



# More than just trees

*What is a forest to most people – simply a nice place to walk the dog? Photographer and conservationist Peter Cairns asks whether traditional conservation messages are failing, and how the value of forests can be better communicated.*

**D**uring a recent presentation to an audience of conservation scientists, I introduced a chap called Steve. Steve is a plumber from Dundee; his wife is a nurse and their teenage children do what teenage children do. Steve is busy at work and he's constantly trying to juggle this with the demands of his family. His only respite is Saturday night in front of the TV with a take-away.

I asked the audience whether it's likely that Steve understood the terms 'ecosystem services' or 'ecological connectivity', two pieces of jargon that are presently doing the rounds. What about trophic cascades or biological corridors? And even if he does understand, is he really that interested in them, given all his other priorities? Steve is fictitious of course, and I'm not suggesting that every plumber in Scotland is nature-averse, but he's nevertheless representative of the values of modern society, a society that the patronising finger-wagging of traditional conservation-speak has failed to connect with.

For most people, forests are at best something nice to look at, somewhere to walk their dog, a refuge from the hurly-burly of daily life. Some might recognise their role in combating climate change. But for many, forests are irrelevant to daily life, and in some cases are perceived as dark and dangerous and as an obstacle to the classic Scottish view.

These may be sweeping generalisations, but the fact remains that for a significant proportion of society, forests (never mind less

attractive habitats such as peat bogs) are low priority. But don't take my word for it: 42% of UK respondents in a recent Gallup poll had never heard of the word biodiversity. Only 27% knew what it meant.

Now, either I'm missing something, or these are alarming statistics. So, is it time to reinvent how we communicate important conservation messages? Is it time to speak to Steve and his family in a language they can relate to? Is it time to avoid the temptation to burden people with technical persuasion, and to exploit their broader motivations? Is it time, in fact, to accept that most people relate to nature on an emotional level, rather than from a scientific perspective?

Conservation communication needs a fresh approach. It needs to reach beyond scientific peer groups, beyond the middle-class and the middle-aged. It needs to entertain as well as engage; above all, it needs to be relevant. Of course, as a professional nature photographer I have a vested interest in selling images. But as a conservationist, I want those images to have impact; to touch people on an emotional level; to influence their values. Over recent decades, visual imagery has played a major role in shifting societal mindsets. Who cared about climate change before Al Gore, and before the News at Ten started broadcasting images of melting glaciers?

Visual media is increasingly influential in dictating consumer patterns and social perspectives. And



conservation needs to better invest in this valuable tool. It's not about dumbing down; it's about recognising that different audiences need different approaches based on different values.

## So, what is a forest?

It's a Mars bar for birds  
It's a Holiday Inn for squirrels  
It's a medical centre  
It's a playground  
It's a power station  
It's a supermarket  
It's a tourist attraction  
It's a stress reducer  
It's a school classroom.

A forest is many things, but if we want to sell its value to a mainstream audience, it has to be relevant to that audience. It has to mean something. There has to be a benefit. It is virtually impossible to ask someone to care about something about which they have no knowledge, with which they have no connection and in which they see no relevance.

Conservation science is ultimately the engine of policy, but people's attitudes, perceptions and yes, even emotions, are the things that drive change. A forest is much more than just trees – as a society we just don't know it yet!

*Peter Cairns is a professional nature photographer and co-author of *Caledonia*, the book from which these images are taken. He is also coordinator of 2020VISION, a multimedia project that communicates the vital link between human wellbeing and restored natural systems. [www.northshots.com](http://www.northshots.com) and [www.2020V.org](http://www.2020V.org)*

Opposite, clockwise from top: The pine marten is bouncing back from persecution; pine reflections, Loch Mallachie, Cairngorms National Park; dawn over the pinewoods of Rothiemurchus. Above right: The iconic capercaillie. Photos: Peter Cairns.