

## MY WAY OF THINKING

## MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner is bemused by the high value we place on protecting art and architecture compared with conserving wildlife and wild places.

How much money do we need to save the world's most threatened species and protect the most important wildlife sites? I'll give you a clue: it's roughly the same as the amount paid out in bonuses to bankers in the UK, the United States and Canada last year. Or, to put it another way, roughly the same as Americans spend on fizzy drinks every year.

A few years ago, experts from conservation and research groups around the world came up with a robust assessment of the cost of conservation. They estimated that it would cost £3.7 billion each year (at current exchange rates) to save threatened species from extinction, and £59 billion per year to protect the most important wild places. Though these figures are eye-wateringly daunting to us as individuals, in global terms they are trivial.

Conservation is actually rather cheap. The estimated cost, totalling £62.7 billion, is a drop in the heavily polluted, overfished ocean. And just think what we get for our money: immeasurable beauty, pleasure for billions of people, and a moral obligation fulfilled. Oh, and don't forget the 'ecosystem services' provided by nature (such as pollinating crops and removing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere), which form the basis of our entire life support system. That's quite important. The cost of conservation is dwarfed by all of the benefits we get back from nature. Besides, it's not a 'cost' at all – it's an investment.

Why, therefore, is it so frustratingly difficult to raise anything like enough

money? The problem is that everyone accepts – without question – the importance of protecting old paintings, say, or old buildings. But they don't accept the importance of protecting wildlife or wild places, which are treated as a luxury. Whenever and wherever nature comes under threat, there is always a battle to persuade the perpetrators and decision-makers that badgers, great crested newts or wildflower meadows are worth protecting.

Last year, someone in Saudi Arabia paid about £350 million for Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece *Salvator Mundi*. The price is insane, of course, and it's a reflection of the massive disproportion of wealth around the globe, but what's interesting is that no one questioned the basic principle of preserving a painting. In our weird and warped world, a single painting is

**“A single painting cost 2.5 times the total annual income of the RSPB.”**

deemed to be worth nearly two and a half times the total annual income of the RSPB – and no one bats an eyelid.

Another recent purchase – albeit a smaller one – was a little more ironic. In June, an anonymous collector paid £7.2 million for the world's most expensive book – equivalent to one-third of the entire annual income of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. The title? *Birds of America* by John James Audubon. Just imagine how that money could have helped to protect the actual birds of America.

I'm not suggesting that we should save wildlife but not art or architecture. We should save both. (Though as my great friend, the wildlife artist David Shepherd, used to say: “We could always rebuild the Taj Majal, but we won't be able to rebuild a tiger”.) The money is clearly out there. We just need to find more imaginative and persuasive ways of getting our hands on it.

That figure of £62.7 billion for annual conservation costs is merely a target. We are nowhere near spending that kind of dosh. Current conservation expenditure must rise by an order of magnitude if we are to have any hope of protecting the natural world. And the real irony is that, if we fail to do that, there's a good chance we will actually lose our life support system – and then the bankers won't get any bonuses at all. 🐾

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](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)

