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"Scientists must change their mentality if they want to protect nature"



Paul Robbins, director of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is one of the world's leading experts in political ecology. He visited the UAB as a guest speaker at the ENTITLE programme organised by ICTA.

Paul Robbins has focused his work on the politics surrounding forestry and the wildlife conservation in Rajasthan, India, a place where some of the last wolves of the subcontinent continue to thrive. His recent research has brought him back to the United States and has focused on the abiding passion of Americans for their lawns and the complexities of elk management policy on the settled fringes of Yellowstone Park.

Considered to be one of the most renowned researchers in the emerging field of political ecology, Paul Robbins is the author of leading manuals such as *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* and the prized book *Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are*, on politics and the environment. He has also written several articles and scientific texts related to the conservation and management of the environment, social sciences and the humanities.

As director and professor of Nelson Institute, he has been a driver of several innovative initiatives in the field of education and has made the institute one of the world's leading centres in global climate change.

We humans like to think that the planet's natural parks and protected areas are wilderness areas, but the fact is that they are constantly affected by us, Paul Robbins states. Not even the most remote regions are safe from the hands of humans. Moreover, many wild species live in natural areas in which humans work, such as forests in which timber is cut or on coffee plantations in India. Therefore, some type of management is necessary in most cases to conserve nature and protect its biodiversity. "Humanisation" requires being responsible, even in wilderness areas, by regulating the management of its use and access to the areas.

You say that public policies mark the destiny of wild species.

Yes. In Southern India, where I have conducted research for several years, many of these species live on coffee, rubber and areca nut plantations, on land which belongs to farmers and where very poor peasants work; peasants who are now migrating to the cities. Without workers to keep up their production, farmers must change crops and make them more intensive, use more pesticides, and this determines the destiny of the species living on the land, such as birds and amphibians. That is why there is a need to improve the life of the peasant workers.

In what ways?

First of all, improving their access to education, to healthcare and to basic services such as electricity. After that, raising their salaries to a level in which they will be interested in staying and working the land. Governments have always helped farmers, but they have never stopped to think about the peasants or about these wild species.

Who must intervene in order to conserve the nature of these areas?

All agents who have any say in the matter must work together; local governments and central government and the farmers who own the lands. But also conservationists and that is why they must change their strategy, because they have generally focused, and quite correctly, on natural areas such as parks, but the plantations I'm talking about take up fifteen times the area of a natural park. This is a huge challenge, because conservationists tend to think only on the wild areas.

It is different in Europe, where there is a long history of collaboration with land owners because the landscape everywhere is very humanised. In the United States we are very focused on wild areas as well and we are slowly learning to think also on the farms, the ranches and the cities as places where there are also species to protect. This is a difficult change in mentality for biologists.

Protect species in the city?

One of the greatest challenges is that much of the wild nature we aim to conserve is not in the protected areas or in the wilderness. It's in the cities, the farms, the pastures, forests in which we chop trees down for wood, etc.

Historically, conservation has been thought of as keeping closed and controlled areas. But now, wildlife can prosper just about anywhere. That is why the challenge now for conservationists is to work with land owners, and local government agencies and with urban planners.

The changes occurring, many of them thanks to human activities - in tropical forests, in temperature, in the sea level, etc. - are modifying all of the ecosystems. That represents a huge challenge for scientists, who must change their way of thinking in order to protect biodiversity.

They need to see it as a human problem, and not as a problem of nature.

Is it possible to maintain natural areas which are not affected by human activity?

Yes, of course we can have natural reserves, but human impact is so strong that, in these cases, you inevitably need to think in a more innovative manner.

In the case of India again, the plantations, with all their biodiversity, are close to natural parks and this makes them benefit from each other. If the areas surrounding the parks are destroyed then there would only be a small island of biodiversity; and vice versa. We need the whole system, the natural parks and the farms with its workers surrounding the park, all together working to conserve the land.

In the United States, in Yellowstone, we discovered decades ago that the area was not large enough to sustain the herds of bison, wolves and elk that live there. We then thought of two options: enlarge the area of the park, which was politically impossible, because that implied moving everyone living in the area, or create an area in which people continued to live, but took on the commitment of caring for the wildlife and the biodiversity.

Is that what political ecology is for?

The influence of man on nature is so numerous and diverse that no regulation or norm can be imposed without having winners and losers. Sometimes there's an ecological cost, but there can also be an ecological benefit. In this case, political ecology allows studying who wins and who loses in the different ways in which these decisions are taken. It is a way to ask and answer questions before taking what could become bad decisions, and that is very powerful.

The ones who always end up losing are the plants and animals?

Yes, we are facing the most mass extinction of species in the history of our species, because the last mass extinction happened before humans existed. And we are the ones causing this extinction.

Often there are losers among the plants and animals in danger of extinction, but I say that in many cases there can be winners as well. If you take a look at what happens in North America, wolves are once again becoming part of the landscape. In some cases, they were introduced by biologists, but in many they simply adapted to their surroundings, they became more intelligent at learning to live near humans.

In India, panthers were almost extinct and now they are making a comeback. Why is this happening? Because they are now living near the farms and the people. Needless to say, mass extinction is a terrible thing, but there are reasons to be optimistic, there are ways to work in and around nature.

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