

COMMENT

Alfred Russel Wallace, societal planning and environmental agenda

Many professionals regard the study of history as a waste of time. I can understand this sentiment where research proceeds rather automatically and largely without concern for possible social censure, but where societal forces directly complicate the agenda involved, there is reason for proceeding with a more open mind. Ignorance of the past invites reinventing the wheel; not only with respect to specific theories or models that were designed in some past era but never fully tested, but also to more general points of view that may extend beyond the immediate science of the question. Meanwhile, within most fields of knowledge there are constant attempts at reinvention; in many of these theory or research paradigms may become stale or stagnant. But just as often societal evolution may produce new agenda, including ones that require wholly new perspectives. The biodiversity movement of the past fifteen years is a good example of such forces in action. Human population pressures increasingly test the planet's ability to renew itself, a momentum that has caused conservationists and planners to move away from single-species and intra-national forms of management and toward larger-scale, interdisciplinary, understandings of the socio-natural processes at work.

Unfortunately, larger-scale understandings are not always so easy to forge. It sometimes helps, though, to exercise our mental faculties by revisiting the writings of broad-minded individuals of the past. Take, for example, the British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), best known as co-discoverer of the principle of natural selection, but also one of the late nineteenth century's most committed social critics and theorizers, and a devoted advocate of the rights of the average citizen (Smith 1998–; Raby 2001; Shermer 2002). Wallace was able to forge a cohesive view of individual and society that also addressed conservation concerns, and for this achievement his work might be looked to as a model suggesting frameworks that can balance the scientific and social objectives of today's planners.

Wallace was never afraid to apply his brilliantly analytical mind in any direction he saw fit: in addition to biological subjects, to ethnography, glaciology, geology and exobiology studies on the scientific side, and to land planning, economics, ethics and institutional reform on the social studies side. This dual aspect of Wallace's intellectual persona emerged early in his life and remained strong throughout it. Two especially important early influences are noteworthy: his exposure to Owenite socialist utopian ideals while in his mid-teens, and his subsequent experiences as a surveyor, an occupation that introduced him both to the natural world, and to the trials and tribulations of land occupancy and tenure. In his maturity Wallace became what we might term a 'socialist libertarian'. He was especially critical of various governmental programmes that he felt discriminated in favour of the privileged classes: a functioning government, he argued, should strive to give its living constituency full rights of access to all services and fundamental resources. It seems to have been his ideal that once basic needs were met for the greatest numbers possible, the accruing leisure and free time could then be devoted to self-examination and improvement, and thus contribute to a perpetual moral/ethical evolution at both the individual and societal levels.

Wallace's place in the history of conservation has been but little assessed, in part because his contributions to the subject were of such a diffuse nature. Still, his writings on tropical nature, including the hugely successful *Malay Archipelago* (Wallace 1869), provided inspiration for a whole generation of naturalists, not to mention artists and writers, and thousands of ordinary folk. Especially important in this regard were his ground-breaking studies on two now-famous icons of nature conservation, the orang-utan and the birds of paradise, and the way he used his first-hand knowledge of the natural world to support the development of the theory of natural selection. He was also one of history's most prolific collectors, in this most direct way of all markedly increasing our awareness of tropical diversity. And, although conservation was not his main business, over a

period of more than fifty years, extending almost right up to his death in 1913 (for example Wallace 1910), he spoke out from time to time on various issues regarding disappearing species and loss of natural habitat, as in Wallace (1863), *Tropical Nature and Other Essays* (Wallace 1878a), *Island Life* (Wallace 1880a), an 1885 address to the Land Nationalization Society (Wallace 1885), *Darwinism* (Wallace 1889), and the final chapter ('The Plunder of the Earth') of *The Wonderful Century* (Wallace 1898).

It is less well known that many of Wallace's social writings also supported conservation-related agendas, though these were sometimes delivered between the lines. For one, his then-extraordinary position that technologically unsophisticated native peoples were neither in intelligence nor morality inferior to Westerners allowed him to extend an ethical line in the sand in defence of their humane treatment and protection. The last portion of one of his late essays (Wallace 1906, p. 182), for example, ranks with the most moving condemnations of colonial exploitation to be found anywhere in the literature:

'For nearly twelve years I travelled and lived mostly among uncivilised or completely savage races, and I became convinced that they all possessed good qualities, some of them in a very remarkable degree, and that in all the great characteristics of humanity they are wonderfully like ourselves. Some, indeed, among the brown Polynesians especially, are declared by numerous independent and unprejudiced observers, to be both physically, morally, and intellectually our equals, if not our superiors; and it has always seemed to me one of the disgraces of our civilisation that these fine people have not in a single case been protected from contamination by the vices and follies of our more degraded classes, and allowed to develop their own social and political organism under the advice of some of our best and wisest men and the protection of our world-wide power. That would have been indeed a worthy trophy of our civilisation. What we have actually done, and left undone, resulting in the degradation and lingering extermination of so fine a people, is one of the most pathetic of its tragedies.'

Ethics, in fact, informed most of Wallace's social writings, which reflected much of the progressive spirit of Owen and the social economy theories of John Stuart Mill. Like Mill, he was particularly outspoken on human rights in the context of land conservation and reform, for example supporting in his book *Land Nationalisation* (Wallace 1882) the establishment of greenbelts, protection of historic monuments and rural commons, and a more enlightened approach to protecting landscape and microclimate from mining operations. His writings on conventional conservation subjects were actually relatively few, though in Wallace (1872) he advanced an economic strategy for the use of land surrounding Victoria Park in London, and in Wallace (1878b) he outlined a novel operations plan for the Epping Forest reserve while seeking a position as the tract's Superintendent; instead, his point of departure was the notion that everyone should have right of access to the land and, by extension, that individuals should not have the right to own it absolutely:

'There is no other natural and universal source of private property but this – that every man has a right to the produce of his own labour; and hence, as land is not produced by man it cannot equitably become private property.' (Wallace 1883, p. 359)

Wallace believed that State guardianship of the land would prevent its overexploitation and degradation:

'The only cases in which Government would have the unfettered disposal of the whole of the land would be in the case of commons, moors, and unenclosed tracts generally. Along with other landed property, this would of course fall in to the State in due course . . . Some might, and probably would, be kept as common land in perpetuity, for the use of the surrounding occupiers and the enjoyment of the public generally. Where extensive tracts of moor, bog, and mountain prevail, as in many parts of Ireland, the reclamation of some of this might be encouraged by granting definite portions rent-free for a certain term of years, and at a low ground-rent afterwards, on condition of enclosure and cultivation.' (Wallace 1880b, p. 726)

Despite his great reputation as a field biologist, I believe it is more to Wallace's core vision of an evolving society than to his purely biological contributions that conservationists of today might most fruitfully turn for inspiration. Although a self-proclaimed 'Radical', Wallace was by no means a rabble-rouser, favouring suggestions for reform that neither directly punished the ineptly corrupt or unfeeling nor advocated economically-destabilizing revolution. His land nationalization programme was not merely intended as a political bridge to socialism; for example, it also illuminated means whereby mineral and biological resources could be developed in ways protecting them from careless speculation and overexploitation. In Wallace's day it was questioned how large land holdings could be divested without recourse to State-sponsored buyouts that might bankrupt the nation. Wallace thought he had solved this problem by suggesting that large landholders be compensated through terminable annuities that would only come due two or three generations in the future, thus giving them and their descendants (and the nation as a whole) time to adjust to the change. Today society faces resource exploitation problems that are not wholly dissimilar, and that might be dealt with in parallel ways. Wallace wanted to assure a healthy rural economy through his nationalization efforts; in our time the conservation issue involves native species more than domesticated ones, but resolution of all related questions still begins largely with who 'owns' the land and what pressures can be brought to bear on selfish actions. With allowance for the fact that times and objectives have changed, it is not inconceivable that some of Wallace's plans to use terminable annuities and other devices to support a conversion to rent occupation formats might actually suggest opportunities related to, for example, the preservation of lands for corridor projects, or the compensation of Third World governments by non-governmental organizations intent on maintaining the natural status of 'hotspot' areas. As Wallace stated in 1880, referring to his treatment of the Irish land problem of the time: 'The principles laid down are of universal application, but the time and the mode of applying such principles are matters of expediency' (Wallace 1880*b*, p. 736).

Most problems are ultimately resolved by transcending them. One thing that I find particularly refreshing about Wallace's vision is that he seems to have come to a logically consistent understanding of the overall path of human self-improvement, both as regards itself, and how it could come to be reflected in environmentally-projected motives. We could do worse than to occasionally take the time to revisit such thoughts, as perceptive appraisals of both short and long-term societal objectives will increasingly become prior considerations if we expect to make successes of our conservation-oriented initiatives.

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