

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and conservationist discusses the reaction to the Notre Dame fire, and invites your thoughts on the subject.



Nearly one billion euros were pledged to restore Notre Dame within a few days of the devastating fire a few months ago, but I seem to be alone in *not* celebrating this fact. Though I have to admit I cheered the 200,000 bees that somehow survived living under the roof and are miraculously alive and buzzing.

I have nothing against 850-year-old monuments, especially ones that symbolise entire cities and nations. But while I'm happy that it was saved from burning to the ground, I don't understand why there was such an outpouring of grief and generosity from all over the world. For a start, why hasn't there been the same reaction to the countless older (and, arguably, more beautiful) historic buildings and archaeological sites destroyed or severely damaged during the Syrian Civil War?

But what really upsets me is our skewed priorities. We don't seem to understand what is really important. Saving a medieval building is commendable, of course, but there are so many more critical issues that more urgently need that kind of money and support.

On the very day of the Notre Dame fire, Extinction Rebellion (XR) was launched. Its *raison d'être* is, quite simply, to warn that if we do not take urgent and essential action to halt biodiversity loss and tackle climate change, we are all doomed (I'm paraphrasing, but the message is loud and clear: 'this is an emergency'). Yet the daily news was dominated by XR's disruption of London traffic and largely side-stepped the bigger issue

that we have entered a period of abrupt climate breakdown and are in the midst of a self-made mass extinction. Needless to say, there have been no billion-euro pledges to save the world.

I wouldn't presume to tell anyone how to spend their money. Billionaires and big businesses can spend it on whatever they like. Indeed, within hours of the Notre Dame fire breaking out, one family alone donated 100 million euros, while banks, pharmaceutical firms, oil companies and countless others also pledged equally mind-boggling sums of money. But I don't think we have to choose between worthy causes. Those billion euros didn't nearly empty the coffers: there is still a lot more money where that came from.

So why the shocking level of complacency when it comes to conservation? Surely, anyone who

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has grasped the severity of the situation must fear for the future? They must care? Part of the problem is complexity. 'Notre Dame damaged by fire' is a simple concept, with a straightforward solution; and, being cynical, there are immediate brownie points to be won by offering help. But it is easy to lose interest or shy away when the problems are as complex as climate change and loss of biodiversity, and the solutions are overwhelmingly convoluted, largely unpopular and seemingly endless.

But just imagine what could be achieved if only we could convince billionaires and banks that conservation is a worthwhile investment. Take an animal close to my heart, for instance: the Critically Endangered vaquita – a tiny porpoise that lives in the Gulf of California, western Mexico. With as few as 10 left, it is teetering on the brink. If only we had thrown one billion euros and government pressure behind vaquita conservation when alarm bells were ringing 20 years ago, we could have saved it from inevitable extinction.

When it comes to priorities, there is one critical thing to bear in mind. We can restore Notre Dame to its former glory – this fire is just a blip in the long and often tumultuous history of the cathedral. But we will never be able to bring back the vaquita. 🐾

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



Vast sums of money were pledged after the fire at Notre Dame in April.