



Keynote Speech for The Future of our Planet conference Delivered by Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado

A Bird's Eye View—Some Thoughts on Nature Conservation

Ladies and gentlemen, partners and friends of BirdLife,

I must begin by saying that I join you all and the people of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, and, indeed, throughout the world, in mourning the passing of HM Queen Elizabeth II and in celebrating her life and reign.

It was my intention to be with the BirdLife partnership in person for the entire centennial World Congress, but, it seemed inappropriate for a member of our family to be arriving on British soil at such a time. Instead, please allow me to welcome you all, albeit remotely, to our London Conference The Future of our Planet, and to possibly 'set the scene' by sharing with you some personal thoughts regarding nature conservation.

When I was a child, I put together many collections—butterflies, beetles, shells, rocks, plants, and feathers, some of which I still have. They bear witness to the fact that my interest in the natural world started from a very young age, and led to my enjoyment of being on the periphery of scientific research—I stress 'periphery', as I remain unconvinced that I could have ever stood the rigours of real research.

But what I am convinced about is that exposure to nature at an early age is absolutely crucial to the development of an appreciation of it in later life.

Indeed, primary schools everywhere would do well to incorporate nature studies into their curricula.

Serving as the Honorary President of BirdLife International since 2004 has enabled me to listen to, and occasionally engage in, scientific discussions relating to birds and conservation.

It has also given me a legitimate excuse to go birdwatching, and to indulge in another hobby—photography.

For the first few years after I became Honorary President, I used to give talks using images taken by professional cameramen.

Now, I try to use my own.

A photo image captures a moment in time. It is only the person who has captured that image who knows the story of what was happening off-frame.

When I look through a folder of photos, I find myself able to recall details of the habitat, the birds nesting nearby, the insects and vegetation in the area, and so on, and it unfolds as if it were a film.

I take note of the fact that individual birds, like people, have different characters, some being highly-strung and nervous, some just watchful, whilst others are laid-back or even quite bold. I try to judge what level of disturbance or intrusion a bird finds acceptable, and act accordingly, so as not to affect it in a negative way.

Each foray I make into the woods, all the hours that I spend in sub-zero conditions in a snowbound landscape, or hiding in the undergrowth (with friendly mosquitoes for the ‘authentic experience’), have hidden within them the jewel of a moment when the birds in my viewfinder seem to accept me.

And when the bird accepts me, I feel a wonderful bond with nature.

And this leads me to the phrase A Bird’s Eye View.

We are taught from a young age that it is important to see things from another person’s point of view.

Simply watching birds, seeing what they do and how they function, is a great learning experience, indeed, one of the most humbling moments in life.

Nowadays, as I look through my binoculars or my camera lens, I am well aware that I am an intruder, and that if I want a good photo, it means

either building up a relationship (where they accept me as a part of the scenery) or agreeing to position myself so that they no longer mind. In other words, 'I am now looking at me through the eyes of the bird'.

It seems to me that people who have learnt to do this with any lifeform, be it an eagle, an elephant, a spider or an orchid, will, by definition, be more in harmony with nature as a whole.

The time spent in the field away from the artificial comforts of life (although I should point out that I enjoy those too!), sharpens the senses. It makes you pay attention to other life; feel for it, love it, and want to support it and, this, I am sure, should be at the core of all conservation. By this means we all become partners with nature.

When I watch birds go about their daily lives, and see how they fit into their environments with insects, plants and other living creatures, I see that the natural world is in a rich and complex harmony, and it is only the human species that is ruining the balance, the pattern and the flow.

Conservation is not about US and THEM, it is just US.

The human species is a part of an intricate web that holds the life of this planet together. We are in an incredibly dangerous phase of human history, and the decisions and actions we take now are of vital importance to our own survival as well as to the entire future of our planet.

Indeed, The Future of our Planet is the overall theme of this conference. It is extraordinary to think that a meeting ostensibly about bird conservation should have to take such a portentous title.

But it is completely right to adopt this wide approach, this 'bird's eye view', the view from a height, as if seen by a bird circling in flight overhead.

I believe that an ability to see things from a distance, to make decisions based on this bird's eye view, is imperative in conservation work.

The scientific data accumulated and analysed by BirdLife, available and used by governments and NGOs the world over, allows us to assess the most effective ways to proceed.

This science is BirdLife's strength, allowing us to present the whole picture.

The meeting today will offer the speakers and panellists ample room for discussion. And I am told that you will be covering critical conservation challenges and opportunities for the coming decade.

But I ask you all not to only focus on the details, the economic benefits, the business investment, etc., but also to step back and see the world as would a soaring eagle.

Decide first what we must be done, then determine how best to do it.

It's Time is the BirdLife centennial slogan.

It's Time to step back, decide on the world that we want, and draw up a plan, but make sure that it is truly science-based. Even so, we also have to be flexible—I learnt that from birds, too—because we have come too far down a dangerous path, and our journey back to safety will require careful monitoring and manoeuvring.

The future of our planet rests with us.