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INTERNATIONAL

ROCHA

Conservation and Hope



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INTERNATIONAL NEWS ISSUE 55 – APRIL 2014

Faith in conservation

Rev. Dave Bookless, Director of Theology, A Rocha International

If a biologist were to classify organizations rather than animals, what kind of a creature would A Rocha be? It has characteristics of a science-based conservation charity and it conducts environmental education, but unusually it also has elements of a Christian mission: a faith-basis, an emphasis on prayer and biblical values. I can imagine our biologist categorizing A Rocha as a hybrid or, more excitingly, as a creature new to science.

Certainly, reactions when people first encounter A Rocha often parallel the excitement of discovering a new species: 'I never knew this existed!' or, 'I always imagined something like this and now I've found it!' A Rocha is a unique movement, committed to the protection of habitats and species, and viewing the care of creation as a mainstream aspect of Christian mission in God's world. We're not a hybrid. Rather, we integrate our science-based conservation with our biblical values. We therefore present a challenge to the usually secular conservation world (faith matters: why we look after nature is key to how we do so!) and also to the global Christian church (conservation matters: God cares for all creatures and so should we!).

This issue of *A Rocha International News* focuses on the second challenge. You'll find stories about how faith makes a difference in conservation, at 'green confirmation camps' impacting the majority of young Finns; amongst Chinese Christians; through the Eco-Congregation scheme in the UK, and by bringing together Christian and Muslim leaders in Ghana to examine their scriptures in the light of environmental issues.

We also work strategically to influence Christians and Christian organizations globally, and this comes under my remit as International Director of Theology. My role looks in two directions:

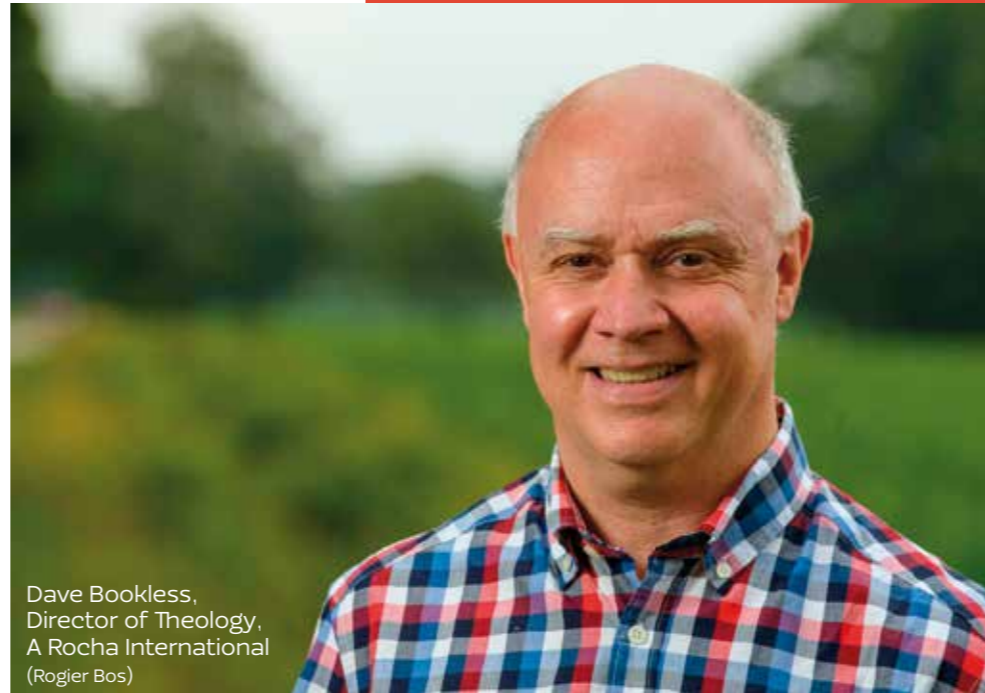
- Internally, for the global A Rocha family, I serve on the International Management Team and the Conservation Science

Advisory Council, and attend Trustee meetings, helping ensure we think biblically about all we're doing. I also oversee the production of bible-based resources for A Rocha teams. We're launching a new website, *At your Service*, making available resources from the last 15 years (see box) and plan to add different languages in due course. I also write briefing papers to help A Rocha teams think biblically around difficult issues, from working with different faiths, to how we approach areas where science and the bible appear to conflict.

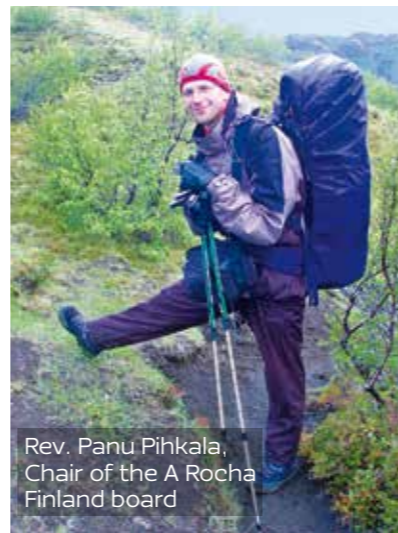
- Externally, my role addresses the small matter of helping the global Christian church recover a biblical understanding of creation care. I obviously can't do this alone so we work in partnership, especially using the global networks that comprise the Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). I helped coordinate a major global gathering on 'Creation Care and the Gospel' (Jamaica 2012) which produced a far-reaching 'Call to Action'.* To make sure this becomes more than a statement we're working with Lausanne and WEA to organize regional conferences leading to national creation-care movements. The first will be for South East Asia (Manila) and East Africa (Nairobi) in 2014. It's exciting to see major Christian leaders and organizations getting involved and taking creation care seriously. I also write monthly for the *Planetwise* blog www.blog.arocha.org sometimes topically, always biblically, reflecting on environmental issues.

Finally, to ensure A Rocha's theology remains rigorous, I'm working on a part-time PhD looking at biblical theology and biodiversity. It all keeps me pretty busy, but it's exciting. Just think of the potential if the world's two billion Christians start to be active in caring for God's world!

* lausanne.org/docs/2012Creation-Care-Call-to-Action.pdf



Dave Bookless,
Director of Theology,
A Rocha International
(Rogier Bos)



Rev. Panu Pihkala,
Chair of the A Rocha
Finland board

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www.atyourservice.arocha.org

Hiking and camping are traditional rites of passage for Finnish teenagers at confirmation camps: now A Rocha Finland is ensuring that environmental education is part of the experience.



Teaching young Christians in Finland

Rev. Panu Pihkala, Chair of the A Rocha Finland board, is a researcher, lecturer and writer in eco-theology at the University of Helsinki. He has prepared environmental resources for leaders to use at the Lutheran Church's confirmation camps.

Panu, why has A Rocha Finland prioritized confirmation camps?

About 76% of Finnish people belong to the Lutheran Church, and most young people, even if they are not church-going, attend the camps, so they reach about 90% of Finnish teenagers.

What happens at the camps?

The camps are for fifteen-year-olds and last a week. They mostly take place in the summer at a camp centre near beautiful woodlands and wetlands. The youth receive an introduction to Christianity and practise living together in a Christian way, led by a pastor, youth workers and voluntary youth leaders.

Can you tell us about A Rocha's environmental input?

The natural setting of the camps has always influenced them, but we have deliberately made this explicit. The environment participates in Christian education! Some camp staff have, for a long time, emphasized sustainable living, but many have not. 'Greening the Confirmation Schools' programme aims to make these themes an integral part of as many camps as possible.

What hopes – or dreams – do you have for these youngsters?

Before returning to the university, I ran many camps, and they were also very important for me in my own youth. They can strengthen your faith and teach you many things. I hope that this tradition continues, with an ever stronger environmental content.

At the moment, you're undertaking research for your doctorate.

Yes, I'm focusing on the influence of Joseph Sittler (1904-1987), a Professor of Theology who was based in Chicago, USA, and wrote on ecological themes long before they became so widely popular. As author of *Theology for Earth* (1954) and *Called to Unity* (1961), he was hugely influential in the Ecumenical movement and within Lutheran Churches. In my dissertation I am presenting an overview of Sittler's work and of early eco-theology in general. I have been digging up much forgotten material from the first half of the 20th Century, which has been fascinating.

As Chair of the A Rocha Finland board, you lead a small group of very committed volunteers. What are your current activities?

A Rocha Finland has maximised its influence by co-operating with many organizations, but we also need more explicit A Rocha activities which we are now developing, such as local group activities. Last year we published the first issue of a new journal.

Challenging British Christians

Dr Ruth Valerio, Churches and Theology Director, A Rocha UK, is becoming increasingly well-known amongst Christians as a writer and speaker on issues of faith, justice, environment and lifestyle.

Ruth, in your blog www.ruthvalerio.net you describe yourself as 'Community activist, Christian, academic, eco-warrior, mum, author, veg grower, wife and pig keeper rolled into one.' What started you off onto such a singular path? One was seeing a few individuals in my church who were switched on to environmental issues and realising that I had a lot to learn from them. The other was reading a book on the Bible and green issues and realising this was a really important part of Christian life. It was almost like a second conversion.

We often expect people to be academics or activists, but you're both! You left Cambridge with a theology degree, and you've recently completed your doctorate, looking at simplicity and consumerism. Why is that such an important issue to you?

Issues around consumerism and how we live are vital for two reasons. Firstly, they play such a huge part in our environmental and social crisis. At the risk of being overly-simplistic, if you look at the problems we're currently facing, they pretty much all come down to the resource-intensive life lived by those of us who are more economically developed. That life is fed by consumerism.

Secondly, they play a crucial part in our walk with God. Jesus said pretty bluntly that we're not going to be able to serve both God and money, and when we try to do both it's a problem! In Hebrews we're told to keep ourselves free from the love of money and be content with what we have.

How does it shape your own lifestyle – and that of your family?

It has affected what we buy, where we holiday, where our electricity comes from, how much we heat our home, how much we use our car and how we eat. Thankfully my children love the fact that we grow/rear/make so much of our own food. I'm FAR from perfect and there is always more to do, and all sorts of compromises that I make, but I'm trying.

Tell us about some of the action being taken by A Rocha UK to challenge and resource Christians to care for the earth.

This year we're going to focus quite a bit on our speakers – giving them training and increasing our church visits. I do a lot of speaking around the country, both to churches and conferences.

Our Eco-Congregation programme is growing, with about 270 churches in England and Wales having been awarded Eco-Congregation status.

Our Land Conferences bring together landowners (mostly Christian) in a safe context to look at Christian principles of how to manage their land well.

I think social media has also got to play a big part. Our Facebook page gets quite a bit of traffic, and we'll be ramping up our Twitter feed over the next few months.

What kind of changes would you most like to see in the UK church?

I would like it to be as natural for them to be engaged in acts of wider creation care as it is for them to be engaged in acts of social care.

Visit www.arocha.org/news55 for the full interviews with Ruth, Samuel and Panu.

Reaching out to Chinese churches



Ruth Valerio and family

Samuel Chiu, East Asia Project Coordinator, A Rocha International

Samuel, formerly a pastor in Toronto, Canada, serves with both A Rocha Canada and A Rocha International.

Samuel, when did you first realize that creation care is a major biblical theme?

My sensitivity to environmental issues was nurtured during my undergraduate years, studying urban planning and land use. Later, in my pastoral ministry, seeking a way to address the challenges of disciple-making in our contemporary, consumer culture, I looked into the need for re-envisioning a biblical worldview. Reading the Bible afresh, I came to understand that caring for God's creation is fundamental to the whole narrative.



St Luke's, near Liverpool, is an Eco-congregation church which has transformed its grounds to create 'a place of beauty and a haven for people and wildlife'. The new gardens have led to a big increase in butterflies, bees and other insects. The two boys are enjoying a bug safari. (Steve Matthews above/Paul Beardwood)



Samuel (left) with Dayan villagers in Taiwan (Joe Ting)



For three years now, you've been working with Asian Christian communities, mainly Chinese, in Vancouver and Toronto: tell us about these congregations.

Because of the large Christian population in both cities (350,000 and 550,000 respectively) there are over 100 Chinese churches in Vancouver and about 150 in Toronto. Most have their origins and cultural links in Hong Kong, the main source of Chinese-speaking students and immigrants until the mid-1990s. They mainly speak Cantonese, with a smaller portion of English-speaking second and third generations. Lately, following the increasing influx of mainland Chinese, through study and immigration, Mandarin-speaking congregations have been rapidly emerging.

You're currently translating *Planetwise*, by Dave Bookless, into Traditional Chinese.

Yes, I want it to be read in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora in North America. There is nothing on the creation care theme by native Chinese theologians, and nothing like this has been translated.

You recently visited an A Rocha group in Hong Kong.

A Rocha has helped over 30 conservationists to form a group. Amongst them are biologists, wildlife researchers, ecology educators and sustainable farming practitioners. Many have been working in isolation, without support from their Christian communities, for a long time, yet still persist within a very difficult economical, political and spiritual environment. When they gathered together for the first few times last year, they all expressed a genuine desire to learn more about the Christian foundation of their passion, and are nurturing mutual support. They are excited to find that they are not alone; that there are many like them around the globe, connected, most importantly, by prayer. They are in intense discussions about future projects.

Training faith leaders in Ghana



Western Reef Egret, *Egretta gularis*, is just one of many species dependent on healthy coastal wetlands. (Peter Harris)

Theresa Maa Ohui Ayiku,
Project Coordinator, A Rocha Ghana

A Rocha Ghana engages with communities to help them protect some of the most biodiverse and threatened habitats throughout the country: coastal fishing communities who depend on healthy mangroves; villages around the rainforest of Atiwa; farmers and fishermen at Lake Bosomtwe and the peoples of the arid savannah surrounding Mole National Park.

In each place, families want to manage their land and natural resources in ways that will not jeopardise the survival of their children and grandchildren. A Rocha helps them through programmes which raise awareness of the threats, introduce alternative livelihoods and address factors which are causing damage, whether it be pollution, over-harvesting, mining or logging.

Working with both Christian and Muslim communities, the team has found that running workshops for faith leaders can be highly effective. We asked Theresa to tell us about this important element of the conservation programmes.

Theresa, why does A Rocha Ghana work so much with faith leaders?

People's attitudes, values and belief systems shape their concepts of the natural world. In Africa, and Ghana in particular, the relationship between people and wildlife is deeply entrenched in their traditions, cultures and religions.

So what are your aims in working with faith leaders?

The goal of our 'Faith in Action' programme is to stimulate behavioural change and local action among faith-based organizations and their large social networks.

Why do you often run workshops bringing Christian and Muslim leaders together?

The largest religious groups participating in our conservation programmes are Christians and Muslims. Both take their faith seriously and have a lot of respect for their faith leaders and the teaching of their holy books: the Bible and the Koran have abundant instructions on caring for God's creation.

In some countries, joint training wouldn't be possible – how is Ghana different?

We are blessed to have Christians and Muslims co-existing without any divisiveness. This is embedded in our culture: in Ghana, people take care of each other, irrespective of religion.

Can you tell us about one of the areas where you've been running 'Faith in action'?

In the Western Region, we've run training programmes in six districts along the coast. Our aims include sustainable fishing, protection of the beaches from pollution and sand-mining, mangrove regeneration and turtle conservation.

People have formed Eco-networks and resolved:

- to dispose of plastic waste properly
- to revamp community groups to keep the environment clean
- to teach radio preachers to incorporate environmental messages
- not to pollute water bodies
- to like dogs and treat them well

Have you produced any resources for churches?

Yes, I have designed a creation care manual for church members, and another for pastors who want to train more trainers – we aim to raise up 'nature evangelists'.

You're based in the Accra office. How often do you visit the field bases?

A minimum of four times a year. We work from four locations around the country (Accra, Kumasi, Kibi and Damongo) so we hardly ever meet together as a whole team. Field visits are a joy, giving opportunities for fellowship and working together.

You've been part of the Ghana team since 2002. What's been the biggest frustration?

Lack of funds, in the earlier days. Once, I had to travel up north to Murugu, and when I got to Fulfosso Junction I got on a market truck with traders, so a journey of about one and half hours took almost four hours. I got there very dirty and dehydrated and I had to 'perch' with a friend because we could not afford to rent a hotel room.

What's given you most joy?

Watching the projects grow!



Theresa Maa Ohui Ayiku, Project Coordinator, A Rocha Ghana



Muslim clerics and Christian ministers at an A Rocha 'Faith in Action' workshop on the coast. (Daryl Bosu)





Mark Craig, Director of Communications, BMS World Mission

Once in a long while, you can find your business life dramatically changed for good by the influence of another organization.

In recent years, that has been true for BMS; working with A Rocha has helped shape our stance on creation care.

Our most popular DVD resource for churches was developed in partnership with A Rocha. *FutureShape: Caring for God's creation* (www.futureshape.org) includes studies for ministers and small groups, with video clips (featuring Dave Bookless) and music.



With support from Climate Stewards (A Christian carbon offsetting charity, part of the A Rocha network, www.climatestewards.net) we delivered on a progressive three-year plan towards offsetting our entire global travel bill. To date, that has resulted in more than £20,000 being allocated to initiatives with Climate Stewards and our own BMS Eco Fund, which encourages our mission workers to develop grassroots creation care projects. One example is in Chad, where a BMS-supported hospital, ministering to the local Muslim population, never had power for essential services until the Eco Fund provided a solar array.

On a personal basis, I made a short film, with Prem Mitra and the late Vijay Anand of A Rocha India, explaining the issue of human/elephant conflict. The passion and wisdom of these two wonderful men, expressed in the beauty of Bannerghatta National Park, was life-changing for me.

Throughout this journey we have had the active support and encouragement of A Rocha friends, most recently Miranda Harris, who spoke at our Catalyst Live event in November. Like A Rocha, we're in this for the long haul, and we're glad to have your support and friendship.

<http://bmscatalystlive.com/videos/miranda-harris-november-2013-manchester.php>



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Registered Charity No. 1136041 Company Registration No. 6852417

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