Environmental Conservation **37** (2): 222–225 © Foundation for Environmental Conservation 2010

BOOK REVIEWS

doi:10.1017/S0376892910000457

Conservation Psychology: Understanding and Promoting Human Care for Nature

BY SUSAN CLAYTON AND GENE MYERS

vii + 253 pp., 24.5 × 17 × 1.5 cm, ISBN 978 1 4051 7678 1
paperback, GB£ 29.99, Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009

Once, when I was about 12, I tried to argue with a guy who was handing out anti-environmentalist leaflets in an airport. He asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I replied that I wanted to be a herpetologist, and that if he got his way, there would be no animals left for me to study. He shrugged and said, 'Be a palaeontologist,' which I thought was an infuriatingly snappy retort. I had no idea what to say to that. This guy and I had fundamentally irreconcilable viewpoints. I found the prospect of extinction and habitat destruction depressing; he simply did not care.

The more time I spend thinking about biodiversity and conservation, the more I revisit that argument in my head. To my frustration, I still cannot win it. I actually think it is unwinnable. How do we reach people who simply do not care about biodiversity? Sure, we can cite the large-and-growing literature on ecosystem services. But it seems clear that there are many wild populations and unbuilt spaces whose loss would neither cripple ecosystem function nor even be noticed by society at large. So when we argue along the lines of E. O. Wilson in *The Diversity of Life* (1992) that 'we should not knowingly allow any species or race to go extinct,' we presuppose that our audience can be convinced that species and races are worth saving, irrespective of their functional contributions, simply for the extra colour they bring to the world's palette. Yet it appears that much of our audience is not currently so persuadable.

Thus, enduring success in conservation will require a massive increase in society's regard for the biota. As we scramble at the end of the pipe to conserve what we can over the next 30 years, we should also be confronting the problem at its source by enhancing bioliteracy and nature appreciation. How best to do this is an open question, but the effort will undoubtedly require a more sophisticated understanding of how people think about nature, what nature means to people in different settings, and how it can be made to mean more.

These are all psychological issues, and it is therefore striking how infrequently psychology comes up in discussions about conservation policy and strategy. Susan Clayton and Gene Myers, distressed at this mismatch between current practice and long-term goals, have written *Conservation Psychology* to introduce a broad audience to relevant research from their field. The book is an amply referenced survey, equally suitable as both an undergraduate textbook and a starting point for academics and professionals who wish to know more about how psychological research can inform their conservation work. I highly recommend its use in both of these contexts.

The book is divided into three parts, each more interesting than the last to conservationists who are not also psychologists. The authors first present the underpinnings of psychology as it relates to human-environment interactions and then discuss how psychological attributes manifest themselves in different interactions with the non-human world (from puppies and houseplants on up to wilderness). The final section of the book considers how an understanding of psychology can be put to work in the promotion of sustainable behaviours.

As I read, I learned some things that I had not known. Elsewhere, I found empirical support for notions that I had always thought must be true (for example that zoos and aquaria foster empathic connections with animals and concern for their plight in the wild) but had not known that anyone had studied in detail. One of the most intriguing revelations of this book is how strongly psychology is already working in our favour. The authors repeatedly cite evidence showing that overwhelming majorities (of Americans, mainly) are concerned about environmental deterioration and support environmental legislation and education. Such data inspire hope that if we can harness these sentiments in the face of competing imperatives, we will succeed in maintaining a biologically diverse world.

And it is here that *Conservation Psychology*'s practical implications truly come into play. The later chapters contain 'how-to' insights about influencing consumer behaviour, designing public-awareness campaigns, and structuring environmental-education programmes.

My biggest concern, which is not an indictment of the book or its authors, is that most of the psychological studies cited seem to be of populations in developed Northern countries, especially the USA. Studies from the developing tropics tend to be more anthropological. Both of these things are useful, but it remains unclear which aspects of human-nature relationships (if any) are truly intrinsic to the working of human brains. This distinction is important for how we direct our efforts; perhaps future experiments that employ identical methods in different countries will provide more guidance.

My other quibbles are minor. The figures include many photographs and schematics, but relatively few actual data. I would also like to have seen more discussion of how the changing technological environment is likely to shape our relationships with nature. Recent studies by Oliver Pergams and Patricia Zaradic (2008) show that people are spending less time recreating outdoors as they spend more time with their electronic gadgets, but the implications of this trend are complex. While a shift away from nature-based recreation is worrying, nature-themed entertainment and the web can be (like zoos) powerful tools for biodiversity education. Moreover, electronic entertainment is not going away, and the options are only getting more interesting. So I think that we conservationists should adapt to this trend rather than wring our hands about it. Here, as elsewhere, we could use some input from psychologists.

References

Wilson, E.O. (1992) *The Diversity of Life*. New York, NY, USA: W. W. Norton & Co.

Pergams, O.R.W. & Zaradic, P.A. (2008) Evidence for a fundamental and pervasive shift away from nature-based recreation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science USA* **105**: 2295–2300.

ROBERT M. PRINGLE
Society of Fellows, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
e-mail: rpringle@fas.harvard.edu