

## A celebration of global friendship – BirdLife International's World Congress

Richard Porter

As one of the most important first steps in the protection of biodiversity, friendship is a concept I always introduce when sharing ideas on conservation with young biologists in the Middle East. With friendship comes trust, and a willingness to engage in discussions and arguments without the fear of being wrong – or feeling awkward, suspicious or stupid. No matter how much or how little we know, how well or how poorly qualified we are, we are all equal – and establishing that is an important foundation for ensuring wise action. After all, we all share the same vision, and we are all striving to achieve the same conservation goals.

This month sees friendship on a global scale – BirdLife International's World Congress in Ottawa. Held every four years, it will attract BirdLife partner organisations from over 100 countries – all of whom are leading conservation organisations. The UK partner is the RSPB, in the USA the National Audubon, in Iraq it's Nature Iraq, in Australia



it's BirdLife Australia, and so on. I often liken BirdLife to the United Nations of wildlife conservation bodies.

Dr Marco Lambertini is the CEO of BirdLife and I asked him about his vision for global conservation.

Although it started off as ICBP [the International Council for Bird Preservation], this is really the 90th anniversary of BirdLife. What do you consider are its main accomplishments in the last 20 years?

ML: I believe that BirdLife has excelled in two main areas, science and capacity development. We have generated some groundbreaking concepts in and approaches to conservation science – such as the Important Bird Areas standards, which have become a global currency for conservation – and have recently triggered the development of the broader concept of Key Biodiversity Areas. More recently, I would highlight the threatened species, IBA and habitat indicators that, through bird data, effectively signal

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**180.** The Critically Endangered Amsterdam Albatross *Diomedea (exulans) amsterdamensis* benefits from both the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme and the Global Seabird Programme. With support from Species Champion VBN (BirdLife in the Netherlands), LPO (BirdLife in France) acts for this albatross at its breeding grounds on Amsterdam Island, while the Albatross Task Force works with fishing fleets throughout Southern Oceans to help reduce seabird bycatch.



Marco Lambertini/BirdLife International

**181.** The 100,000 ha of the Harapan rainforest in Sumatra, under threat from illegal logging and clearance from illegal palm-oil plantations, is one of the few remaining large dry lowland forest blocks in Sumatra. The site has now been set aside for forest restoration by the Indonesian Government and given to the direct management of a BirdLife coalition including Burung Indonesia (BirdLife partner in Indonesia) and RSPB (BirdLife partner in the UK). Based on the Harapan example, more forest restoration concessions are being developed all over Indonesia.

crucial trends in the overall state of biodiversity and ecosystems. These indicators have been officially adopted by inter-governmental mechanisms like the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

Even more unique, perhaps, has been our contribution to building local capacity for conservation. This is the core of our model, and the development of the BirdLife Partnership, now close to 120 countries and territories in all continents, is testimony of our efforts to empower local civil society conservation organisations around the world. BirdLife has played a pivotal role in promoting the establishment of, first, national bird and then nature conservation organisations in key countries like Brazil, Indonesia, Madagascar, Seychelles and Fiji. Over the last 20 years we have strived to unite and support the largest partnership for birds and nature across the world.

**What is the BirdLife model – and why do you think it works?**

**ML:** We passionately believe that developing indigenous commitment, knowledge and local organised action is the only way to secure real and long-term impact for birds and nature. This is why our entire effort goes in supporting national conservation organisations and local groups. They *are* BirdLife. They are at the core of the organisation. Our model is designed to empower and to deliver durable and sustainable local capacity for conservation, with a unique flow, local to global. This means that partners work locally but are united by a shared strategy. They benefit from each other's experience, ultimately joining forces to tackle international threats and drivers of biodiversity loss. A model where the outcome is greater than the sum of the parts.



Remind us of how many birds are threatened globally.

**ML:** Too many, around 1,200 species, one in eight living bird species. And it won't get any better over the next few decades. It is crucial that we act now to prevent extinctions and conserve our 'natural capital', recognising species as the foundation of the functionality of the ecosystems.

What do you see as the biggest problems facing conservation?

**ML:** There is no doubt that the demographic explosion of the last 100 years in particular has pushed us to live outside the boundaries of what planet earth can offer us. This has generated unprecedented loss of natural habitats, biodiversity and vital ecosystem services. Land conversion, mainly to agriculture, and the emission of greenhouse gases in particular are reaching levels that could undermine the functioning of the global ecosystem.

What are your personal priorities for leading BirdLife into the next decade?

**ML:** Perhaps one internal and one external. Internally, we need to continue along the path of increasingly working together. People from different countries came together 90 years ago and founded BirdLife because they realised that international collaboration was key to address the emerging issues for birds and nature. The same principle is even more valid today. If we want to make a real difference for nature at local and global levels, BirdLife partners will need to increasingly align along common programmes, join forces and share resources. Externally, we need to win our case advocating the vital importance of nature for our own well-being, economic stability – and indeed for promotion of social justice and the equitable sharing of resources. Nature provides everything we need to be happy, healthy and to prosper. On the other hand we need to continue to develop local capacity. Take our Important Bird Areas. We have identified over 11,000 IBAs around the

Jens and Hanne Eriksen



**182.** The Critically Endangered Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* has benefited from the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme, thanks to the actions of ACBK (BirdLife Partner in Kazakhstan) and support from the RSPB (BirdLife Partner in the UK) and Swarovski Optik. New breeding and wintering grounds have been identified and conservation measures implemented.

world and today we can count on 2,000 IBA local caretaker groups. My vision is to have a global Partnership in each country of the world and at least a local conservation group taking care of each IBA. And if we can manage to unite all this local energy, knowledge and passion to support each other and work together, it will be a truly unstoppable force for nature!

**Are you honestly optimistic about the future for the wildlife on our planet?**

**ML:** It is easier to be pessimistic than optimistic about the future. However, the growth in protected areas, the progress in legislation and enforcement, the development of consumer awareness and local action are all very positive trends, which let us hope for a better future for birds and biodiversity. Meeting so many dedicated young conservationists of the BirdLife Partnership in so many developing countries is perhaps for me the most uplifting and encouraging sign that we can achieve positive change. It is a fact that we have never been more aware of the impact we are having, the consequences we are facing and the solutions we can deploy. We have the knowledge and the means to make a difference. The commitment towards change is growing. This generation of women and men, not the previous, not the next one, has *the* great opportunity to turn the tide of the current ecological crisis into real sustainable living. Complex, difficult but so important and exciting. We cannot miss it.



David Thomas/BirdLife International

**183.** Marco Lambertini and friends. Working with people is at the heart of BirdLife's working model. Educating and inspiring young people to understand and care about wildlife is clearly one of the most valuable ways to build a conservation movement with a strong future.

Marco, thank you for taking the time to talk to *BB* readers. On behalf of *BB*, we send you our best wishes for the success of the World Congress in Canada in June. I'm looking forward to being at this international gathering – and enjoying myself. While conservation is a serious business, there's no reason why it can't be fun.

If you want to know more about BirdLife's World Congress or even attend, visit their website [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)