



'What has NATURE ever done for us?'

One of the gravest misconceptions of the modern age, and one which has concerned me for more years than I care to remember, is the presumption that Nature can be taken for granted and her needs ignored. There are some who seem to think that only when times are good should we afford the cost of nurturing the natural environment. There are plenty more, I am afraid, who see the process of protecting natural systems as the sort of cost that should be avoided altogether, simply because it actively interferes with development, job creation and economic growth.

This prevailing attitude could not be further from the truth. Nature is, in fact, the source and very basis of our welfare and economic prosperity. For me, this is so self-evident as to seem ridiculous even to say it. But as countries struggle to meet the enormous economic challenges they face, the biggest one of all remains largely hidden from view.

This week, the Prince of Wales revealed that the prospect of being a grandfather has sharpened his anxieties about our environment. Here, he argues that it would profit us all to show the Earth more respect

The services and countless benefits to the human economy that come from Nature have an estimated value every year of around double the global Gross Domestic Product, and yet this colossal contribution to human well-being is hardly ever mentioned when countries consider how to create future growth. As I have long been trying to point out, this situation cannot remain the case for very much longer. We are reaching a critical turning point when humankind has to realise that people and the human economy are both embedded within Nature's systems and benevolence.

To some extent, this awareness is slowly starting to gain ground in the mainstream of our collective thinking. In part, this is the result of recent scientific studies and discoveries which are being translated into many inspiring examples of practical action. Our dependence on Nature is also

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slowly being reflected more confidently in those economic policies which enable people to achieve a better balance between keeping Nature's systems intact and creating economic development that results in more jobs.

But if we are to deepen this commitment to Nature's needs, it is paramount that we adopt a different mindset; one that veers away from the focus that has dominated the past half-century or so. Essentially, we have to become far more joined-up in our thinking and behaviour.

For example, the so-called "Green Revolution" which began in agriculture during the Sixties and quickly enabled global food production to expand and keep pace with the accelerating growth in population has also, among other things, caused the dangerous depletion of fresh water around the world, made a huge contribution to climate

There is nothing in Nature's elaborate system which is not necessary

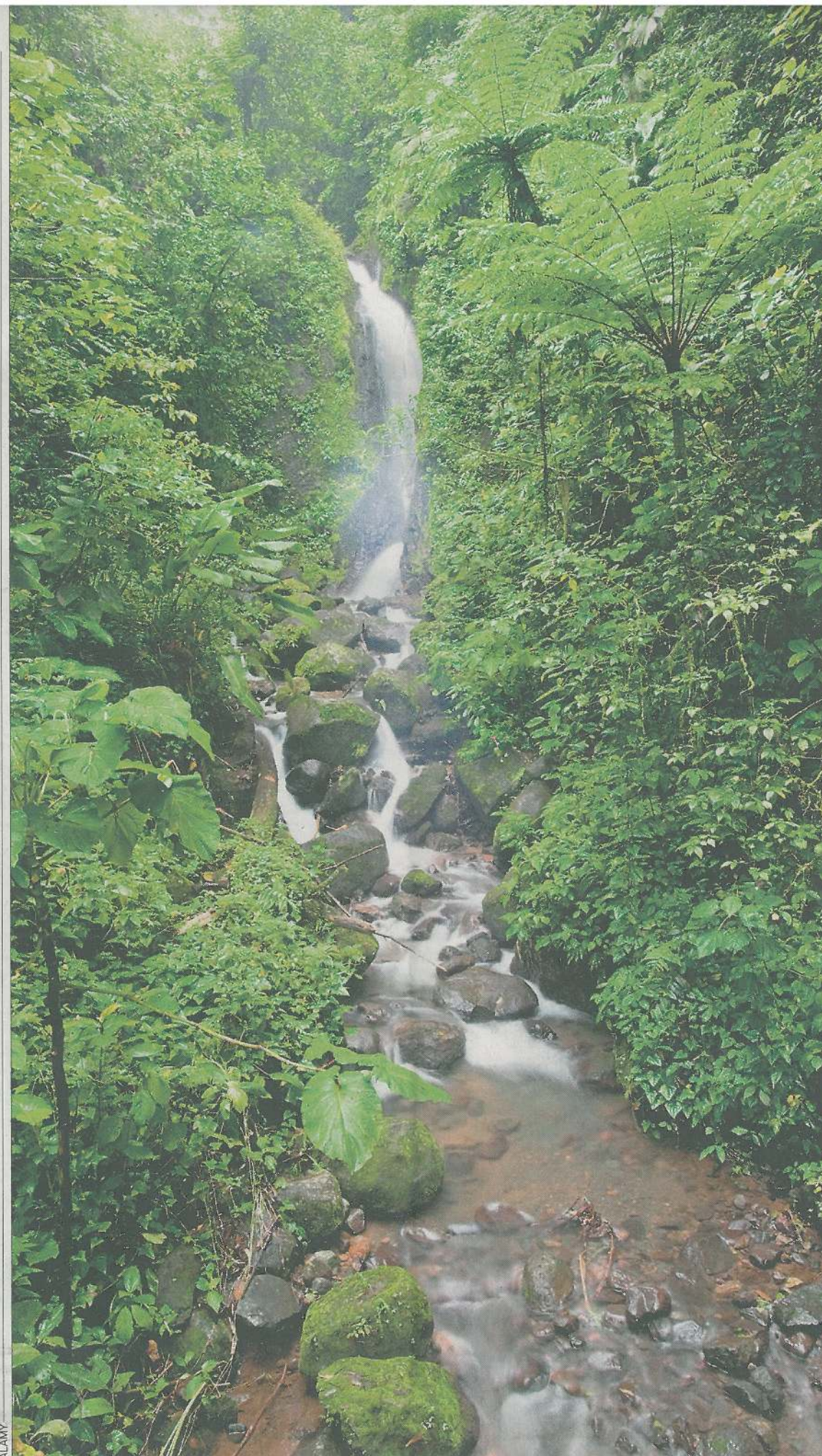
change, caused a massive loss of biodiversity and damaged soils worldwide.

Biodiversity is absolutely crucial. You cannot simplify Nature's system and expect it to carry on operating in the way it did before. There is nothing in Nature's elaborate system which is not necessary, so to take one participant out of the dance leads to the dance breaking down and, sooner or later, this will have a serious impact on the state of human health.

This is why these costs have to be taken into account if we are to see what we do in its proper context, and then an approach to food production that avoids these disastrous side effects has to take its place, otherwise we are lost.

It is far too easy to believe what we see at first glance – that is, that there are huge economic benefits if we use modern farming techniques and that no alternative which does not have efficiency and profit as its priorities can possibly replace it.

But if we stand back, the picture quickly looks a lot less positive. In fact, it looks frighteningly bleak because the predominant approach is effectively cannibalising its



Force of nature or market forces? City dwellers benefit both psychologically and economically from tree-planting in urban environments, and the Prince of Wales believes that more countries should follow the lead of Costa Rica, left and right, which has doubled forest cover – and the income of its citizens – rather than pursue intensive agriculture



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own future by degrading the
natural systems it absolutely
depends upon.

The same picture emerges if
you look at the way we regard
the economic benefits derived
from destroying the world's
tropical rainforests. The soils
and minerals that lie beneath
the forest and the timber that
comes from the trees certainly
all have tremendous market
values, but what about the
huge role they play in soaking
up the vast quantities of
carbon dioxide produced by
power stations, factories, cars
and planes? It is a natural
service which has recently
been calculated to be worth
literally trillions of dollars.

And remember, they are
"rain" forests. Take the
forests out of the equation
and you very quickly affect
how much rain falls from the
skies - which, of course, has
very serious implications for
our ability to generate power
and produce food. And yet
we conclude that the
forests are worth more
to us dead than they
are alive!

This is an insane
example of the kind
of short-termism
that dominates the
present economic
world view which,
by definition, is
obviously not going
to help us succeed as
a species in the long
term. Sooner rather
than later the wheels will
start to fall off.

There are a wealth of
examples of how Nature
sustains our civilisations and
economies - from the oxygen
we breathe, to the soil, water
and pollinating insects that
produce nearly all of our food;
from the scavengers that help
control disease to the oceans
that replenish fish stocks.

To understand what Nature
does for us every single day
of our lives is clearly vital
if we are to maintain our
welfare and develop in the
future. Yet, as I say, these and
other natural assets continue
to be liquidated as if they
are inexhaustible. What has
perplexed me for so many
years is why we fail to put two
and two together and see how
dangerous this is. It is surely
not for want of good science
and reliable information.

In part it is to do with that
ancient, instinctive human
tendency to grasp the short-
term solution because, as
hunter-gatherers, this was once
necessary in order to stay alive.
It is also perhaps to do with the
seemingly impossible task of

Costa Rica has doubled forest cover and its per capita income

finding consensus on the kinds
of national and international
laws and policies that protect
Nature, especially when the task
depends upon a multilateral or
global process.

Some of the reasons are to
be found on a much deeper
level of human experience
where there now abounds
a disturbing lack of a sense
of the sacred. This is very
important. If nothing is sacred,
most of all Nature, then we
create the potential for the
perfect kind of storm, to which
it will be virtually impossible
to adapt, let alone mitigate.

This is why I was so pleased
to see Tony Juniper's new book
as, for me, it hits the nail firmly
on the head when it explores
how our economic system is so
disastrously misaligned with the
realities that enable it to exist in
the first place.

Not only does it provide
readers with a clear and
compelling explanation as
to what Nature does for us,

it also offers some very
strong examples of how

that misalignment
can be rectified
- and that includes
ways in which
Nature's value
can be harnessed
even within our
existing economic
approach.

It describes
simple things, like
planting trees in city
centres which would
help to cool the air while
giving city dwellers that
contact with Nature which has
such immediate psychological
benefits. Thus, they would
improve well-being and
reduce the need for expensive
air conditioning.

On a larger scale, it also
describes radical schemes
like the one in New York,
where the city has been given
a modern water treatment
system that relies upon water-
friendly farming and good
forestry practice. This is no
small scheme and it depends
upon the integrated co-
operation of many thousands
of stakeholders.

The result of such joined-
up thinking is the biggest
unfiltered public water supply
system in the United States,
one that initially saved the city
some eight billion dollars and
has since dramatically slowed
down the rise in consumers'
water bills. They have gone
up by just nine per cent,
whereas had the city installed
conventional treatment systems
that figure would now be nearer
100 per cent.

On a larger scale still, the

book explains how some
countries have begun to
integrate natural values into
their national accounts. One of
the pioneers is the Central
American country of Costa
Rica, which has taken a much
more integrated view of how
Nature and the economy
interact, seeing them as two
sides of the same coin. As a
result, since the Eighties, not
only has Costa Rica more than
doubled its forest cover, it has
also doubled the per capita
income of its citizens.

Dramatic examples like this
should encourage us to see
the tremendous opportunities
there are in approaching things
in a much more joined-up way.
All it needs is the inspiration
and unlimited capacity of the
human imagination to do so.

One very positive
development I have been
greatly moved by in recent
years, and towards which I
hope I have made some small
contribution via the activities
and projects I have initiated,
is the increasingly prominent
discussion about what is
known in the jargon as "natural
capital". This idea defines
Nature as, among other things,
a set of economic assets which,
if managed well, can produce
dividends that flow from those
assets indefinitely. This is
not what generally happens
at the moment. Assets such
as soils and forests are often
simply liquidated as if they do
not need to be maintained or
replenished, and it surely does
not require a financial expert to
point out that this is the fastest
way to bankruptcy!

This shift towards seeing
Nature as the provider of a set
of economically vital services,
rather than resources that can
be used up to fuel economic
growth is, for me, one of the
most important conceptual
shifts in history. I am pleased
to say that the shift is already
under way, but it needs to go
much further and happen
much faster.

I am not so naive as to
imagine this is an easy
transition to achieve, especially
in such economically
challenging times, but perhaps
our current very fraught
economic circumstances offer
exactly the right moment for
the world to force this new
attitude to break through
into the mainstream.

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