

Bob Pressey

Save the World, then Study Medieval History



Bob Pressey is a Senior Research Scientist with the National Parks and Wildlife Service in New South Wales. Those readers who do not know the location of New South Wales have probably had a Euro-centric education which has left them with only a sketchy geography of the Southern Hemisphere. Here is a clue, though: New South Wales was once used by Britain as a penal colony. This could explain the accompanying photograph. Bob has a BSc (Hons) from the University of Sydney, a Master of Environmental Studies from Macquarie University and a PhD from the University of New South Wales, somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere. The motivation for those qualifications has been a need to understand the natural world and a desire to use that knowledge to change the way human beings use the natural world. For the last eight years, he has been engaged in research on systematic approaches to establishing protected areas for nature conservation.

I came to Berlin because I went to Caracas. I went to Caracas because my parents gave me a sense of fairness that I directed to the situation of all the species that share the planet with *Homo sapiens*, the wise ape. When I was at school, in the western suburbs of Sydney, I began to wonder why beautiful parts of Australia were being cleared for profit, not for need, and why irreplaceable topsoil was being blown and washed out to sea. I also wondered why some species had been exploited to the point of extinction, an oblivion much more profound than death. I was indignant that the French government persisted with nuclear testing in the South Pacific, despite the weight of evidence that the outcome was long-term poisoning of the surrounding land and sea and that fallout would find its way into the milk that I drank.

Those questions and reactions began a long random walk through the education system, into seven or so years as a freelance environmental consultant and then into my present job as a researcher. The walk was a quest for knowledge and ways to change the things that were wrong about the

way our species manages the 'environment' — that term often given to all the other things in the world apart from *Homo sapiens*. The word 'environment' rolls off the tongue fairly easily, especially in these days when it is fashionable in some circles to express concern for whales and kangaroos. But the environment is much more complex and wonderful than any of us know.

Why be concerned about the conservation of biodiversity? Well, first of all, it is fading before our eyes as more people try to extract more things from the natural environment. Why should this be a bad thing? There are several reasons. Many conservationists argue that there are sound anthropocentric reasons for nature conservation and appeal to enlightened self-interest. They list all the benefits that come from a healthy and diverse natural environment and list the consequences of losing these services and opportunity values. Others, like myself, simply believe that nature conservation is a good thing. How do we justify that? In the same way that we justify voting rights for women or legislation against the abuse of children and animals. The rights of animals, women, workers, blacks and children are ethical stances that we now take for granted. But many people had to battle and make sacrifices for them, just as they are doing now for the rights of nature (Nash, 1990). An ethic is a self-imposed constraint on behaviour. An important emerging ethic in global society is that nature conservation is good for its own sake. This ethic will become increasingly influential in the coming decades.

Part way through my random walk, which still has about forty years to go, barring accidents, I flew to Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. I was to attend the IV World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas. One of the other Australians to attend was Chris Margules, with whom I had worked for some years. Early in the two week congress, we met Dick Vane-Wright and Chris Humphries from the Natural History Museum in London. I had seen their work and we had much to discuss. I also found them congenial company, and we were all committed to the exploration of Venezuelan music, food and beer. We also shared a healthy cynicism about the slow pace of change in environmental management due largely to political pragmatism but also partly to the cumbersome bureaucracies that have been put in place to further the environmental cause.

Soon after our time in Caracas, Vane-Wright and Humphries were contacted by the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin about possible fellowships. The idea of a *Schwerpunkt* on biodiversity conservation emerged which would culminate in a multi-authored book on systematic approaches to selecting protected areas. I was contacted about being one of the participants. The editors of the book were to be the 'Caracas Four', veterans of many restaurants and music spots in Venezuela. So from the western sub-

urbs of Sydney, my random walk in the area of environmental protection led to Wallotstrasse 19, and what an impressive place it was.

My time in the Kolleg was limited by other commitments to one month in October 1993 and two months in June-July 1994. In October, Vane-Wright and myself worked on a detailed outline of the book that would come out of the academic year. Authors were then allocated in (hopefully) appropriate combinations for the topics to be covered. All that was left was to begin work on the book but I returned to Australia concerned about the feasibility of producing an integrated product with so diverse an authorship. The diversity was not only in background and expertise but in perspectives on biodiversity and how to protect it. By the time I came back in June, much progress had been made, although there were vigorous debates about some issues and the structure of the book continued to evolve. More importantly, it became clear that the book would work — we had managed to use our diversity to strengthen, not weaken, the project.

The Kolleg itself was a marvellous experience. Memories of the October visit are dominated by the fine family apartment in Koenigsallee, bicycle rides in the Grunewald, stern Berliners on Kurfürstendamm, and a weekend trip to Prague. Life in June and July seemed so full and intense that my e-mails and faxes to colleagues in Australia waxed lyrical about the beauty and richness of Berlin in summer, without being able to explain my euphoria. There are so many things to remember that I could fill pages here. Some that come to mind now are runs in the Grunewald with Scott Camazine most mornings, our regular attempts to better our times over a set course, finishing at the Grunewald gate, bending over panting and hurting with me asking what time we had done, Scott saying something like `that was not fun !', walking back into the Kolleg sweating in an unrefined way before showering, coffee and several breakfasts on the terrace on balmy mornings, hammering on the keyboard afterwards in my office above the entrance to the Kolleg, looking out the window onto gardens and a quiet treelined street, lots of lunches with some of the best minds in Europe benignly amused at this bunch of scientists working on nature conservation or something, most of them preferring to talk about issues more important than this thing called biodiversity (perhaps some new scientific fashion that will fade and be replaced), afternoons on the computer, evening dinners on the Kolleg terrace and exchanging Australian observations on life in Europe with Janice Margules, who died much too young on returning to Australia, all the other evenings in Berlin with fragments of recollection now mixed, the "Quasimodo" basement with the basse so loud that it vibrated in the chest cavity, watching and dancing a little at "Abraxas", countless cafes and restaurants with tables on the sidewalks, conversation and wonderful company over wine and borrowed cigarettes,

nights on the top floor terrace with the sounds of cars and conversation drifting up from the cafe, the old lady in the opposite apartment tidying her room, the full moon rising over the rooftops, the Piranha cocktail bar and ordering drinks by the half litre (or was it by the litre?), an evening beside the lake, a long moonlit walk in the forest, a late picnic deep in the Grunewald and a rainstorm to make it seem wild and distant from cities, wanting to stay in a fairy tale forest far from the rest of the world, racing the buses down Kudamm on the Kolleg bicycle, playing pool at the "New York" cafe, and countless other impressions very difficult to disentangle and explain. When people asked me about my time in Berlin, I could only say that it was wonderful. I couldn't tell them exactly why.

If all these fragments seem to emphasise aspects of my stay other than research, the nominal reason for my presence in Berlin, I should reassure you that we did work hard. The Kolleg gave us an experience that is rare in a professional career — the best minds in a field of science gathered together to agree, argue, reconsider and write about a structured compilation of ideas and techniques. The book will be a major scientific advance. It will pull together many existing ideas in new ways and will describe new ideas. It will be called something like "Priority Areas Analysis: Systematic Approaches for Conserving Biodiversity". It will mainly concern the selection of new protected areas. This is important because protected areas will continue to be the most important means of carrying other species into the twenty-first century, along with *Homo sapiens*. The importance of systematic approaches is that most protected areas have been selected in an *ad hoc* way and are much less effective than if they had been located systematically in response to an explicit goal. The application of systematic approaches will maximise the effectiveness of any new protected areas.

So the Wissenschaftskolleg has facilitated the production of a book on state-of-the-art approaches to locating protected areas. This will be very influential in scientific circles and will alert many managers and policy-makers to problems and solutions. What remains to be done? Unfortunately, a great deal. The availability of systematic approaches will not, in itself, save the world, or even the world's remaining natural areas. The main impediments to saving nature are political pragmatism, lack of perspective by conservationists in promoting areas for protection, and the conflicting agendas of agencies and lobby groups. Overcoming these will need substantial changes to current policy agendas. These changes will be accelerated if more scientists learn the rules of the policy game and play more effectively.

What else is needed? The combination of improved science and enlightened policy must produce cultural and social organisations that foster, not just tolerate, nature conservation. At the moment we have a type of ecol-

ogical apartheid — reserved land and the rest. What we need is a spectrum of protection measures from outright nature conservation through various mixes of conservation and extractive uses, to outright extraction at the other end. Moreover, these protection measures must be applied to the right places in the right ways. More broadly, we need a way of designing human activities so that the compatibility of human activities with the maintenance of natural diversity is a much more important criterion than at present. This is the approach promoted by the Wildlands Project, a grand vision for nature conservation that is continent-wide and will be implemented over decades and centuries (Noss and Cooperrider 1994). It is highly, but not hopelessly, ambitious. The first step in making a grand vision become a reality is to articulate it.

As part of this grand vision will be an emphasis on biophilia, acknowledgment of the human bond with other species and encouragement of respect for other life forms (Wilson 1984). Another crucial part will be the prudent location of protected areas of several types. This is where our team will contribute, thanks to the sponsorship of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. When the whole process of the integration of human activities with the natural world is further underway, it will be time to devote more effort to such luxuries as medieval history—areas of intellectual endeavour that are interesting but do not make *Homo sapiens* civilised. 'Civilised' means brought out of a state of barbarism, instructed in the arts of life, or enlightened and refined. We can claim to be all these things when we learn to live without destroying the natural world of which we are part.

Much of the pleasure and effectiveness of working at the Wissenschaftskolleg was due to its staff who were invariably helpful and pleasant. I would like to express my thanks to all the staff of the Kolleg, its kitchen, its administrative support, and its library, with whom I dealt during my stay.

References that any civilised person should read:

Nash, R. (1989) *The Rights of Nature: a History of Environmental Ethics*. University of Wisconsin Press

Noss, R. F. and Cooperrider, A. Y. (1994) *Saving Nature's Legacy: Protecting and Restoring Biodiversity*. Island Press, Washington DC

Wilson, E. O. (1984) *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts