

## **Made a difference to that one**

I will start with an apocryphal tale. Many years ago now an environmental conference was held at an almost unspoilt beach resort. At lunch on the first day one of the delegates took a walk along the beach which he noticed was littered with innumerable starfish which were dying in the heat of the sun. About halfway along the beach he met a young girl who bent down after every step to pick up a starfish and throw it back into the sea. The delegate asked her what she was doing and she explained that she was saving the starfish. "But there are millions of them" he exclaimed "you can't possibly make any difference". She quietly bent down and threw another back into the sea, looked up at him and said "made a difference to that one".

Although this is a very simplistic take on nature conservation and environmental improvement it does have something relevant to say. Today the UK Treasury released a major report on the economic importance of nature. The last time it released a major report on environmental issues it was the Stern report of 2006 which transformed economic understanding of the climate crisis. The new report by Prof. Dasgupta is expected to have a similar impact.

The report opens by saying "our economies, livelihoods and wellbeing all depend on our most precious asset: nature. We are part of nature, not separate from it."

The report notes that our demands on the planet far exceed its capacity to supply us and that it costs more to restore ecosystems than it does to protect them. Prof Dasgupta argues that a fundamental change is necessary in the way we measure economic success, the use of GDP being fatally flawed because it only measures money flow and takes no account of rises, or falls in natural capital – the value of the goods and services nature provides to us all. According to UN data this natural capital fell by 40% per capita between 1992 and 2014 and since 1970 wild animal populations have fallen by an average of 68%.<sup>i</sup>

The report concludes with these words: "To detach nature from economic reasoning is to imply that we consider ourselves to be external to nature. The fault is not in economics; it lies in the way we have chosen to practise it. Transformative change is possible – we and our descendants deserve nothing less."

If we are to achieve transformative change one of the key factors will be the redevelopment and strengthening of our individual and collective relationships with the natural world. Until we live in empathy with nature as a part of it we are unlikely to make the quantum leaps of understanding required to effect the other changes we so badly need to make to our way of life.

We need to take individual responsibility and do what we can in our own lives. For example, in my work as a gardener I refuse to use weedkillers and insecticides. As a result four other people followed suit and a substantial local business with large gardens made my example a matter of policy, clearly stated on their website.

Not everyone is in a position to influence use of horticultural chemicals but the important thing is that we do what we can, even if it seems trivial on a global scale. The consequences of personally refusing plastic carrier bags may initially seem insignificant but if a thousand people see what you are doing and just three of them take notice and follow suit, three more iterations of that process will reach and influence almost 100 people. This is how transformative change is made: not with a

bang, but with the gradual influencing of hearts and minds until a tipping point is reached and the exceptional becomes the new normal.

This is why, like the girl on the beach, we all need to be able to say “made a difference to that one”.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/feb/02/economics-failure-over-destruction-of-nature-presents-extreme-risks>