

The Sanctuary Interview

Meet Vance G. Martin

President of The WILD Foundation for 26 years, he is the face of one of the world's most respected programmes, the World Wilderness Congress, which has a track record of influencing governments, mass media and conservation groups such as the IUCN, in every continent. He has a special affinity for South Africa and South Asia but lives in Colorado, U.S. from where he directs and works with a livewire set of global associates who lobby and campaign on issues related to biodiversity protection and climate change. A prolific writer, he has also authored several books, the latest among which is a stunning publication simply titled, *Wilderness*. He speaks to **Bittu Sahgal** about his inspirations, commitment to the planet and his mission.

You joined the WILD Foundation as its President in 1984. What was the focus of your life before that?

My early career path was neither auspicious nor a standard model for others, and financial security was certainly never a deciding factor. I always wanted to be in nature and my first childhood thought about my life as a grown up was that I wanted to be a Forest Ranger. Yet in college I shocked myself by realising I was not a Forester in the traditional sense. I admitted to myself that I knew not what I wanted to be – all I knew was that it was not what I was being taught. So I dropped out of Forestry and studied English Literature. I then travelled for two to three

years in Asia and Europe, on a “rather less than abundant” budget, trying to understand people and the planet. I ended that phase working as a volunteer for 10 years at the Findhorn Foundation in northern Scotland, to help build and run a residential, educational/spiritual community... my first experience of working in the “charitable sector”. The place, people, philosophy and practice was a tremendous influence that helped shaped my life. I began to trust myself, read the “signs” around me every day, and put some pieces together to create skills and a world view through which I could apply myself. Fortunately, my many mistakes were forgiven by my friends, family, colleagues, and

mentors. I began to raise a family, laughed a lot, worried some and worked hard all the time. Towards the end of that process, in 1980, I met Ian Player in Australia.

It's been a long ride Vance, what was the real trigger? What sucked you into defending the wilderness?

Once I met Ian, my personal but general commitment to nature turned very specifically to wilderness. We quickly sized each other up – me 31 and he 54 – and felt a mutual trust and instinctive bond. After a bit he “made me an offer I couldn't refuse”... a job of sorts, bags of responsibility, some good connections, committed mentoring – and no money. “If you raise the money to make it

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work, you can do what you want.” Sounded right to me, despite the reality that I had no income, no family money to fall back on and a wife and two young children.

Any particular incident or natural experience that was pivotal in your life?

That is as challenging as to ask me if I have a favourite place. I put “special experiences” in three categories. The first is watching or feeling wild nature – the woodpeckers I watched as a boy of two years, the Eastern box turtles that always appeared after the rains in the great temperate forests of the Eastern U.S. (and are now, almost, no more), the wild dog regurgitating food for her sister's young in Botswana; Second, the mentors that life provided to me at the right time, men and women who encouraged and supported my commitment to nature, tolerated my eccentricities, and scolded me when it was needed; and third, numerous non-physical experiences that are as real as

driving my car or eating my dinner, a challenge to explain briefly, yet which (continue to) convince me that there is something “other”, that we are not alone on this mission, and that if we are assiduous, unyielding, and caring in our commitment to nature and human integrity, the prospects of success for humans are significantly more than can be accounted for by demographics and the normal laws of physics.

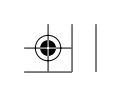
Who do you hold out as the wilderness prophets that the world should know?

I noticed from an early age – and always thought it was no mere coincidence – that the people who have affected more humans than anyone else on earth, also drew inspiration, strength and metaphor from their time in wilderness and nature – Mohammed, Buddha, Christ, Lao-Tzu and others. It is interesting to me that the wilderness experiences of these people are

overlooked. Others, I guess, are those who can communicate their feelings and understanding about wilderness – it is hard to do better than Terry Tempest Williams. She has written many books, with the amazing *Refuge* her most acclaimed. But her little-known *Desert Quartet* is one of the best wilderness books ever produced.

What does the wilderness mean to you personally Vance?

Wilderness has a sense of *proportion*. It has beauty, efficiency, complex relationships and interactions and a good “feedback loop” – if it cannot integrate input, you know it. It is dynamic, tangible and real, yet there is always “something else,” a mystical quality. It is also a learning environment. Within its workings are clues to all the practical solutions and spiritual context we need to live as a technologically advanced, healthy and prosperous human society – if only we understood it!



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COURTESY: VANCE G. MARTIN

Vance Martin (previous page, right), President, WILD Foundation, finds that if done correctly, collaboration creates synergy, which in turn produces results. Over the years, Martin has collaborated with local and international wildlife experts and conservationists including El Mehdi Doumbia (previous page, left), a Tuareg field conservationist and Iain Douglas Hamilton (centre) of Save the Elephants. WILD has helped supply valuable equipment for anti-poaching and other field work, including this aircraft (above) in Zakouma, Chad (North Africa).

Talking about understanding the wilderness, has President Obama merely flattered to deceive, or is he going to deliver on his promise to protect wild nature and fight climate change?

Obama understands relationship and mutuality. Therefore I feel strongly – as much as one can about any politician, especially one who is not intrinsically an outdoorsman – that Obama is genuine in his desire to bring cohesion and sense into our social and economic contract with nature, and that he sees the issue of climate change clearly. Like all of us he is far from perfect. Far more than most of his predecessors, he inherited a mess of epic proportions – the philosophical battleground that is our world today, with extremism of every stripe on every side; political gridlock in the U.S. and elsewhere; a financial system with little or no sense of integrity; and a dramatically out-of-balance world reeling with predictable environmental results. He has his plate full of life-sized, competing demands. But I believe he is genuine, yes.

I miss Nora Kreher who you and I loved so much and who fought so hard for elephants, Africa and the planet. Anything you might want to ask her if she were with us today?

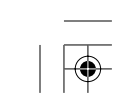
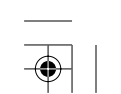
Dear Nora seemed to handle “the imponderables” better than most of us, I believe because she knew the value of doing good things well, and the importance of trusting one’s own instincts. I relied greatly upon her for her inner compass, her direct understanding of the role of nature, and her inherent integrity in dealing with people. If she were here, I would certainly ask her as I always did, what books she was reading. We explored so many authors together – such as Chatwin, Kaplan, Chadwick – and not all of them “eco writers”, certainly. Robert Kaplan, for example, is a political and social writer, and is pessimistic about the clash of human society and nature. *The Ends of the Earth – A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, is an awesome, tough and riveting read, fulsomely illustrating the

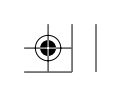
environmental lessons of history, and it is not optimistic. Therefore, while it informs us it also tests our inner conviction and our commitment to create a better world. The book has an awesome bibliography.

How do we handle the conundrum of the forest, ecosystem people and nature? How should ordinary people battle money-power from destroying what is precious?

We live in a complex world with competing and valid demands, priorities and agendas. That said, a simple, basic principle needs to be at the core of every household, company, community and government. While “taking care of nature” is just one of many valid social/human priorities, it is *the first among equals* because if we trash our home, we trash ourselves. If we disrespect the mother who raised us, we disrespect ourselves. By this, I don’t mean Nature Worship – I mean “common sense”. Spread the word! Each of us needs to practice it, nicely insist upon it, vote for it, and say thank you when people do it.

WILD’s next ‘engagement’ is a new concept, a vision with practical outcomes, called Nature Needs Half. It draws upon the best ecological research of the last 15 years, all of which increasingly tells us that in order for wild nature to continue to provide life support (‘ecosystem services’), it generally needs to have at least half of its land and water intact, and interconnected. It is bold vision and not without controversy – but it is both important and possible.





COURTESY, VANCE G. MARTIN

Vance Martin's organisational philosophy is focused on fostering a movement, not growing an institution. His work has taken him across the globe including the Great Karoo in South Africa's Eastern Cape. He says he prefers to look for ways to add value, help others do what they need to do and "learn a great deal in the process."

How do you manage to work with and for so many non-profits – The Cheetah Conservation Fund, Friends of Peace Parks, Conservation & Preservation Charities of America, Fulcrum Publishing, and of course your job as Chair of IUCN's Wilderness Task Force and your responsibility as a Trustee of the Wilderness Foundations in Africa and the U.K.?

I have an inherent sense of collaboration – it just seems natural to me – and seek out opportunities to do so. Done correctly, I find that collaboration creates synergy, and synergy produces results – it is effective, efficient and satisfying. In the end, it's nice to feel satisfied! In addition, my organisational philosophy or model is focused on fostering a movement, not growing an institution... so I get around a lot, look for ways to add value, try to help others do what they need to do, and always learn a great deal in the process.

How should we remain optimistic? Apart from merely mouthing the hope, can the individual truly make a difference?

Individual engagement is critical – the environmental crisis is not a spectator sport. But it is tough and we seldom feel

that we are in control. In truth, here is really only *one* thing that we can truly control – and that is our personal attitude. Hope and positive thought are powerful and productive attitudes, and when coupled with hard (and smart) work they produce real and durable results. What's more, even though hope and optimism have inherent value, by engaging in tough issues – of which there is certainly an abundance – our attitudes are tempered in the fire of reality, and our internal strength grows just as do our knowledge and skills.

So what's next for the Wild Foundation? How do you intend to go to battle tomorrow?

I try to avoid the war metaphors even though it is truly a war of sorts with which we are faced. I identify people as enemies only as a last resort – and try instead to identify clearly the issues and challenges that many people and institutions represent as we engage them in the need to change. WILD's next 'engagement' is a new concept, a vision with practical outcomes, called *Nature Needs Half*. It draws upon the best ecological research of the last 15 years, all of which

increasingly tells us that in order for wild nature to continue to provide life support ('ecosystem services'), it generally needs to have at least half of its land and water intact, and interconnected. It is a bold vision and not without controversy – but it is both important and possible. *Nature Needs Half* is science-based, but it also strikes me as characteristic of a common-sense relationship, or a partnership. So, we're aligning our programmes and actions around this, and asking others to work on this vision in the way and at the scale at which they can. That's the way that WILD works best... encouraging and facilitating a movement, and not just building another conservation organisation. The power to make the necessary changes in our world does not reside in an institution; it is amply inherent within individuals and in the human spirit.

And your message to the children of tomorrow?

Please do not blame us too much for the mess you inherit, for that will only fester within you. Have faith, take action, do your best, and have fun. 🐾

