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Circumnavigating Hope: A Journey to Find and Share Successful Environmental Outcomes

The relationships between emotions and environmental engagement is an important, emergent area of study. In *Engaging with Climate Change*, a major new book edited by psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe, 23 authors explain how guilt, fear, and anger about the state of the environment lead to a repertoire of defensive strategies, including blame-shifting, fatalism, and techno-optimism. I have discovered that a critical piece in shifting the dominant environmental narrative beyond “doom and gloom” is connecting people with authentic, peer-reviewed, scientific examples of successful conservation outcomes. They need to believe that species can and do rebound, to understand that ecosystem resilience is possible, and to see proof of successful conservation outcomes in order to feel authentically hopeful about the state of the planet and their capacity to influence it.

Yet, sourcing these examples is not easy. “Doom and gloom” has become the de facto cultural construct not only for environmental communication but for the environmental science it seeks to communicate. In 2011, a team of distinguished rainforest biologists, including the late Navjot Sodhi of the National University of Singapore, published a groundbreaking article in *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* “Widespread pessimism prevails,” they wrote. “What successes have been won are rarely highlighted or fail to attract wide attention” (p. 585). As Nancy Knowlton of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and Jeremy Jackson of Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California put it: “An entire generation of scientists has now been trained to describe, in ever greater and more dismal detail, the death of the ocean.” Fortunately, according to Knowlton and Jackson in the February 2011 issue of *Solutions Journal*, “Many students today take a different attitude. Like medical doctors, they want to save their patients, not write their obituaries.”

In an effort to fill that need, I hosted a gathering of conservation biology thought leaders in December 2012. The result is *Circumnavigating Hope*—a multi-year collaboration of the Zoological Society of London, the Smithsonian Institution, other ISE partners, and a popular press. The project draws on an array of disciplines and creative approaches to shift the environmental narrative toward hope, resilience and successful conservation outcomes. The project comprises a popular book, a global inventory of successful conservation outcomes, a participatory social media application and an international series of face-to-face and virtual dialogue events.

Circumnavigating Hope responds to the need for solutions-based orientations and answers a number of pressing needs. From the perspective of the Zoological Society of London, it provides a means for field-based marine conservation practitioners to learn about authentic marine conservation successes, thereby increasing the likelihood of

their replication. It extends the work that Nancy Knowlton at the Smithsonian Institution began with her *Beyond the Obituaries* program, which seeks to shift marine conservation research beyond recording losses toward documenting and professional sharing of successful conservation outcomes. Furthermore, it addresses the problem of public apathy toward environmental issues by using the knowledge that conservation psychology and environmental education researchers, including me, have been assembling on the emotional implications of the “doom and gloom” narrative, and by creating personal story- and dialogue-based opportunities for meaningful community engagement.

Circumnavigating Hope reflects the belief that story telling is central to social movements because it constructs agency, shapes identity and motivates action. Social movements require storytellers who are able to acquire leadership, gain adherents and develop a capability of mobilizing needed resources to achieve success.

I will use my 6-month fellowship with the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society to fuel the emerging social movement towards hope, resilience and the environment. I will use the fellowship to assemble and write a book for the *Circumnavigating Hope* project. The book will set the tone and approach for this international collaborative project. I know that the combination of such an intellectually enriching environment and the opportunity for intense, focused writing will enable me to move in innovative and challenging directions with the book, and to lead and enrich the broader research agenda, and social movement.