

## **The Sibthorp Trust**

### **Professor Roger Crofts**

Lord Mayor, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to be here. Thank you to the Croydon Society and to the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society for giving me a platform on behalf of the Sibthorp Trust to tell you a little of what we are doing today.

But the real question at a meeting to celebrate the life and work of Mary Sibthorp is this: are we really adhering to Mary's instructions as very clearly told us by Andy Bebbington earlier? Are we effective Trustees and would she be satisfied? It would be interesting to hear a whispered judgment later on in my dreams!

#### *Inheritance and responsibilities*

I want to reflect on how we have interpreted our inheritance and our responsibilities; to reflect a little on my reading of the original Trust documents; to reflect a little on whether I have any Sibthorpien credentials or not; and then to talk about our programme.

Any set of Trustees must, of course, have a clear view of the Trust's inheritance. It's a self-regulatory group of individuals and that indeed is a high responsibility. So how do we interpret it? Each time we appoint Trustees - we have appointed four new Trustees in the last year - we need to make sure that there is a clear and consistent message about our

inheritance and our responsibilities. We seek the guidance of Martin Holdgate who is our link with the past and knew our benefactor. I put it like this: to question accepted norms and to do this in the context of key international conservation strategies The World Conservation Strategy was the relevant one at the time of the Trust's foundation, and there have been updates since then. Our role is to stimulate and provoke debate on the natural environment and with society fully connection.

The injunctions we have acquired and inherited are, first, the importance of valuing natural resources. The implication there is that if we misuse those natural resources, what are the causes? We must challenge the negative influences that are degrading our natural resources; and we should be stimulating their wise use. I really like the term 'wise use' but maybe we should say 'stewardship'. It's a very traditional way of looking at things, but I think it has a great resonance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And, second, if we are going to honour our benefactor's approaches then we must ignore the constraints of tradition - and particularly set aside politics. The environment seems to be absolutely overcrowded with politics, as my wife often tells me when I go home after a meeting: "Oh, another bunch of environmental politicking. Did you do anything useful, particularly to combat the greenhouse gases that you put into the atmosphere travelling by air to an international meeting?" It's extremely important that this Trust should not be part of the institutional structure. There is a little conundrum that I will come back to later, because if you look at the origins or the

present affiliations of our trustees you may call into question our connection with government and other institutional structures. I shall return to that point. Quite simply it is extremely important that we stand aside from the institutional structures, and do not bed ourselves into any particular body.

And, third, the final injunction is: connecting the environment to society. I think too often in the past, and in the early years of my life, environment was seen as something quite different from society, whereas many generations before, they were seen as part and parcel of the same thing. Maybe it was all part of urbanisation and now globalisation that the disconnect came about and it's very important that we prod and poke at that particular issue and ask "Why? What are the causes of disconnection and what are the things that might help bring the connection back?"

### *The early years of the Trust*

When the Trust was established in the early 1990s, there were four original signatories, all very notable in their field. Sir Martin himself, of course, plus the very distinguished environmentalist Vernon Hayward, long-term Professor of Plant Ecology at Reading University and still very active on the global scene of plant ecology. Professor Adrian Phillips, a notable leader globally on national parks and protected area mechanisms, and Dick Steele who had been for a long time the Director General of the Nature Conservancy in Britain.

It is quite interesting looking at the early documentation to note the names of the witnesses at the Trust's foundation. David Ingram was the Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh; Stanley Johnson, a Member of European Parliament and an environmental consultant; Sandy Kerr, one of my colleagues in Scottish National Heritage; Robin Pellew, who was the head of the Worldwide Fund for Nature for the UK; and Ian Prest the head of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

### *The name of Sibthorp*

At a recent Trustees meeting, I thought, "My goodness, can we not formally change the name from the IUCN The World Conservation Union UK Sibthorp Trust to The Sibthorp Trust?" My fellow trustees agreed and so we wrote a very magisterial letter to the Charity Commissioners saying we'd really like to change the name and to clarify the purpose. Not surprisingly, I suppose, from these guardians of charities, we got a letter back saying this is all very interesting but we could not do any of the changes we wished to. It has to stay the same because any change of name would be dissociating the Trust from its original intentions as set down. But, as we wanted to make sure that the name Sibthorp continued we decided to give the organisation the informal name of The Sibthorp Trust. It is extremely important that we have in our minds and we have in the minds of all those we interact with that Mary Sibthorp was our benefactor. And that's why the logo has the Sibthorp Trust rather than a more convoluted name.

But there is a close connection, not in an institutional sense but in the sense of the philosophy and values of the Trust as we take it forward, with the IUCN, whose mission statement I think Mary would have liked even though it wasn't around in her day: 'a just world that values nature'. It is obvious that there are a number of different concepts that resonate with her own thinking: the connection between society and nature, but not just nature in itself but the value that society puts on it. Also the 'just world', something I now think we call social justice. So, I like to think that Mary would like the fact that we want her name up as a banner to keep on reminding us of our begetter and that we must stick to her principles.

### *The Trustees*

Who are our trustees? Andy Brown, who has just retired as Chief Executive of English Nature; Tricia Henton, former Chief Executive of the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency and now of the Environment Agency of England and Wales; Ed Maltby who is the Director of the SWIMMER Institute Liverpool University and Dave Richards is an environmental policy adviser with of Rio Tinto. Now, you might say this is quite interesting: Rio Tinto, isn't that one of the environmental enemies? Well, of course, Mary would have loved the challenge of having someone from big industry whose activities, in the popular mind, were all about damaging the environment. But here is a man in that - if you like - enemy camp trying to do his best as their Principal Advisor on the environment. It's quite right to have that person in our party. It's stimulating. Maybe we should have someone from the financial sector? Well, we'll see. Camilla Toulmin who heads the

International Institute for Environment and Development based here in London, an environment and poverty specialist who has worked a lot in Africa. And then me who, in my retirement, call myself an Environment and Management Advisor.

*What the Trustees stand for*

More important than the names and their current affiliations is what we stand for. I mentioned earlier that with our specific current or former affiliations you might question whether we could possibly take on board all of Mary's desires and demands. Because we are all a bit mainstream - maybe Ed is not as an academic. But I would have to say that none of us would be described as people supplicant to systems or views. We work within the system but we often try to change it. We have environmental interests in the very broadest sense rather than what I regard as the current trend of a rather national, narrow and traditional view of biodiversity - and that is something I want to come back to.

Yes, we are all based in the UK but we have very broad perspectives and many of us work in other parts of the world: Camilla particularly in Africa; Ed in the Middle East, in Europe and in the Far East, for example. And we all have active engagements in international organisations as well. We must not be parochial. We must look at the wider world, the wider dimension that we can learn from in various ways.

What about my own credentials here? Sad to say, I never met Mary. I did not know about her, I thought, when I was preparing this talk but then tonight when I saw the book of essays called the *North Sea*, I recall reading that book in my early life as a civil servant dealing with the impact of North Sea oil gas development on the Scottish mainland.

We do have these important links with IUCN, the World Conservation Union. I, personally, am associated with the UK Committee of the World Commission on Protected Areas and I became a Trustee when I was the Chairman of the UK Committee of IUCN. I think it's very important that Martin has often politely and kindly whispered to me "How effective is that body?" and "Do not be oppressed by their way of dealing with things". Because IUCN is the most unusual body: it's government and non-government all together. And sometimes the government tail wags the charity dog.

### *Challenging accepted ideas*

I also believe that we should challenge traditional mindsets and introduce modern ideas. Personally, I am not a developer of modern ideas but I am a great gatherer of different perspectives and views. It is extremely important that we carry with us this sense of challenge. I always wonder that if we all think the same thing, we are probably all wrong. And, it's very important that we have mechanisms that challenge us. More specifically, I believe that the way biodiversity has been interpreted in the UK from the Convention on Biological Diversity has been very narrowly interpreted in a

way that Mary would have really strenuously objected to. It seems to suggest that nature is just about what's an endangered species and that we can have loads and loads of plans of action to save those species, while forgetting that they live in a symbiotic relationship within the wider environment themselves and that human activities have a great impact upon them, and environmental change itself. That's a very important issue that we will maybe be addressing in the future. We should embrace the environmental dynamics and functions and link nature and human change. My own last job in Scotland for ten years was to fight the battle for linking nature and environment with people, because we relied on societies around the country to achieve the international demands that were being made, and to recognise the vital importance of the long-term stewardship of the natural resources. And we had to recognise that imposing a view from environmental bureaucrats is not necessarily the right way to go.

#### *Sibthorp Trust programme for the future*

So what about our programme? In Sibthorp, over time, we have built up capital and we do not want to diminish that capital to any great extent, because we believe it is our role to ensure that the debates and the dialogues which Mary wanted stimulating can continue in the future.

Sibthorp I focussed developing thinking on the Ecosystem Approach. We are now finding that the principles and tactics that were espoused in the original publication from Sibthorp I, have been translated into the international Convention on Biological Diversity and are now just beginning

to register with Whitehall departments. But it is also important that we take stock periodically on the progress of new ideas and approaches. The current Trustees wish to provoke debate on progress with the Ecosystem Approach and the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

### *Publicising the Trust's plan*

The proceedings of Sibthorp II were published yesterday. It is our job to make sure that these are widely disseminated. We have made a deal with a publisher, something we did not do for the Sibthorp I proceedings, so that it will be widely publicised through web sites, and will be available through Amazon.

### *Social capital, social science and ecology*

Our current main business is developing Sibthorp III. We kick-started this a couple of years ago by inviting not an environmentalist but the very distinguished economist Partha Dasgupta to talk to us about what he called 'the idea of social capital'. This was a challenging presentation reflecting on society's values and the contribution to managing and using the environment by different societies around the world. There are so many dimensions to this issue. It's not just what the scientists say, it includes the traditional knowledge within societies which, we are discovering now, is very valuable. We have put a recorded version of the speech on the website, [www.sibthorp.org.uk](http://www.sibthorp.org.uk)

The four points that really came out of that first step in developing Sibthorp III are: can we use social science as opposed to just using environmental and ecological science to tease out this relationship between society and natural resources; is there a way of bridging some of the inequality of gaps within society about the use of natural resources - there are so many of those across the globe; how can we measure progress; and has the government really a role in this and, if so, precisely what is that role?

We thought this was a pretty wide subject and if we are going to make a difference we need to hone it. We lighted on biodiversity and human health and invited a group of people yesterday for a scoping seminar. One conclusion was that the subject of biodiversity and human health is really not very stimulating. Are there really connections? Are we not really asking: is there a linkage between the world outdoors and society's health and wellbeing? Our Sibthorpien approach has to be: is there an evidence base? Yesterday morning was quite fascinating. We were told there was a lot of written evidence. We said, "Can you produce it?" Organisations present said, "We'll give it to you". But during the course of the day we began to poke and prod in a way that I'm sure Mary would really have approved of. And the evidence seemed to get a little more flimsy. Was it really as hard as they said? The first question we need to address is: does this so-to-speak evidential base have any reality to it at all? We must give that a poke and a prod. We had a debate on whether modern hospitals without windows, on cramped sites reduce the chances of rapid recovery compared with the more traditional hospitals in grounds with beautiful trees. Well, we might

all think that, but is there any evidence for suggesting that that is the case or not? That's one of our questions. What is the ethical position and what are the values and beliefs? It's very easy for a bunch of professional people, with scientific and other sorts of technical expertise, administrators et cetera to quickly agree on what the values and beliefs are without recognising that we have no clue about what the rest of society really thinks about these things. How should we approach that sort of issue? Is there any evidential base for it at all? Do we continue to talk about approaches that are based on nature or begin to think about the human-centred approaches? It's very important. The message coming from our group yesterday was that it had to be the latter, if we were going to bridge a gap between the environment, the outdoors and the world of health.

### *Institutional obstacles*

It became pretty clear that there were lots of institutional blockages. We are so used to talking about a silo mentality. The person who works in the health service was very critical about the focus of the health service and it struck me that it seems to focus on 'illness' rather than 'wellness'. We should have a good debate on this issue. Is the orientation of one of our most expensive forms of support for human beings in our own country really working? Do we have a policy that bridges the gap between all these different bits of government? I'm rather sceptical as a former civil servant that we do and we need to find out what are the things that create those blockages and what are the things that might begin to break some of the barriers down. So that's where we are.

What would Mary think about all of that? I'm waiting for the whisper in my dreams this evening. All I want to say is that we are very conscious, as Trustees, of our inheritance and that is it extremely important that the debate is pushed further, that we tilt at windmills, that we prod the sacred cows and that we question long-standing beliefs. Because then I hope we might have made a little progress, so that Mary would have said, that's not too bad, but you could a lot better.

**Professor Crofts, CBE, Chairman, Sibthorp Trust**

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