

How do we spread word about the biodiversity crisis? Experts weigh in.

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By Margaret Sessa-Hawkins

How do we raise awareness about the biodiversity crisis facing the world?

This was the problem put to six experts (including Sir David Attenborough) at a panel held at BirdLife's Cambridge office, the [Cambridge Conservation Initiative](#), on 12 April. It's a tough one. Right now, species are going extinct at a rate up to 1,000 times the natural level, yet few people even know about the issue. With the 2020 Convention on Biological Diversity in Beijing looming on the horizon, we need to make sure that the biodiversity crisis causes as big a splash as the Paris Climate Agreement did in 2016.

The expert panel featured BirdLife CEO **Patricia Zurita**; **Alice Jay**, campaigns director of [Avaaz](#), a website that promotes global activism; **Prudence Gallega** of the Cameroon Ministry of Environment; **Helen Crowley**, head of sustainable development for [Kering](#), a luxury goods company that owns brands including Gucci, Balenciaga and Alexander McQueen; and **Dr. Cristiana Paşca Palmer**, Executive Secretary of the [UN Convention on Biological Diversity](#). Each offered a valuable perspective from their different standpoint, providing five important lessons to take away:

Harness existing emotion

One of the earliest points to emerge in the talk was a general consensus that people care

deeply about the environment. Alice Jay pointed out that in public opinion polls conducted in France, Canada and the United Kingdom, more than 80 percent of respondents wanted their governments to do more for conservation, and nearly 80 percent felt that half the earth should be set aside for conservation. On a similar theme, but taking a slightly different tack, Patricia Zurita said she agreed with Sir David Attenborough when he said that all children are awed by nature, and that we need to harness that wonder.

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Help people to understand the urgency of the situation

Many of the panellists stressed the need to convey to the public both the benefit and need for conserving biodiversity. Alice Jay pointed out that one thing that people need to clearly understand is how urgent the situation is: that we could potentially crossing an ecological tipping point that threatens the entire planet. Dr. Cristiana Palmer agreed, saying that intrinsically, people are saddened when they hear about an endangered animal being killed, but they don't understand that what is going on in fact threatens our very existence. Conservationists need to help people make that connection.

Conservation isn't in opposition to economic growth

In many ways, conservation is often painted as the antithesis of economic growth. The panellists, however, pointed out that it didn't need to be. In her keynote address, Dr. Cristiana Palmer said that we need to engage leaders of the business community in the issue of biodiversity, and not just around corporate social responsibility. She that there is a lot of data indicating that preserving biodiversity is good for business, and we need to convey that message.

Helen Crowley, as head of sustainable development for Kering, echoed this sentiment. She explained that the company has developed a way to measure the environmental profit and loss that occurs with each product. In this way they can figure out how each part of their business affects conservation, and develop policies around it.

|"UK emissions are going down year after year, yet the economy is not dropping"

Prudence Gallega pointed out that when talking to ministers in Cameroon, the Ministry of the Environment has learned that just speaking about conservation doesn't work, they have to speak about development and economics as well. She said that instead of going to the agriculture sector and telling them not to farm, it would be better to tell them to "adopt farming methods and options that would make sure [they] farm for a longer time and generate benefits."

Alice Jay mentioned that in the messaging around climate change there was a fear that if emissions were reduced it would negatively impact the economy, but in fact in the UK emissions are going down year after year and the economy is not dropping, which proves that conservation and economic development can happen hand-in-hand.

We need to make sure everyone's represented in the conversation

One of the biggest splashes the panel made was not in anything they said, but in who they were. All members of the panel were women, and they represented a diverse range of ethnicities and nationalities. When Patricia Zurita pointed out how wonderful it was to be on an all-female panel, the audience exploded with applause. This idea that the conservation community needs to both listen to and elevate voices that aren't typically heard was echoed in the conversation itself.



From L to R: Dr. Cristiana Paşca Palmer, Alice Jay, Patricia Zurita, Prudence Gallega, Helen Crowley and moderator Richard Black © Cambridge Conservation Initiative

Prudence Gallega's point on this subject was especially poignant. In speaking of the importance of involving local communities in conservation, she related a story where communities in Cameroon were initially moved out of a conservation area, and the area subsequently became a conservation failure. She pointed out that new approaches, where the communities are involved in establishing and helping to manage conservation areas, help reduce illegal wildlife trading.

There is hope

The final speaker of the night was Sir. David Attenborough. In his address he stated that although conservation can occasionally be a depressing field to work in, he still sees hope. He closed his speech by saying that while there are always problems, and solutions never seem simple, "while there are people like you putting your heads together, people like you getting

together and spending time together, it does seem to me, as an onlooker, that the world has a cause for optimism and cause for gratitude.”

*You can watch a livestream of the event below and [read Sir David Attenborough's remarks here](#). Join the conversation using **#OurNatureOurFuture***