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Cultural services of birds

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The extraordinary biological diversity of birds worldwide is, predictably, mirrored by an equally diverse response in human culture. Building from an established foundation in species and sites conservation, BirdLife International has, in recent years, begun to explore ways of engaging wider cultural values in its conservation programmes.

In a global context, this makes sound sense for a number of reasons. Although the biodiversity crisis is well known, and very well documented (not least by the 1360 experts who contributed to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment), the environment and conservation movement continues to fail to win arguments in the face of pressing political and economic reasoning. Poor accounting of the real value of nature, and of ecosystem services, undermines conservation. Rapid urbanization is increasingly removing people from access to ‘wild nature’ and leading to a disconnectedness which, in terms of voter apathy, very probably means a growing shortfall in support for nature conservation initiatives.

In this paper, we briefly outline our strategy for work on understanding, assessing and monitoring ecosystem services, particularly a collaborative study with the BirdLife Partner, Bird Conservation Nepal, which is developing methodologies, and toolkits, and testing them at three pilot sites. This work brings together science, policy, and BirdLife’s communities and livelihoods initiatives, with a strong focus on delivering innovative approaches at local level.

Celebrating local cultural distinctiveness is vital to the emerging grassroots movement within BirdLife, which is enhanced through work on our Local Empowerment Programme, and a growing network of so-called Local Conservation Groups. Clearly, birds influence cultural values from a bewilderingly diverse array of perspectives, from the canon of English poetry, to the mascots of Latin American football teams, but the common ground is specific cultural circumstances. Understanding that lies at the heart of effective action on the ground.

Moreover, at wider scales, cultural responses enable a proactive dialogue with audiences, including urban audiences, for whom more science-based approaches are often alien. In many instances, these values are intangible, rooted in history, tradition, folklore, faith and a wide range of arts ‘practices’ that are difficult to ‘commodify’, and hence overlooked. Yet, major biodiversity loss can, as in the case of precipitous South Asian culture declines, have a real cultural impact – in that instance in funeral practices at the Parsi Towers of Silence.

In an effort to explore the potential for engaging cultural values, BirdLife has initiated a series of interdisciplinary collaborations with authors, musicians and visual artists, embedding them alongside thematic programmes, such as our work on flyways, albatrosses and preventing extinctions. In the latter part of the paper, we will describe some of these collaborations, concluding with the initiative *Ghosts of Gone Birds*, through which, with film-maker Ceri Levy and creative agent Chris Aldhous, some 80 artists, authors and musicians were each challenged to produce work on the theme of an extinct bird species, and so to raise funds and awareness for the Partnership’s programme on Preventing Extinctions.