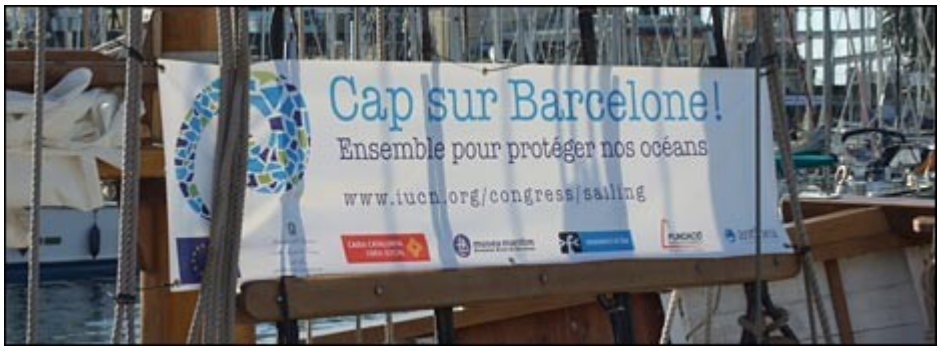
Wildlife conservation: Congress diary



More than 8,000 conservationists and policy makers are in Barcelona, Spain, for the IUCN World Conservation Congress.

Held once every four years, the gathering is viewed as a landmark event where future conservation strategies are developed.

In his daily diary, environment correspondent Richard Black reports on the topics beings discussed in the conference halls, and visits some of the fringe events.

SATURDAY 11 OCTOBER - FIVE TO SAVE

"It has not been a day for seeing the sun.

All day, delegates here, mainly IUCN members from governments or non-governmental organisations, have been debating and discussing the 125 motions that, in theory, shape the organisation's work for the next four years.

Many of them do not directly deal with species conservation. But some do; and I thought I'd share with you five of the species that are concerning members in various parts of the world, and that they hope could be helped by IUCN resolutions.

There are concerns in Japan for the future of the dugong (sea cow)

Japanese conservationists are concerned about the dugong, the sea cow - in particular, around Okinawa, where the Japanese authorities and those in charge of the island's big US military base are planning a new facility for US marines.

The conservation groups are asking IUCN members to approve a motion asking Japan and the US to conduct an environmental impact assessment for the development which allows for the option of not building it.

The dugong isn't about to go extinct. But many argue that the vaquita is; some believe it could happen within five years.

This extraordinary-looking porpoise is the world's smallest cetacean, and probably the one that exists in the smallest numbers. About 150 remain.

Mexico's environment ministry has developed a plan to eliminate the fishing that is driving the porpoise's demise through entanglement in nets. But, say conservation groups, the fisheries ministry isn't buying into the scheme, and there is no effort to stop illegal fishing.

They want all parts of the Mexican government to pull behind vaquita conservation - and they want the US, as the state that imports most of the shrimps from the fishery that's causing the problems, to help out.

The vaquita's elusive nature has not saved it from being caught in nets

Numbers of the Iberian lynx are only marginally higher than those of the vaquita.

The problem is the one that threatens more species than any other; habitat loss, as wild animals give ground to man.

In this case, the plaintiffs are simply asking Spain and Portugal to give greater priority to the lynx's preservation - which presumably means restricting the intensification of agriculture, urban development and road building.

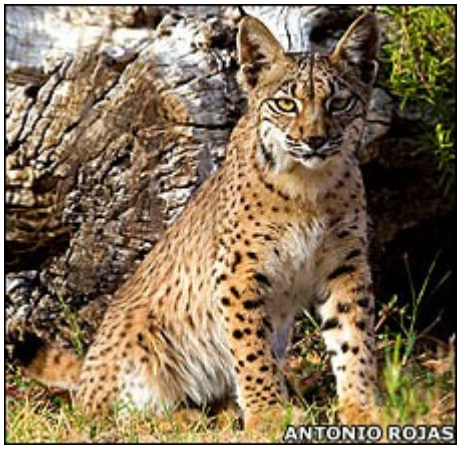
If you ask me, there are few more special creatures on the planet than the leatherback turtle, a two-metre soft-shelled beast that always seems to go at its own pace and no faster.

Its trek to extinction isn't so leisurely, though. It's estimated that the Pacific has lost 95% of its population to overfishing and by-catch, and could vanish within five to 30 years.

So a bit more protection in this region, please, is what is asked for here. That would mean closing fisheries along the leatherback's migration route, and the mandatory use of turtle-friendly fishing gear.

Finally in my list of five is the Mediterranean monk seal, said to be one of the 10 most endangered animals in the world.

About 1,000 remain, in two geographically-isolated populations.



The Iberian lynx is endangered by habitat loss

They used to live near Barcelona, and of course the conservation groups moving this motion are smart enough to mention it - as though we can gaze over the harbour at the Mediterranean blue and imagine the seals' heads bobbing above the wavelets.

What can be done? Coastal development of many types seems to compromise the seal.

And as coastal development along Europe's favourite holiday coastlines is hardly likely to stop, more marine protected areas are the favoured outcome.

IUCN motions don't make governments do things. But the organisation talks regularly and directly to governments, and carries more weight in governments than NGOs.

If these motions go through, it will put a little more momentum into schemes to keep these species in existence. ”

FRIDAY 10 OCTOBER - BROAD GREEN CHURCH

“What do you need to know if you want to save the world?

The question sprang to mind last week during my beaked whale research trip when one of the marine biologists I met told me that she'd have been much better off studying maths or statistics or computing rather than marine biology.

So this week, among so many of the world's leading lights in conservation, I've been keeping an eye open for what the well-developed environmentalist is mainlining.

Indigenous leaders in Barcelona. Environmentalism is a rich ecosystem

Once all this was the preserve of naturalists who roamed the planet describing species. Charles Darwin spent years on a definitive study of barnacles.

Then, ecologists worked out the dynamics of natural systems, the links between the various species and the various environmental factors, and what keeps what alive.

Now, the spores of conservation have settled everywhere.

Saving the planet now needs lawyers, economists, engineers, chemists, politicians, as well as those steeped in the traditional disciplines.

In the main conference hall, candidates for the various important voluntary posts within the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) - head of the regional groups, head of the various commissions (on species survival, environmental law, and the like), president - have been giving their election speeches.

I checked out a few of the biographies.

So Mahfuz Ullah, a Bangladeshi standing for the post of South and East Asian head, has a background in physics and mass communication and journalism, while Hiroharo Koika is a Japanese diplomat who served in nine embassies around the world.

Spencer Thomas was director of finance for Grenada.

Perhaps Carlos Manuel Rodriguez, one of the three presidential candidates, caught the point most effectively, describing himself as "lawyer by formation, politician by decision, conservationist by heart".

The great fields of the green world now contain lawyers, to draft environmental treaties and laws and make sure people obey them. Economists calculate the

financial costs of nature loss and the benefits of sustainable businesses.

Engineers work out how to re-invigorate dying watercourses. Communications chiefs look for new ways of getting the word out. Hunters run sustainable trophy-hunting schemes that raise money for conservation.

Gender specialists engage women in conservation in societies where they may not have a lot of power. Entrepreneurs leverage funds - a term you would never hear from an ecologist - for green technologies.

It's a rich ecosystem.

And it's virtually an open door. Just make sure you have a skill to bring, plus the commitment to work long hours for far less money than you could earn elsewhere, and the environmental family will find a home for you somewhere.

But if all you can do is wave your bangle-bedecked arms around and complain about how bad everything is, there's little room now at the top table. Saving the world is a job for professionals. ”

THURSDAY 09 OCTOBER - IRON BOUND

“Could "polluting" the marine environment restrain rising temperatures and rising carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere?

According to Margaret Leinen, chief scientist of the company Climos, it could; and the magic pollutant is iron filings.

Placed in the oceans, the theory goes that they will stimulate the growth of phytoplankton, tiny marine plants, which will then photosynthesise more CO2 out of the atmosphere and down into the water column.

The idea has been around for a long time and studies date back at least a decade, without having given us a definitive answer to whether it will work.

The topic of "ocean seeding" has been making waves among delegates

At a seminar here on ocean geoengineering, as the approach is known, Ms Leinen told us of her company's plans to seed trial sites of ocean hundreds of kilometres across, and - under the auspices of independent scientists - conduct studies that would satisfy academics, regulators and investors.

Scientifically, the issue is not whether the mechanism works - it does - but what else happens afterwards.

How deep will the carbon be carried, through physical or biological paths? How long will it stay stored? Will the plants' decay produce methane or nitrous oxide, more potent greenhouse gases than CO2?

Investors will want to know simply whether it can turn a profit - which hangs on whether it is shown to work, and so whether it qualifies for carbon credits.

Greenpeace scientist David Santillo expressed the concerns of many.

When money is involved, how can we guarantee independent science? Won't this be a distraction for investors who might otherwise fund renewable energy projects? Will there be any negative impacts on ocean life?

Hold back the geo-engineering tide

These are important concerns. But the reality is that we are already producing huge changes in the oceans.

We are warming them, diminishing the water's natural alkalinity, fishing huge swathes of biological life out of them, creating lifeless zones with agricultural runoff, changing the dynamics of ice cover and freshwater input.

Frankly, I would like to know whether iron seeding works, and I would like to know quite soon, please.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) last year suggested carbon emissions ought to be constrained within a decade and a half, and there is little sign in the real world that it is happening.

If Ms Leiden and other entrepreneurs can get hold of investors' money, if the science is rigorous and the regulators satisfied, then I would vote for finding out whether it works once and for all.

Forward motions

There is a distinct change of pace now at the congress as we move from what's known as the forum into the council sessions.

The forum has been about ideas and networking and discussions and projects. But many delegates are complaining it's been too intense, with so many events held that even four days of frantically rushing from seminar to roundtable to reception have not been enough to catch a fraction of the action.

The focus now switches to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) itself; what it should do for the four years until the next congress, what it thinks is good and bad in the world, how it should work.

This year sees 125 motions under debate. Most are uncontroversial, such as asking IUCN to make young people aware of environmental issues or to write to member governments urging greater action on climate change.

But there are several juicier morsels to savour. Should there be a global moratorium on biofuel development and on financial incentives to develop them? Is there any science behind the argument that culling whales could rebuild fish stocks? Is the organisation compromising its integrity through a close relationship with the Shell oil company?

These motions are not binding on anyone but IUCN itself, so in that sense they are toothless. But that does not mean they are without influence.

Much of the world's now intricate web of environmental regulations began life

within IUCN.

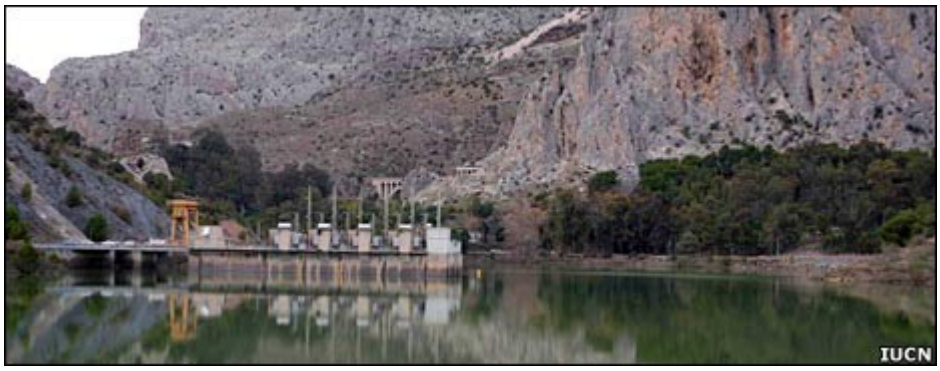
As a global organisation which numbers most governments as members, its resolutions indicate to the watching world, including UN institutions, the balance of thought across the breadth of the environmental community, from governments to campaign groups to scientific researchers to business groups.

So a call for a biofuels moratorium, for example, would be widely cited as proof that the business is running too far too fast for the world's ecological health.

Not surprisingly, governments and interest groups liable to receive an IUCN slap in the face are lobbying hard to water down the wording.

We shall see by next Tuesday who emerges with a red weal, and who with a sunshine smile. ”

WEDNESDAY 08 OCTOBER - CHANGING TIDE



Can building more dams help protect water supplies in the future?

“These days, you can barely find a single campaign group that doesn't espouse the concept of climate adaptation.

Precisely what it means, though, is, like the concept of jazz, open to interpretation.

Mark Smith had few doubts. "Climate change adaptation is water adaptation," he said during a workshop on the links between climate change and water - and as head of IUCN's water programme, he should probably know.

The more I think about it, the more I conclude he is right.

There is barely a region in the world that will not see its supply of water change, if climate projections prove even partially correct.

The models suggest that broadly speaking, the much-quoted Biblical saying "To him that hath shall be given, and to him that hath not shall be taken away" could have been dealing with water availability under climate change.

So, regions that are already wet such as Scotland are likely to become even wetter; arid areas including much of sub-Saharan Africa will more likely become even drier.

It holds temporally too, with inundations forecast to become - well, more Biblical, to give one more spin

Fish make up a key part of many communities' diets

to an already overused journalistic cliché - with longer dry spells in between.

Then there's sea level rise, which even if it stays obediently at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's lower estimate of 28cm over the century - and no-one in the field seriously believes it will - would cause serious problems in many regions.

The big one, for me, is glacier melt in mountain ranges.

Glaciers are basically huge reservoirs, storing snow as it falls and releasing water as the weather warms up.

Add up the number of people who get their drinking water from mountain glaciers - in the Himalayas, the Andes, the Rockies, the Alps - and I reckon you are on your way to two billion.

So what can be done? What does climate adaptation mean in a context like this? And who is going to pay?

Mark Smith agreed with Darren Saywell from the International Water Association that only a combination of the things that engineers habitually do, such as building dams, and things that they don't habitually do, such as protecting wetlands and forests, could do the trick.

If indeed anything can.

Estimates of how much it will cost to "climate-proof" the developing world run from $10bn to more than $50bn per year.

Currently we are seeing a trickle, rather than a torrent. ”

TUESDAY 07 OCTOBER - CARBON AND JARGON

“The World Conservation Congress can be a confusing place.

Some people are here with both their IUCN SSC and ASG hats on.

Others are seeking to mainstream stakeholder buy-in for cross-sectoral biodiversity financing.

In some rooms you can perch at the interface between ZERI and the WBCSD.

The conference hall is choked by confusing linguistic emissions

So it was refreshing - no, it was a paradigm-breaking uplift scenario - to see, on today's agenda, a session on how to break through the jargon barrier that keeps many of the issues discussed here sealed within the small circle of people who speak the same language.

The Red List is simple to communicate. I can do it in two words - "we're ¿.d" - in the modern spirit of interactivity, you can choose which word to use as the second.

But most sustainability-speak is far too jargon-laden to translate to the world outside these walls, however important the ideas themselves. I think everyone here knows it, but no-one quite knows what to do about it.

The session didn't quite live up to its title. Rather than clearing up the language, speakers chose to look at methods of getting things across.

Somewhat inevitably, once the first speaker had promised us an exciting new way of communicating biodiversity loss and reached for her computer mouse, technical gremlins came out from their hiding hole and it ground to a halt.

The Google Earth on screen looked to be in no better condition than the real one.

Forest flaws

Back in the UK, environmental groups have been busy pressurising the government to meet its various targets on cutting carbon emissions by - well, by cutting carbon emissions, rather than by buying measures from overseas that result in equivalent carbon savings.

I had a different take on the issue today from Russ Mittermeier, president of Conservation International, a major US-based environment group.

The core of its work is in developing country ecosystems such as rainforests, attempting to preserve places where nature can work.

Russ wasn't so sure that making all the changes at home was such a good idea.

When preserving forests is generally believed to be the cheapest way of curbing climate change, and when it has so many side benefits for the fresh water supply, for animals and plants, and for people who live off the forest, why not prioritise spending money on that?

"The danger is, you end up with nice clean energy systems at home, but you've lost the rainforest," he said.

In the dash to biofuels, campaigners forgot about biodiversity in their haste to find a climate-friendly transport solution.

There are good counter-arguments to Russ Mittermeier. But his point should surely remind us again of the dangers of separating the world's various environmental ills, and trying to solve them separately. ”

MONDAY 06 OCTOBER - SEEING RED

“I am hearing voices in my head.

One is saying "we've heard it all before"; another is asking "so what?"

A third is contending "I don't believe it", while its less robust companion bewails "there's nothing we can do".

These voices are very familiar. They bug me every year when the Red List of Threatened Species comes out, and they were particularly prominent last year around the launch of the UN Environment Programme's Global Environmental Outlook (Geo-4).

They are all saying things that in their own way are

At least 25% of mammals, including the Caspian seal, are at risk

Mammals facing extinction threat

quite sensible.

We have heard it before – the message of environmental doom is very familiar to anyone who reads further than Heat magazine and the immigrant-petrified middle tabloids.

The implications of biodiversity loss are nebulous next to a train crash, disaster seems hard to credit when our cat is well fed and the car works, and there probably is nothing that we can do.

So does that mean it is not worth hearing that 25% or 30% or 12% or 45% of one or other group of species is heading down the path to extinction?

If I was about to be hit over the head with a large stick, I would prefer to know.

If a quarter of the world's mammals are heading for the mortuary drawer, again, I would like to know, even though I might not have a clue how to stop it.

In fact, working out how to stop it is probably the hardest task facing the human race. Nuclear disarmament looks like a doddle by comparison, because the root causes of biodiversity loss are simply what our successful species does to live, eat, develop and expand.

Demise of the devils and other mammals under threat

Open In pictures

Presumably we are going to keep doing those things. So presumably other life-forms, less adaptable, will feel a tighter and tighter squeeze.

Until something gives.

Buying the argument

"Haven't you always wanted the chance to live a sustainable lifestyle?

"Well now you can, thanks to the government's Sustain-a-bill!"

Unless I am mistaken, this is the future of advertising – at least, as foreseen by a panel of luminaries connected with the industry who held a post-tea break discussion at the congress.


Scruffy is the new green

"The advertising and marketing services industry has in part been responsible for encouraging overconsumption," Sir Martin Sorrell, CEO of the marketing services group WPP, admitted in a pre-recorded video message.

"But we've but come to a stage where overconsumption is not necessarily the best route to follow, so responsible consumption is becoming increasingly important."

He picked out events that he believed showed businesses were transforming their paradigms towards sustainability, such as Rupert Murdoch's espousal of carbon neutrality and Richard Branson's investment in low carbon energy.

Dean Sanders, a former Kraft executive who now runs the marketers GoodBrand

and Co, argued that advertisers weren't responsible for advertising environmentally damaging products – it was the fault of the companies that made those products.

And Cheryl Hicks from the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) suggested advertisers could help sell people on a sustainable, low carbon, environment friendly lifestyle, if governments would only engage them to do so.

So there we are. Advertising and marketing agencies, or at least this small sample, see themselves as part of the solution to the growth in consumption that lurks – together with population growth – behind every other environmental problem.

Buy a used Red List, anyone? ”

SUNDAY 05 OCTOBER – THEY COME IN WAVES

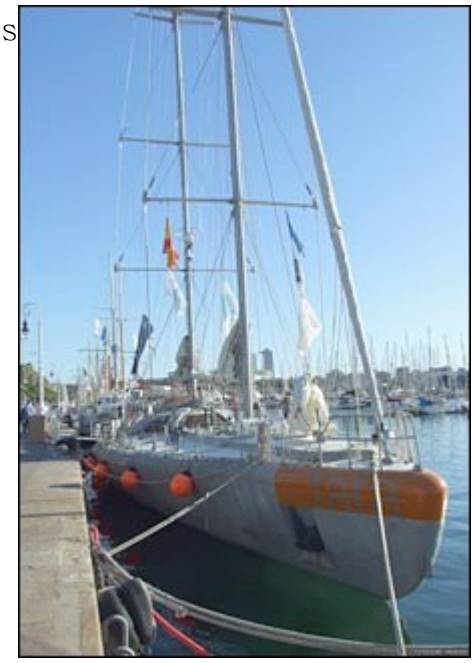
“Having delegates fly in to international conferences isn't very smart when the conference has a strong environmental theme and aviation is widely seen as Public Carbon Enemy number one.

Messages about saving the planet do not mix well with talk of air miles and upgrades – though the mix does happen.

OK, so most green groups offset these days – but that's not a flawless process.

Hence the decision by the World Conservation Congress organisers to invite delegates to sail.

Blown by the wind, navigating by the stars, perhaps doing a little sustainable fishing on the way – what better way to arrive ethically and climatically clean.



Plain sailing: delegates were invited to arrive by boat

So the bright Catalonian morning saw perhaps 15 boats, maybe a few more, moored up in the dock before making the short hop to the conference centre itself, where they would "deliver their message".

The message appeared to be that more awareness of issues like climate change, biodiversity loss and marine pollution would be a good thing – which probably 99% of people in the conference centre would agree with anyway.

Stormy waters

There were some interesting vessels on display, ranging from the mighty research ship MarViva (which I mistook for a tug at first sight), complete with submersibles and an engine that racked up decibels with the abandon of Led Zeppelin, down to ordinary yachts.

One that caught my eye was the Tara, a futuristic metal-hulled research boat which has just spent 16 months drifting in the Arctic. Yes, drifting – allowing itself to become enmeshed in ice when the ice built up – although director Etienne

Bourgois told me the ice turned out to be about half as thick as they were expecting.

Tara facts three and four: when ice converges on the boat it is lifted out of the water onto the floes, with no damage; and the crew spent 18 months seeing no-one but each other.

Then there was the Largyalo, a catamaran with giant canoes as the bits that go in the water (I believe they're still called hulls on a catamaran but don't quote me).

The inspiration was Polynesian, the boat's "constructor" Petra told me. It's sure to catch attention during its planned 1,000-day, 100-port trip raising awareness about climate change.

And that is really the point. The initiative was called Sailing to Barcelona, but delivering their message here will be as plain sailing as you can get - everyone wants to hear it.

The big world is a stormier place, where the worthiest messages get tossed around on angry seas, and sometimes wrecked before their time. ”