You'll be a conservationist if...

E. C. M. Parsons

Published online: 2 October 2012
© AESS 2012

I recently taught a graduate class on the future of tropical ecosystems, and after a discussion on the environmental and conservation problems facing these regions, loss of biodiversity as the result of human activities was the chief, overarching problem that was identified. We then turned to discussing the skill set needed for a conservation practitioner in tropical areas. Virtues they extolled included an understanding of local culture and history, as well as a perspective on local politics. An ability to communicate effectively at various levels, from grassroots community groups to policy makers and government officials, was seen as important, likewise the ability to work in isolation or in a diverse team, members of which might have very different backgrounds and goals. Innovation was also seen as key, as was the ability to react rapidly to changing circumstances or to make the most of an opportunity as it arises, as well as using “outside the box” and novel methods when, for example, operating on a shoestring budget. Diplomacy, creativity, patience, and organizational skills were also mentioned.

Despite conservation of biodiversity being their major task at hand, biological expertise was noted by the graduate students almost as an afterthought, and it was primarily discussed in terms of an ability to understand biological concepts such as animal behavior, biogeography, and ecosystem function, rather than specific technical expertise in biological sciences. A background in sociology, psychology, law, economy, history, or communications was seen by them to provide as valid a skill set as biology. So, what makes a conservationist? An understanding of the issues and concepts is very important, but more than scientific knowledge is needed.

By the end, the students concluded that what was needed was a very interdisciplinary background, a “jack of all trades” but master of all too. The need for environmental practitioners, who were citizens from the countries in question, was also emphasized. The students noted, however, that in that particular class, nearly 20 % of the students were originally from a developing nation in the tropics, taking an interdisciplinary degree, and so perhaps, we were starting to get on the right path. However, the majority of the class was composed of white, English-speaking-only, middle-class Americans, many with a very biological research-focused program of study, and they themselves expressed that they lacked the skill set for doing on-the-ground environmental work in the tropics, but yet, they made up many of the practitioners that did so. Even worse, their demographic probably had access to the majority of the funding for biodiversity conservation. So the take home message was a need to shift from the current system to greater university support for capacity building within countries (i.e., more scholarships, student visas, academic exchanges, or in situ training courses).

Communication skills featured highly on the list, and although, as mentioned above, many students were in an “interdisciplinary” program in which the social science, economics, and policy were well represented, the practical communication side was very lacking. Sure there were classes in the university about communication research and the academic side of communication, and many students gained experience in presenting academic talks in a variety of classes. But classes specifically about environmental communication and techniques (such as how to adapt your materials talk to members of the general public, a policy maker, or the media; how to engage members of a different culture or mindset; or how to deal with potentially hostile or reticent audiences) were, at the time, lacking, let alone actual, practical, classes that taught communication methods in an experiential way. Even though we expect graduate students to be able to present at conferences and thesis defenses, they rarely are given any formal training to

E. C. M. Parsons (✉)
Department of Environmental Science and Policy,
George Mason University,
4400 University Drive,
Fairfax, VA 22030-4444, USA
e-mail: ecm-parsons@earthlink.net

do such, and training for communication in a nonacademic setting is virtually nonexistent at universities. Communicating to a panel of scientists at a conference is a very different kettle of fish to an adversarial group of fishermen, an elder or a shaman in an Amazonian village, a panel of disinterested politicians, or a newspaper or TV journalist on a deadline. I hasten to add that subsequent to this class, the university did start to make steps into this area, but I would argue that effective communication training is an essential part of the modern environmental student's program of study.

The list of virtues needed by a practitioner in environmental conservation that the students generated reminded me of Rudyard Kipling's famous poem "If" (see below). The poem was written by Kipling in 1895 and was first published in 1910; it became an inspiration for thousands, particularly during the horrors of the First World War. The poem similarly lists virtues such as patience, perseverance, and being able to communicate and relate to many layers of society.

However, the discussion of what makes a good environmental conservation practitioner in the tropics has led to a discussion about some of the students' experiences with, and views of, current practitioners in the field. Many of the same graduate students in the class described above were also volunteers at a major environmental conference (in which I had encouraged them to participate) that had taken place nearby. The students staffed the registration desks and generally helped with logistics. Although there were a number of academics and practitioners in the environmental and conservation fields at this event, a large proportion of the attendees were representatives of environmental nongovernmental organizations or government agencies, and many were international participants, although the majority were from North America or Europe. The students' attitudes to many of those who attended this event were quite negative—noting chronic disorganization, lack of patience, rudeness to the student volunteers, arrogant and disrespectful behavior. One of the worst offenders was actually someone who was due to speak on collaborations, partnerships, and outreach to communities in developing countries, but the students specifically commented that they would give little credence to that presenter when they couldn't even extend civility to students and their peers in a conference setting.

However—and this is a big however—despite these negative experiences, the students also described several conservationists who were approachable, friendly, kind, and patient. Their presentations were of high technical quality, yet easily understood. Their methods and approaches were new and innovative, not the same old, same old. Very often, their work was interdisciplinary, recognizing the importance of the human dimension of conservation and not just presenting scientific data. Despite being very senior scientists or conservation

practitioners, they calmly waited in lines and met technical or logistical difficulties with good humor. They were willing to speak to anyone who approached, in particular young students who were often in awe and extremely nervous of these senior people, lending them an ear and supportive and encouraging words. The behavior of these "role model" environmental practitioners was an inspiration for the students and exemplified many of the virtues outlined by Kipling.

So if you want to be a modern conservationist working in the field, and more than that, if you want to be a role model to young would-be environmental practitioners, I urge you to read on....

If by Rudyard Kipling

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
But make allowance for their doubting too,
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master,
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much,
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be [...a conservationist...] my son!"