Earth Optimism—recapturing the positive

Nancy Knowlton

On Earth Day weekend 2017, Earth Optimism summits and related events around the world celebrated conservation success stories. In Washington, DC, over 300 presentations featured progress in protecting species and spaces, reducing pollution, restoring habitats, harvesting wisely, and tackling climate change (EarthOptimism, 2018). Participants included not only conservation scientists, but also policy makers, students, artists, engineers, inventors, and representatives of business, media and philanthropy.

The successes described during the summits represented a fraction of positive developments around the world, and these continue to accumulate. Articles in this issue of *Oryx*, for example, point to progress in ameliorating negative human–wildlife interactions (Jamwal et al., 2019; Pozo et al., 2019; Scheijen et al., 2019), valuing protected areas (Davenport et al., 2019; Deacon & Tutchings, 2019; Lham et al., 2019), and increasing the potential for biodiversity and human well-being to improve hand-in-hand (Benedicto Royuela et al., 2019; Sardeshpande & MacMillan, 2019).

A consistent theme in these—and many other—reports is the importance of engaging local communities (Kujirakwinja et al., 2019; Olendo et al., 2019; Superina et al., 2019). This bottom-up aspect of conservation successes means that by definition many are small in scale—each a drop in the bucket compared to the overall scope of the challenges we face. This mismatch in scale has led some to conclude that talking about such small successes is counterproductive because it could result in a decreased sense of the urgency of conservation amongst the general public and policy makers, or in the arming of those who oppose conservation outright with arguments that we need do no more. I received one e-mail suggesting that 'Scientists who engage in optimism events should be ashamed of themselves'.

Yet no one involved in the Earth Optimism and related movements argues that we are anywhere close to achieving what is needed to return human activities to sustainable levels. Nor are we suggesting that conservation failures or concerns go unexamined (plus there seems to be little risk of this, as reports of ongoing and impending disasters continue to pour in; e.g. Ripple et al. 2017). Rather, we are saying that we need more clearly documented and narrated stories of conservation success and better ways of finding these exemplars, which are often hard to track down.

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This is a genuine problem. I have found that almost anyone can rattle off a long list of environmental problems, but even conservation professionals are often remarkably unaware of what has been achieved, particularly in areas outside their expertise. We all need to know about what is working, as conservation successes such as those documented in this issue of *Oryx* provide an antidote to despair and its partner, apathy, and are a source of inspiration and information for those wishing to replicate or expand the scale of success.

In this issue, for example, I gained much from Martin & Richardson's (2019) report of the complete eradication of rats and mice from South Georgia, one of the most important seabird nesting islands globally. The article provides valuable details on how this extraordinary success was achieved: the planning and funding required, how risks were minimized and effectiveness was monitored, and the need for continued vigilance. Even if South Georgia is just one island, and removing invasive rodents is just one conservation challenge, the fact that it was done on a surprisingly large scale by a small conservation organization is extremely encouraging, and the lessons learned will facilitate comparable efforts elsewhere, including in the tropics where removing rats could even benefit coral reefs (Graham et al., 2018).

Over the last decade we have made inroads in professional and public awareness that all is not lost. When we organized the first Beyond the Obituaries symposium on ocean conservation successes in 2009 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, one of my colleagues told me there weren't enough successes even to fill a day-long programme. Less than 5 years after the launch of #OceanOptimism by 14 of us in 2014, the tag has been used by over 40,000 Twitter accounts. In addition to a growing number of professional articles that analyse the elements of success (e.g. Cinner et al., 2016; Pringle, 2017), several books have featured this theme (e.g. Balmford, 2012; Bloomberg & Pope, 2017).

Nevertheless, we are in a race against time across all environmental fronts, and I often feel that the efforts to publicize environmental successes are themselves too small in scale. Whenever I tell an audience about the partial recovery of sea turtles (Mazaris et al., 2017) or of Chesapeake Bay (Lefcheck et al., 2018), it is gratifying to know that 50–200 more people are now aware of these achievements. But if our goal is to reach one billion people with this message—as it should be—our efforts are falling far short. Fortunately, the media now seems more receptive to telling the story of

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environmental successes (Johns & Jacquet, 2018), and there is a growing number of initiatives shining a spotlight on solutions and good news (e.g. the New York Times' The Week in Good News, David Byrne's Reasons to Be Cheerful project, and the Solutions Journalism Network).

Even so, when it comes to changing the conservation conversation, the whole remains less than the sum of its parts, perhaps because of the stickiness of bad news (Ledgerwood & Boydstun, 2014). What is needed is a truly global Earth Optimism Alliance, underpinned by a curated and compelling bank of conservation success stories that anyone can share, and a media—and social media—campaign that can spread them beyond the conservation choir. Flagging successes with #EarthOptimism is just a start; we all need to be able to execute targeted searches for cases of success by geography, problem type, species and a host of other attributes, and uncover not only the facts but also the stories of how progress was made (Olson, 2015).

Planning for such an alliance and story bank is ongoing, stimulated by the success of the 2017 events and the upcoming 50th anniversary of Earth Day in 2020. As Andrew Revkin reminded me, the first Earth Day may have been stimulated by an environmental catastrophe, but the event itself was more joyful than angry. In this age of environmental despair (Kolbert, 2018), we need to work harder to recapture the positive.

The Editorial and the *Oryx* articles cited herein are freely available as a virtual issue of the journal at cambridge.org/core/journals/oryx/virtual-issues.

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