



Human Nature Projects

Elliot Connor

Sydney, Australia

It was a clear night in northern Botswana. Ten-year-old Elliot and his family had set up camp for the night, with their tents grouped around a little campfire. There was nothing around, except the infinite expanse of the veld, the stars in the clear night sky, and the sounds of the bush. Elliot was trotting along behind his parents and his big brother, on the way back from the campground bathroom to their tents.

Suddenly, he sensed a movement behind him, and he froze—they were in the wilderness after all. There were all sorts of animals around. He turned around slowly.

“There, about two meters behind me, was a young leopard, crouched quite low to the ground,” Elliott remembers. “It was stalking me.”

For three never-ending seconds, Elliot looked right into the leopard’s eyes. Luckily, at that very moment, his older brother turned around, flashlight in hand. The beam of light scared the leopard away; but for the rest of the night Elliot and his family stayed in their tent while the leopard kept circling the camp site. His father stood guard by the fire, with a bottle of wine and a shovel in his hands.

Elliot would never forget this encounter with the leopard. From the time he was a small child, animals had been an important part of his life. His parents were passionate bird watchers and he often tagged along with them, using their old camera gear to take pictures. When his family moved from the U.K. to Australia when he was five, his passion for animals only continued to grow.

But as he grew older, he realized that animal species around the world face a lethal enemy. Human activities have decimated natural habitats and changed the climate, which causes many species to go extinct. According to UN estimates, about 200 plant, insect, bird, and mammal species are disappearing from our planet every day.

To fight this trend, conservationists around the world are trying to educate people about the need for saving endangered species. When he was 15, Elliott decided that he wanted to turn his passion for animals into doing something. So he started volunteering with the Birdlife Australia Discovery Center, which was just around the corner from a local park in Sydney. But soon he understood that there was a long way to go.

“It was quite a shock for me,” he says. “All the volunteers were at least 70 years old. And there were almost no visitors coming through.”

Elliott was appalled to see how isolated the field of conservationism was in Australia. So, six months later, he decided to start his own club for naturalists. It was the first of its kind in Sydney. The main purpose of it was just to try to inspire more people to go outside and experience nature. He also joined many other organizations, and volunteered wherever he could. In fact, he put in more than 300 hours of volunteering in just 12 months—but in all that time, he never met anyone his age.

His volunteer work also took him abroad. In January 2019, Elliot was working in a rescue center for raptors and hedgehogs in southern France. One night he was doing research into various conservationist organizations, when he

realized that many of the websites he was looking at were decades old. A lot of the organizations had ceased operations, and even the well-established ones were struggling to incorporate young volunteers.

“It was very difficult for me as a minor, to work my way into these organizations so I could gain experience,” he remembers. “That is sort of what triggered it for me.”

Taking long winter walks through the beautiful landscape of southern France, he started wondering what could be done to get young people involved in conservationism. “That’s where a lot of the philosophy for Human Nature Projects came about,” he says. “It’s designed as an entry point for volunteers. We’re trying to promote it as a very accessible, engaging, community form of conservation.”

For Elliot, it was the beginning of a very exciting project: in June 2019, he officially founded his organization, Human Nature Projects. It has quickly grown into a decentralized network of more than 1,400 activists in 110 countries. “We want to empower each of our volunteers as an individual, and help them create the impact that they want to make,” Elliot explains. “But we also recognize the power of the collective.”

The semi-independent country teams organize their own outreach and fundraising efforts, and projects, which ensures that their activities have the biggest possible impact on the local level. The teams organize a wide range of activities: the Australian team has just started a campaign on bush fires, while the team in the Congo is focusing on climate change, and volunteers in Uganda are fighting to rescue chimpanzees.

“I think it just goes to show the power of being able to link up such passionate youth leaders, and supporting and engaging them in this process,” Elliot says.

For Elliot, who describes himself as an introvert, it was hard to take the initial step of presenting his ideas and his vision to a wider audience. “The biggest challenge was having the confidence in myself, being able to just put myself out there,” he says. “In a sense, I just needed to have the ambition to aim for something so large.”

But even during the very first meetings with other activists for Human Nature Projects, Elliot felt that he had created something that could inspire others, not just himself. “It was an amazing realization that I was able to speak with people all around the globe,” he remembers. “That’s something I never even dreamed of. I’m very introverted myself, I never took on leadership roles in school.”

But Elliot is dedicated to the issue: when he first started his project, he would work on it after school, from 5 pm until 9 pm, trying to learn more about the underlying problems at night. It was tiring, and in the beginning, responses to his outreach work were slow to come in.

“You just have to have the perseverance to move on,” Elliot says. “You have to find new routes, be creative about how you set about projects like this.”

Elliot knew for sure that the issue of conservationism needed a new approach, and a new generation to take up the fight. Being a resource-poor field, conservation projects often struggle with a lack of funding. But there are also issues of duplicated efforts and miscommunication, he says.

“We need to redefine how we’re measuring our impact,” he says. “We need to work through the people first. We need a community-centric model of conservation. This means changing the perspective of communities-- which is obviously the root cause of these problems.”

That is why Elliot came up with the four C’s of conservation: Connection, Curiosity, Creativity, and Collaboration. For him, it is all about educating and engaging people in the fight for animals, and changing their perspective on nature.

“Increasingly, we’re learning that animals are just as intelligent, just as complex as we are,” he says. “My life goal is reframing our relationship with nature. I think if we can reevaluate what it means to be human, then that is the ideal way to be able to live alongside animals.”

It is therefore a central part of Elliot's work to make people appreciate the nature around them and build a community around a positive message on conservation. "The positive side of things is often lost when we talk about conservation," he says. "In order to get people involved in the cause, you need a positive message about how we all can contribute our share to saving nature."

Elliot's Human Nature Projects is a successful example of this approach. He has an Excel spreadsheet on his computer, with the names and contact information of over 1,400 volunteers around the world, working to save endangered species.

"When I scroll through it, it feels amazing, I can't quite describe it," he says. "Seeing all of the volunteers conducting these amazing projects is definitely what drives me forward."

When Elliot finishes high school in November, he is planning to take the Human Nature Projects to the next level. He has been dreaming of going into wildlife filming for a long time. Together with an international wildlife movie production company, he and his organization are planning to set up a website where 200 volunteers from around the world will produce a 24-hour live stream of wildlife in their home countries. Elliot is going to take a gap year to travel around the world, meet his fellow volunteers in person, and start working on the film project.

"You need to get out there and do something," he says, and he adds, "Whatever you do, aim for the stars. If you miss, you will hit the moon."

The least I can do is speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Jane Goodall

Call to Action: Join Elliot's Human Nature Projects: <https://humannatureprojects.org/>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
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