

Interview – Jean-Christophe Vié

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What has changed since the last World Conservation Congress four years ago?

Four years ago, the climate change problem was far less pronounced; there wasn't the kind of consensus that made the Climate Study Group possible, for example; we didn't have articles in such magazines as *Nature* raising awareness on how serious the problem has got. Another piece of good news is that people really want to talk about biodiversity, as well as other things that have worked well to preserve it up to now, such as protected areas. So we're constantly looking for new initiatives. Cooperation with the private sector has improved, though as far as I'm concerned we're still barely off the ground. We have to do far more, making sure that companies become much more implicated than they are now. We have to stop with half measures. I think we're getting there.

What are the most endangered pockets of biodiversity on the planet?

I don't think a single zone has been spared on the planet. Each one faces its own specific threats: deserts are expanding, water is getting more and more scarce, at both poles we know that ice is melting fast. So we have to expect compounding consequences. We're already witnessing pretty dramatic upheavals. We'll have to adapt, that's for sure. We have to start drastically changing our habits in the hope of making the transition as smooth as possible, because plants and animals have a limit to how much they can adapt. Some will deal relatively well, and others, due to their biological traits, will unfortunately be unable to.

Are protected areas working to conserve biodiversity?

Protected zones have been criticized in certain places, largely because they were created in a rather authoritative manner and without consulting local populations. But when you look around at what's left outside those zones, there's nothing. So if these protected zones hadn't been created what would be left to conserve today?

Do we need to control human populations in order to conserve biodiversity?

Lots of people have been worrying, for a long time now, about the ever increasing human population, but this is a complex issue and unfortunately too many factors come into the equation for there to be any easy answers. There are social and religious concerns, to name but two. We see it in Europe nowadays. In my own country, France, the government is inciting people to have children. They get alarmed if the population starts declining. They take pride in the fact that France now has the highest birth rate. I find this worrisome because this goes totally against what we want for the world as a whole. I think it's a good thing the population is dropping. Of course then you have to take into account economic concerns – "We need to create more markets, because we've got to produce more, sell more and make more profit. And who will pay for pensions?" So we're caught in a kind of spiral. But in any case at one point everything is going to grind to a halt. I think it's preferable to make sure we stay in a position of being able to choose our own destinies, rather than be confronted with a reality that will be catastrophic for everyone. This is our chance. We have to change now.

How much carrot and how much stick is needed to change behaviour patterns harmful to biodiversity?

I've always been in favour of a "both, and" scenario. We have to begin with incentives, even though these don't seem to be working all that well, and then move on to sanctions. But we can't skip directly to sanctions or repression. If we want to solve a problem, like we did for tobacco

because it was having such an impact on human health - and therefore on the public purse ...well, one day we just made a decision and that was that. And now we realize that everyone is living rather well with it. There may be a frustrated minority, but now that smoking is banned pretty much everywhere, people are, on the whole, delighted. And yet it was long a cause for heated debates, so it seems that, unfortunately, in many cases if we wait around for a general consensus before we act, we simply never do. There comes a time when you have to make a decision, that's all.