

THE ROLES OF RANGERS IN A WORLD IN CRISIS

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The warnings of scientists and environmental groups make it all too clear just how serious and increasingly imminent is the problem of climate change. The publicity it is being given almost obscures other very serious global environmental problems such as the biodiversity crisis. What has this to do with the work of countryside rangers? The world is becoming urbanised – that is an increasing proportion of the world's population live in towns and cities, and hence distanced physically and culturally from the natural world that they nonetheless remain dependent on.

When I was working briefly in Switzerland in the 1980's, I was shown the developing crisis of forest death in the Swiss Alps. This was a frightening spectacle; since Alpine forests are vital in the control of erosion, slope stability and control of avalanches. Without them, it is not possible to live in many areas. The Swiss authorities thought it would be easy to explain the significance of this to the Swiss people who were, after all, a mountain people who understood mountain management. Alas the Swiss had largely left the mountains. The generation they were addressing had grown up in Zurich and other cities. In one generation of urbanised life, all that knowledge had been lost and the authorities had to re-educate the population. This is happening all over the world! Australians, despite the images of Crocodile Dundee, are a highly urbanised nation. When I worked in Australia I was struck by how detached most Australians were from their environment. Many were afraid of it.

This loss of knowledge can go much deeper. "I'll just pour this down the sink" said our plumber, pointing to the brew of water, antirust and antifreeze compounds he had drained from our central heating system. I gently pointed out where the sinkpipe lead to and he then suggested he pour it down the outside drain that lead directly to the nearby stream. The most basic connections between their actions and the ecosystems around them are missing in the minds of most people growing up in urban situations. This in fact is now true even of many people living in rural areas. Restoring these links is a major task before us if appeals to manage our planet's environment more sustainably are to have impact.

There are only two direct growing interfaces between modern people and their environment. These are gardening and outdoor recreation. Outdoor recreation is a major emergent landuse in countries undergoing urbanisation. It is during their outdoor recreation that, globally, rangers encounter millions of people annually and, in their dialogue with them, help restore these links through enjoyable learning. When, some years ago, I was asked to undertake a study into any problems of access to countryside for schoolchildren on outings for environmental education, it became clear that the main constraint was the lack of biology teachers knowledgeable enough to interpret what they children saw and encountered in the countryside. The burden fell on Scottish

countryside rangers and I would guess that a similar burden falls on rangers elsewhere.

The task is of fundamental importance. It requires all the creativity, commitment and insight that many rangers bring to their work and the forthcoming International Rangers Conference will certainly help further that task. Scotland is uniquely placed as a country to consider the roles of rangers today. It was one of the earliest nations in the world to be urbanised. It was the fount of the enlightenment that still shapes how we approach the world today and it was the main inspirational force in the Romantic Movement through which we still see much of our environment. I am sure it will be an extremely stimulating event we can all look forward to.