



A Rocha UK is 20

CEO Andy Atkins looks at the journey so far and where we believe God is leading us next.

These are challenging times. As the world grapples with the impact of the worst pandemic in a century, other potentially catastrophic threats, such as climate change and species loss, have not gone away. Crises are accumulating; hope is rare. Is there anything a small Christian charity can do?

With God, yes. A Rocha UK's two-decade history has taught us much about the way God works, and gives us hope for what he might do next. A Rocha UK was founded in 2001 as a local Christian conservation project in a deprived area of west London. A group of volunteers, gathered by local vicar Dave Bookless and his wife Anne, started restoring a couple of areas for nature. First, it was a section of canal in the Living Waterways project. Then it was the whole of Minet Country Park, with a diverse mixture of habitats over its 90 acres.

Roots

Dave and Anne had themselves been inspired by the 'original' A Rocha founded in Portugal by Peter and Miranda Harris. They had visited the Cruzinha field study centre opened in 1986 in the Algarve and, like so many others who spent time there, Dave and Anne were blown away. They felt called to establish a Christian community caring for creation in the rather different environment of Southall.



A Rocha's first field study centre, Cruzinha, is close to the Alvor estuary, a crucial staging post for migrating birds. © Jean Morgan

Go back 20 years, and perhaps the biggest challenge for a Christian nature conservation organisation was persuading the vast majority of other Christians that our faith had anything at all to say about the environment. A Rocha UK threw itself at that challenge. This quickly took us beyond doing conservation locally to providing talks and materials to help Christians understand the biblical basis for caring for the environment – books like Dave Bookless' seminal *Planetwise*, for example. Around the country, like-minded people began small associated projects. A Rocha UK attracted a core of committed supporters, many thrilled to find others like themselves – Christians who not only loved nature but believed we have a biblical mandate to care for it too.



A Rocha UK supporters at work on their local Wildlife Trust reserve. © Jean Morgan

Branches

Fast forward to 2021. From its roots in Southall, A Rocha UK's work has branched out widely. The Southall work continues strongly around our Wolf Fields Nature Reserve. But who, 20 years ago, would have dreamed that A Rocha UK would now be leading a fast-growing Partners in Action network of Christian organisations committed to managing their own land for nature in all four UK nations? Or that we would be facilitating an Eco Church movement of more than 3,400 local churches in England and Wales? Or hosting an 'online community' – the phrase hadn't been invented 20 years ago – of 'Wild Christians' caring for nature in their homes and communities? We are amazed at where God has led, and often carried, us.

Values

Similarly, our work remains rooted in the A Rocha family values of the '5 Cs': Christian, conservation, community, cross-cultural and co-operation – only the way we express these has diversified as our context has changed dramatically. Scientific data is now telling us that time is extremely short to avoid



Seabirds are amongst the species worst affected by climate change; both the kittiwake and guillemot (pictured) are in decline. © Norman Crowson

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runaway climate change and mass extinction of species – and with those, human suffering on an apocalyptic scale. Conservation organisations cannot ignore climate change but must engage in how species loss and global warming can be addressed together. There is an urgent need for governments and all sections of society to act themselves and to work with others; A Rocha UK now collaborates with a number of secular as well as Christian organisations.

Catalyst

The Church context has changed dramatically too. Among UK Christians, the more common 'environmental question' is no longer *whether* Christians should care for creation, but *how* to do so effectively. The Church of England has committed to trying to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2030, and other denominations are heading in a similar direction. Still not everyone gets it; but the next generation, the future of the church, absolutely does. So we are developing new forms of community, through our national programmes and virtually, to support thousands more Christians and churches to go further faster.

The little-appreciated fact is that UK Christians and churches have huge potential to help bring about a low-carbon, high-nature economy – if we use what we are, and what God has given us. That includes 50,000 worshipping communities in the UK, along with all our buildings, land, people, income, investments, moral voice and prayer, local convening power and international links.

Mission possible

So what does all this mean for A Rocha UK in the critical decade ahead? First, we believe God is affirming the mission we defined through much prayer and discussion five years ago: **To equip Christians to care for the environment – for God, nature and all people.** Second, we should specifically focus on delivering a restorative vision we summarise as:

- **Land for nature:** We want to see a large amount of land owned by UK churches, Christian organisations and Christian individuals being managed for nature.
- **Christians for nature:** We want to see the majority of the UK's local churches and Christians engaged in deliberate and ongoing action to protect nature and address climate change practically and by using their collective voice to speak up for change.
- **Nature for all:** We want to see large numbers of the general public actively benefitting from access to nature on land owned or managed by UK churches, Christian organisations and individuals.

To bring this about we will need God's help and many more people to join us. But if this vision is of him, we and all our supporters are privileged to be included in it, and to be able to bring hope on a much larger scale in the years ahead.



A bee orchid found just before Minet Country Park opened was a symbol of hope on the previously neglected site. © Norman Crowson (bee orchid)