

The Heart of A Rocha

1. History

Three stages can be seen to have brought us to this point in May 2005

1.1 The initial project. Founded in 1983 A Rocha began as an attempt to give local expression to a dual conviction – that creation care was a normal part of Christian discipleship, and that environmental work inevitably had a basis in values and beliefs. The choice of the Portuguese context allowed us to be cross-cultural and strategic as we responded to environmental and evangelistic needs.

1.2 The next generation of projects began in 1995 as A Rocha began to support initiatives in Lebanon, then Kenya, France and the UK. We began to see the first diversity of expression of the A Rocha commitments which were defined by a representative workshop in 1994 as Christian, Conservation, Community, Cross-cultural and Campaigning. The latter commitment was later re-stated as Cooperation. The first ARI team was formed as Rachel Simonson joined us to open the Cambridge office in UK.

1.3 A third wave of national organisations joined under the *Guidelines for New A Rocha Initiatives* – typically they were nationally led and even more diverse. By 2004 they numbered 15 in total. The original projects had grown in scope and were beginning to develop national structures to support and amplify the local projects. The ARI team grew to ten people working in five countries.

2. A Rocha now:

What are the distinctives at the heart of the A Rocha family?

2.1 Worship

Firstly, our work is above every other consideration, a response to God's own concerns revealed in Christ and in scripture. However great the needs, and however ordinary the projects we undertake, all we do is by its very nature **practical worship**. That gives us our direction in the different field projects (study, conservation, then education) which are the ground of A Rocha's visible identity, and that recognition also sets our local and wider priorities. It also establishes the character of our work as both grateful and hopeful, and defines our methods which always reflect a conviction that we are undertaking work to which we are called by Jesus. So we endeavour to carry it out as a created and believing community which is inevitably involved and engaged with the whole created world.

2.1 International Projects

Secondly, our niche as an organisation among many other Christian environmental organisations is that we put God's call to care for creation, our love for Jesus the Creator, and our belief in the Holy Spirit who is the agent of creation, **into practice** in multiple local contexts world-wide. We do of course want to explain and amplify the significance (*literally its sign-bearing or (small s)- sacramental character*) of our work to both Christian and other audiences, and particularly those involved in the conservation world, but the explanations are born out of work with creation and out of convictions lived.

2.3 Credible advocacy

Finally this incarnational identity is what gives us our credibility in the conservation world where we are alongside others in sharing objectives that are frequently held in common. Hard won experience in putting our commitments into practice in the different local contexts also gives us our authority in the Christian world. So we don't talk so much about success or failure, but about a journey, of lessons learned, and of challenges ahead. We are following the living God as we pioneer a series of new approaches. The context continues to be the widespread indifference or incomprehension of the Christian community, and the unfamiliarity of the conservation world with the wide range of relationships and conceptual connections we believe are vital to effective action.

3 A Rocha's future direction:

What new possibilities can emerge from a biblical approach?

3.1 Wide relationships

It is often asked what is distinctive about the Christian approach to conservation in general and the A Rocha approach in particular. Beyond the three elements above we might say that we recognise a wider range of relevant relationships to the issue of nature conservation than most.

Firstly we recognise the fundamental influence of the broken relationship between people and their Creator – for A Rocha this is the principal ecological connection that has been broken.

Secondly, we have always held what has become a growing conviction within the environmental community itself: to use the words of Achim Steiner, former Director General of IUCN now Director of UNEP, “90% of conservation work is with people.” As A Rocha has always believed that to be true, we find ourselves now with some lessons to share from a well-established series of relevant initiatives. Among them could be the value of working long-term in places such as the Alvor estuary, Aammig marsh or Southall, where community attitudes are vital to the success of the conservation effort. The role of field study centres in developing long term leadership prospects is also an important emphasis of our work for similar reasons.

Thirdly we are a natural mediator or *interlocuteur* with a vital constituency for nature conservation, the world wide Christian community. A Rocha is able to make the case for conservation in terms that are truly persuasive for that community because we understand that for the Christian community the truly fundamental reasoning is primarily theological, not pragmatic, and we share those core commitments. This has relevance both in the wealthier world where our analysis is that the Christian community has allowed materialism and individualism to draw it from the truly ecological nature of biblical discipleship, and in the poorer world where despite the concentration of biodiversity dualistic western models for church life have been adopted and have largely marginalised an appropriate response to the richness of creation which is now suffering widespread destruction.

3.2 Wide partnerships

A Rocha recognises a **wider range of relevant partnerships**. We are distinctive within the evangelical community for our emphasis and starting point from understanding Jesus as the Creator. That enables us comfortably to recognise the possibilities for close partnerships with many others who share our created identity and conservation aims, even if not our Christian commitment. Furthermore, building on the wider relevance above, those partnerships can be very broad. So in Lebanon it is entirely appropriate to assist the conservation of the Aammiq wetland through running an arts project with village women from surrounding communities, and in Kenya to work to set up a sustainable income flow for village children's school fees.

3.2 Transformation

Finally we recognise a wider definition of success. This is not an escape clause, but the reality is that the outputs of conservation projects can take many years to assess, and as they often need to involve lasting change in people, the consequences of good work can be hidden for a long time. While recognising the need for tangible and measurable outputs, our motivation as described above means that a faithful response to doing things God's way will be its own satisfaction even if it isn't possible every time to achieve the aims of a defined project. That allows us to continue for the longer term in situations that could be too discouraging for more focussed and results-driven approaches. It also tends to prejudice A Rocha in favour of longer term commitments as the change we are seeking in both places and human communities is profound and sustainable. We seek to be a transformational organisation.

4 The agreed future vision

Who we are drives what we do, so here may be some ways ahead – many of these are live topics for discussion in the A Rocha family.

4.1 An international movement established nationally

As we consider the way ahead we have agreed that there are no necessary contradictions between taking a natural place among other conservation groups and retaining a clear Christian identity. To both Christian and other audiences we seek to bring a coherent demonstration of the Lordship of Christ as seen in the work of nature conservation (creation care), the life of the organisation (a part of the body of Christ) and the advocacy of the cause (teaching and evangelism.).

Our recognition that people's transformed lives in Christ is the starting point of hope for means we value any opportunities for witness very highly. Within that, local and national priorities will help A Rocha National Organisations define their programmes. That national definition will of course take into account both the inevitable and welcome relationship to the rest of the world, and the necessarily international character of nature conservation. Ecology and theology both insist on our membership of one world – seen by Christians as created whole, but at the least by all as an ecological entity.

4.2 A cross-cultural reality.

Faced with the varying emergent realities of globalisation and exclusion, A Rocha wishes to celebrate its cross-cultural history and identity, and to make our world wide family a celebrated reality. So we will endeavour to organise our

decision making in such a way as to create genuine exchange of perspective, and the inclusion of the whole perspectives that the Christian community world wide can bring. This will lead to an organisational model which we believe implies both thematic and regional coordination of the agreed vision and mission. Our emphasis on the value of community means that we expect this agreed vision to emerge from committed long-term relationships, which themselves enable very diverse people to work together with joy, despite major frustrations and misunderstandings at times!

4.3 Leadership

It follows from our belief that Christians have a true view of created reality, even if very partial, that we should have some success in achieving conservation goals. Alongside that we should expect to see the emergence of powerful and effective conceptual tools to aid the conservation movement, even if those employing them do not explicitly share our Christian convictions. Those concepts will do greater justice to the environmental challenges of our time for being posited on a world understood to be created for God's good reasons. We can see parallels in the medical world where the involvement of Christians dates back far longer, and where their ideas such as those seen in the hospice movement, or the widespread community health projects promoted in the poorer world through the churches, have gained general acceptance. Essential to the task of offering some more widespread leadership is the requirement to find a common language or culture for our own expression that allows others to take ownership of the approaches we are adopting without being required to belong to a Christian sub-culture.