize ceremony took place at Harvard University in September 2018. The prizes – in the spoof alternative to the rather more illustrious Nobel prizes – honour genuine achievements that make people laugh, and then think. Though tongue-in-cheek, they are designed to spur public interest in science, medicine and technology.

Some of my favourite winners over the years have included the discovery that regularly playing a didgeridoo is an effective treatment for sleep apnoea and snoring; that many identical twins cannot visually tell themselves apart; and that the word 'huh?' exists in every human language. Others include a chemical recipe to partially un-boil an egg and – my all-time favourite – a device, called the Mosquito, that repels teenagers loitering on street corners by emitting a piercing sound at a frequency that only adolescent ears have the ability to hear.

It got me thinking about some would-be inventions that could become useful tools in the, rather limited, armoury currently available to conservation efforts. Increasingly, it feels as if reasoned debate and argument doesn't seem to work, so maybe some (albeit imaginary) gadgets would help make a difference.

How about a single-use plastic bag whose bottom falls out five minutes after you leave the shop? Or anti-fouling paint that permanently turns bright pink whenever a fishing boat takes fish from a protected no-take zone? Wouldn't it be great if there was a gadget, which would have to be a legal requirement in all supermarkets,

that would sub-consciously stop consumers from buying anything with multi-layered packaging? Or perhaps something – we could call it a 'wrapper-zapper' – that gives litter louts a mild electric shock every time they drop a cigarette butt, drinks can, unwanted receipt, or anything else, and leave it? A mere flick of a switch and they'd be running for cover.

It's hard not to be petty. I'd love to see a mobile phone that – when used in an otherwise calm and peaceful bird hide – heats up until it is too hot to touch. And how about 'smart roads' in all big cities that can detect ridiculously gigantic 4WDs and automatically turn off all their radios, heaters, satnavs and phones? But we have to be cleverer than that. Maybe

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we could adapt the Mosquito to emit a dreadful scratching-nails-down-the-blackboard sound that repels farmers who are not diligently introducing environmentally friendly measures on their land, for example, or anyone about to kill a legally protected hen harrier – it's intensely gratifying just thinking about all the possibilities.

Then we should find ways of striking back at environmentally unfriendly politicians. By that, I mean almost all of them. In the House of Commons, we could have special microphones that pump helium into the air whenever an MP or minister dares to mention their hysterical and deranged obsession with 'economic growth' – at whatever cost to the environment; then their voices would be high-pitched and whiny and no one would take them seriously (which we shouldn't anyway). And, as an aside, I'd personally pump a little more helium every time they utter 'let me be clear', 'hard-working families', 'a fair deal for everyone', 'the great British people', or any other irritating political clichés.

I'm being facetious, of course. But I get tired of so many politicians, business leaders, hunting fraternities, individuals and others who throw around the usual banalities and sound bites about caring for the environment – and then go home and do absolutely nothing. Or worse.

Sometimes, it's just good to dream. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk

