

Yes, we should put a price on nature.

---



So nature is priceless. It's a noble, clichéd sentiment. My heart wants to agree. I work in conservation after all. But my head is shouting No! There are grave problems with nature having nothing but intrinsic value. Here's why.

Conservation leaders need to move beyond the mantra of cherishing and celebrating nature. We need a new, radical hardline approach of negotiating in a language that the rest of our destructive world understands: units of real value.

Promoters of an idea backed by the UK Government to value the natural world under the concept of 'Natural Capital' say that without assigning economic values to living things and natural environments, poor decisions are made.

But critics have argued this week that you cannot and should not put a price on nature, and if you do, it will mark it up for sale and ultimately destroy it.

Yet we've been trashing and selling the earth's natural resources since long before the idea of natural capital was invented, precisely because nature is widely regarded as free, priceless, without a tangible, defensible value. Metrics are neutral and objective, whereas our current values of nature are subjective, cultural and optional.

To illustrate this point, picture any idyllic landscape painting of ‘nature’. Forget momentarily what the painting is worth, and ignore for a moment what the location itself would cost you to buy. It could be any painting, but let’s pick John Constable’s iconic *The Hay Wain*, because it is the most famous, illustrates a large-scale distorted public view and helps explain some points about the value of nature and pricelessness.



*Pic: John Constable, The Hay Wain. National Gallery.*

According to the National Gallery, the scene in *The Hay Wain* is our most famous symbol of the English landscape: a rural idyll, evoking nature, tranquility, countryside, cosy and familiar tradition. It presents an idea about ‘nature’ that the vast majority of the British public can relate to. In reality, it portrays a Londoner’s nostalgic, romantic perception of nature in his own rural childhood, deliberately filtering out the reality of industrial ‘progress’ just out of view.

The painting has desperately little to do with genuine nature, wildness, ecosystems or wildlife. Yet its fame and financial value amplify the public’s affection for nature nostalgia, and this flags up the massive inability of non-experts to judge natural value objectively. Its popularity is an advertisement for how millions of humans impose their own cultural layers over and above real values of the natural world around them.

*“The average British person would be far more likely to cherish something like a Constable painting than a slime mould, a lichen or a fly on a carcass.”*

Danger lurks in such disproportionate, populist, skewed views of ‘nature’, with millions adoring such images and

assigning them an expensive price and a cherished position in our psyche. By contrast, any wildlife living in that Constable scene, with all its intrinsic value, would be worth no monetary value, and some of the species that were fluttering in those fields will have quietly gone extinct since he painted them. Isn't that a crazy upside down world?

## INTRINSIC VALUE

If asked to picture nature, the average British person would be far more likely to conjure and cherish something like a Constable painting than a slime mould, a lichen or a fly on a carcass. In this way, we place a higher amount of 'pricelessness' - an appropriate oxymoron - on things that we personally value more dearly than others. These are subjective and cultural measures and values, but they have far more clout than neutral intrinsic ones.

When we compare public support for various conservation charities, we can easily guess that those championing fluffy animals will trounce those defending the value of insects, mosses or fungi. I recently tried to persuade every national newspaper to run a piece on a Buglife campaign to save an ugly industrial wasteland crammed with so many important but obscure insects that it should be a national nature reserve with the highest protection.



Of course, not one of them did. Why? Because they think the public does not care about the intrinsic value of nature. People care about trees coming down on Sheffield's streets because they make their neighbourhood feel nice, so that gets coverage. But no-one chains themselves to fences when insect sites get demolished or aphids, spiders, fungi and other small beings get sprayed to oblivion.

Skip forward to 2018 and Constable's famous setting on the Essex/ Suffolk border area, or actually any of the surrounding and similar-looking Home Counties now converted to arable farming. The immediate Hay Wain scene itself is still an attractive looking landscape with a few grazed pastures among the wider arable empire, and the neighbouring Flatford Mill is now expensively preserved, perhaps more because of the famous association with a painting, not because of any wildlife heritage value.

It is now home to a field studies centre for nature learning, cream teas and painting. But wander away from the tourist trap and like much of East Anglia you'll find local hedgerows have been ripped out, old elms and black poplars are lost, ancient woodlands almost completely gone apart from the occasional relic in an otherwise entirely pillaged north Essex/Suffolk farming landscape.

Those landscapes that were familiar to Constable are now mostly intensively farmed, industrial-scale, borderless wheat fields lacking the ancient margins and ditches where rare arable plants once thrived.



That heavy horse is now a tractor. The dawn chorus is quieter, the bats that would have been hiding in those trees are sparse, any local badgers... probably culled. Perhaps

the cull would not have happened if the real price of a living badger were measured to be higher than a dead one?

A frightening proportion of the insect abundance that would have flitted around Constable's easel, and plagued his sandwiches whilst he sat there admiring it all, has been lost to pesticides regardless of how priceless a few people think they are. Constable's childhood landscape and its wildlife were far richer than what I've experienced in this region, two centuries later, and that difference is almost entirely because farmed landscapes have capital value whereas nature does not have any natural capital value.

No-one has given any real values to the wonderful rare flowers, exquisite little dung beetles, stag beetles and song birds. Their intrinsic value has not saved them, with the scales tipped heavily towards the narrow economic values gained by destroying their habitat to increase crop yields.

## MEASURES

This week in a piece in The Guardian, columnist George Monbiot criticised the Natural Capital concept and raised the question of how do you value a primrose? It is indeed true that you cannot *easily* assign a meaningful price to every living thing, and I see his point that it seems odd to attempt to do so, but it's not impossible to assign a minimum unit value or score to all species, abundances and assemblages. There are plenty of reasons to try, and we have skilled people who can do it.

Ecologists and conservationists are data geeks, they are obsessive about quantifying and characterising and measuring. For example, the value and quality of any stream can be assigned in units by using a point scoring system for the aquatic invertebrates we find when we sample it.

Similarly, we measure the value of dormouse habitat by counting how many individuals of this European protected species we find by using an agreed methodology. We already characterise and assign species-richness and diversity values to every kind of natural habitat in the UK through the National Vegetation Classification scheme, for example.

We do all this measuring, endlessly, including meticulously cataloguing nature's decline, and yet we fail

to give nature a value in a language that non-conservationists understand. There is no point telling an economist or a property developer that something is a 'SSSI' and that's it's got 'Red Data Book' species. They have no idea what we are on about, it is meaningless unless we tell them its loss its worth 'X' in measured units that makes Development Plan A economically non-viable, but Plan B possible and favourable to conservation.

A unit of value can be defended in court, its value can even be priced into the tax and legal system, for example with how we farm and set subsidies. It can be visualised by a lay person. The process would provide a benchmark that is far better than zero.



#### WHAT ELSE CAN WE VALUE?

Many of our upland 'heritage' areas are heavily grazed by sheep, or otherwise drained, burned and modified to facilitate human interests such as grouse shooting estates and meat production. The 'values' of the displaced wildlife has not been quantified in economic terms, so the net loss is zero.

If we were able to quantify at least some of this natural value, for example by giving an arbitrary measure to species richness and habitat classifications, and add on other costs such as losing carbon by burning those moors, and add on the price of any economic damage from flooding downstream and so on, then such measures might well produce a figure that would outstrip the economic value and any justification for heavy grazing and grouse estates.

Unless we do the maths and find such a unit of measurement, then decision makers, conservationists, lawyers and policy makers are in a weak position to defend nature against enormous conflicting economic interests.

## PALM OIL

We could also set an example to others. We are a global influencer as a rich nation, so where we lead, others may follow. Intrinsic value will not save a rainforest from loggers. Just as Constable presented skewed values, the current non-metric cultural values we impose on nature are not appreciated in some countries where the most wildlife-rich areas are being rapidly destroyed.

These include areas of deep poverty where poaching and logging occur, and where people cannot afford choices, but corporations implicated in the destruction certainly can. Zero natural capital value in rainforests means poor or no regulation where it could otherwise be leveraged to defend against economic pressures, corporate behaviour and land use choices.

Rainforest land value is very clear to farmers, economies, corporate giants like Nestlé and Unilever. A rainforest's true biodiversity value to the planet overall is perhaps incalculable, as it is the life force of the planet, but we could assign a score, a unit of value to the number of species present within a forest area to defend the value of that land before it is cut down for a palm oil plantation. That figure would be incredibly high in Indonesia because it is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, also famous for destroying pristine orangutan habitat.

Let's add on a score for the cost of the carbon impact of logging; the health impacts of deliberate forest fires to human health and wildlife, such as those that raged out of control across swathes of Indonesia as the land was burned in preparation for plantations. Let's cost the economic impact on families displaced from their land so it can be sold to plantation chiefs. Let's price the loss of fair wages as monocultures and monopolies force workers into labour without alternative choices.

If this total value were calculated it could be compared to a species-poor area and it would quickly become clear to non-conservation people which lands and farming methods were 'costing' a higher price in damage to nature.

What if we applied the same principle to vanilla farms in Madagascar where the Lemur habitat is almost wiped out? And of course the price of losing nature in favour of

industrial production of sugar cane, biofuel crops, coffee, cocoa and tea plantations could be measured in the same way.

It is depressing to think that we are losing only intrinsic value across the planet. None of the wildlife I have mentioned has any value as 'natural capital' and so it is largely defenceless. For now, we only calculate sums for species which offer obvious 'ecosystem services' to people, such as the value of pollinators to the world's crops.

It may be impossible to put a true and comprehensive value on all of nature but we could do a hell of a lot better than zero. The human population has already subconsciously put a zero price on nature by harnessing and exploiting almost every inch of the land. Nature is cheap to destroy.

#### HOPE AND PRAY?

How do you defend something of zero financial value against someone else's economic case for destroying it? That's an impossible predicament. Do you just carry on relying on cultural and emotional attachment, volunteers and charities to do low-budget conservation work, and a few prayers? How do we apply that rationality to real world problems of habitat loss, wildlife crime and modern farming practices?

Natural Capital is a powerful opportunity to even up the scales. At present, developers and ecosystem plunderers hold the weight. And we don't have much time. We are told the planet is heading towards the sixth mass extinction. The population of the planet is growing at a faster rate than the successes of people who care about saving its precious, disappearing wildlife.

With this predicament, the view that you cannot put a price on Mother Nature, just like you cannot put a price on a Mother - she too is priceless - appeals to romanticists, poets and artists; but not realists. Mothers are priceless, and yet they are undervalued, exploited, not treated equally; exactly the same applies to Mother Nature. She is taken for granted, assumed to be a given.

We need to stand up for Mother Nature's rights like a feminist would stand up for hers. If she could speak for



herself, she would demand that everything she has and everything she does is given a fair and higher value, not lamely taken for free with a shrug and a muttering about how priceless she is. If nature could speak about how we have destroyed her creations, perhaps she would be a bit like the feminist singer Beyoncé and shout something similar: “If you liked it, then you should have put a price on it.”

*Alex Morss*

*[www.alexmorss.co.uk](http://www.alexmorss.co.uk)*

*May 2018*