



MY WAY OF THINKING

# MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner explains why we need to personalise conservation, as now, more than ever, an individually named animal will make headline news.

One of the great challenges in conservation is that there is no end. We can never let our guard down and say, 'Right, that's such-and-such a species saved – now let's go and save something else'. The original threats rarely go away and, with unerring inevitability, there are new ones lurking just around the corner, ready to strike the moment we take our eyes off the ball.

This means two things. First, it makes conservation interminably expensive, because we can't take money away from one species to save another. Second, conservation is seriously difficult to 'sell'. How can we inspire people to support something so complicated and long-winded, with absolutely no guarantee of success?

When I first started working in conservation – straight out of university – one of my first tasks was to promote a campaign to save the tiger from extinction. Thirty-seven years later, nothing much has changed. We are still trying to save the tiger. It hasn't disappeared yet – so we must be doing something right – but it's still teetering on the brink, just as it was all those years ago. To the public it has become little more than background noise: 'Haven't you saved the tiger yet? What have you been doing all this time?'

Saving individual animals is so much easier. Suppose there were two campaigns: one to rescue a cruelly treated tiger called Babar from a dilapidated zoo somewhere, and the other to raise money for tiger conservation in India. Rescuing Babar would get the most publicity and raise the most money, because it is an easy

concept with a beginning, a middle and (most importantly) an end. You can imagine all those uplifting pictures of him looking happy and living it up in a retirement home for tigers in the wilds of Surrey. Job done. Thank you very much. Protecting wild tigers, on the other hand, can have no grand finale. And even if we do ultimately bring them safely back from the verge of extinction (though, to be honest, I'm not sure we ever will) we are destined to watch over them forever.

Last year, two lions – Saeed and Simba – made the headlines. They were rescued by the animal welfare charity Four Paws from abandoned zoos in war-torn Syria and Iraq. They've just been in the news again, being given a new lease of life in a big cat sanctuary in South Africa. That's fantastic – we should care about individual animals as well as entire

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species – but the frustration is that we struggle to inspire action to stop the catastrophic decline of lions in the wild. How often does that make headline news?

The lesson is simple. We need to personalise conservation. These days, thanks to the rapidly growing trend for simple social media sound bites, most people aren't interested in detail. They don't want to hear about the challenges of anti-poaching operations, the intricacies of trade in tiger bones, or efforts to close down the Chinese market. But they might sit up and take notice if they were introduced to a tiger called Eric. I'm being facetious, but it's true, and there are many examples to prove the point. Keiko the killer whale opened our eyes to cetaceans in captivity, Cecil the lion put the reprehensible 'sport' of trophy hunting well and truly on the map, and Sirocco the kakapo (who shamelessly shagged my head in *Last Chance to See*) introduced the world to the Critically Endangered night parrots of New Zealand.

I'm not suggesting a change in conservation policy. Just the recognition that individual animals, with heart-wrenching stories we can all relate to, raise money and support far more effectively than entire species. And if that requires a little anthropomorphism, by putting the spotlight on a badger called Beryl or a hen harrier called Harry, then so be it. 🐾

**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)

