

This year's Private Land Conservation Conference was hosted by the Tasmanian Land Conservancy (TLC) on behalf of the Australian Land Conservation Alliance (ALCA). The theme was Valuing Nature, which made the conference a must-attend event for those of us constantly trying to raise the value of nature in political debate and place conservation firmly on the political agenda.

The task of delegates was to examine how the wellbeing of an environment is attributed. Business is now firmly wedded to conservation, and one of TLC's sponsors was the National Australia Bank, so first we had to get to grips with concepts such as 'natural capital' and 'ecosystem services'. But just as the environment cannot be separated from economics, neither can it be studied in isolation from community or cultural connections.

Underlying many topics were recurring ideas – partnerships and collaboration, sharing information and reaching out to wider audiences; basing conservation strategies on Indigenous practice or on-farm biodiversity; and connectivity, whether across island archipelagos or continents.

There were some great stories: of a scientist and a photographer on an island inhabited only by Shy Albatross; of human and animal recovery, together, after a firestorm; and, on the return to Aboriginal ownership of Truwana (Cape Barren Island), the environmental remediation work of on-country rangers.

One afternoon there was a big debate on the subject "Nature Should Be On The Balance Sheet", with speakers for and against. The Affirmatives were adamant that we should put a monetary value on, for example, the importance of bees to pollination, and the very exercise of doing that would prioritise and increase the value of the 'service'. The Negatives argued simply, that nature's spiritual essence is priceless.

Marla Edwards, Director of Development at The Nature Conservancy Australia, for the Negatives, played a video in which young people were asked to describe what it was about their mothers they most appreciated. They struggled and stumbled, but it was obvious their mothers were highly valued. Then they were asked if they would sell their mothers, and for how much. Their shock, and that of some of the delegates, was palpable.

We laughed, but the point was made. The winning team was decided by 'clapometer'. Usually in such light-hearted instances, the adjudicator is

diplomatic and awards a draw. Not this time: the Negatives were clear winners by sheer volume of noise. A room full of ecologists and environmentalists, scientists and writers was always likely to identify with nature's incalculable worth. Emotions aside, however, unless we can measure all the costs of society's development, what hope do we have of making those who reap most benefit pay the true cost?

For greater detail of the content of the Conference, and an account of a field trip beforehand, please see my blog at

<http://heyjudeblog.com/blog/2017/11/13/dwri8mhpqnn8jpi5b9auiwtdjlscOf>

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