

What kind of animal are you?



Dr Glyn Davies

After fifteen years living in rainforests Dr Glyn Davies is now Director of Conservation at the Zoological Society of London. Simon Hodgson talks to him about swapping tents for ties.

"I was born overseas" says Glyn Davies. "My mother was born overseas, my wife was born overseas, her parents were born overseas and my kids were both born overseas. Overseas is normal". And so it has proved. During his career he has been based in Borneo, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Cameroon and even (wildest of all?) Brussels. These weren't business trips: "I've spent a lot of time just under tarpaulin. I need to smell and breathe wild places".

But Glyn Davies sits talking to me in a London hotel wearing a suit and tie and looking every inch the respectable man about town. He is now the Director of Conservation at the grandly titled Zoological Society of London (ZSL to its friends). He has a responsible role directing around thirty conservation projects worldwide, with a budget of £3m, thirty ZSL scientists and 'hundreds' of locally employed staff in the field.

Most visitors to the 'living collections' at London Zoo and Whipsnade are completely oblivious to this behind-the-scenes work. They are equally unaware that ZSL includes the Institute of Zoology – a university-level laboratory supporting the Society's work. The field conservation programmes form the third element, covering all habitats from deserts to the marine environment.

Davies' own research was in primate ecology: "How do monkeys make a living in the rainforest?" as he neatly puts it.

He studied zoology at Bristol building on his boyhood hobby: "I was born in Kuwait ... not a lot to do in the summer holidays, so I spent a lot of time in the desert catching lizards and snakes". After graduation he went to Borneo "and fell in love with the rainforest. It was an ocean of incomprehension. It absorbed me". A PhD from Cambridge, some advice to the Malaysian Government on the formation of two national parks and he was off again.

Five years research in Sierra Leone was followed by Kenya, now working for DFID, the UK's Department for International Development, and all the time looking at forest ecosystems and those living in them. "We had a very big team and we could not make the socio-economic and biological gel" he explains, "there was a kind of rub on 'conservation' versus 'people'". Davies began to realise that many of the big conservation questions centred not on biological science, but on the local community. How did they perceive the forest? How did they use it? What did they see as important?

Next stop was Cameroon looking at the upland forest areas. The bark of a particular tree was in great demand from the drug companies to make medicine to combat prostate cancer. "It was kind of unregulated so people just cut down a whole tree, stripped the bark and sold it by the kilo. But there it worked for the first time. The social science advisor, the biodiversity advisor and the Cameroonian teams really got engaged, trying not to destroy but still allowing things to be gathered". Davies and his colleagues began a programme of joint surveys allowing local people to work out for themselves where to cut, and how much.

But no ecosystem is stable, not even a Whitehall department like DFID. The new Labour Government arrived, bringing with it a "ferocious focus on poverty", prioritising poverty relief above all else. Suddenly Davies' personal blend on conservation and social benefit slipped down the list. "Time to leave" he says simply. His move to ZSL felt like coming home.

As he tells this story it is obvious he is not afraid to say what he thinks, and say it clearly – not always prized attributes among civil service mandarins. Later he gives me another glimpse, this time as we are talking about the delicate subject of bushmeat – the millions of tonnes of wild animals killed for food each year in West and Central Africa and a favourite target of the conservation establishment. Davies points out that most of these animals are under no threat and furthermore, that many of them are crop pests such as Cane Rats or Porcupines. "It's no good saying to people 'you can't eat Cane Rats' ..." when they have suffered from the "economic collapse of cocoa and coffee". But endangered species like gorillas are another matter. They provide only a tiny proportion of the total market and it is quite possible to discourage that trade. Davies' prescription is a case-by-case blend of science and cultural awareness; "You can't make blanket policies" he states flatly.

While we're on controversial subjects I decide to tackle him on the link between conservation and Zoos. How does the caging of wild animals provide any benefit for their brethren in the field? The first answer is very simple – money taken at the turnstiles. "The Zoos contribute £250,000 from income" explains Davies, which goes towards core costs (such as management and fundraising) that are notoriously difficult to cover from project sponsorship. Then there's awareness and education. "Kids are excited by seeing the animals" he states, "and it's not the same as a video. You see them light up".

However Davies freely admits that the simplistic argument of "breeding animals and putting them back" is oversold, but goes on to offer me a host of better ones. The crossover between Zoological veterinary science and conservation is critically important. The conservation programmes draw heavily on the expertise of the Zoo vets, in areas as diverse as wildlife disease, health and genetics. "That has come from vets knowing how to breed them and how to stop them being sick" he says. "Increasingly translocation seems to be important as populations get fragmented. You need that training in anaesthesia and how to look after animals."

He presents a spirited argument for the Zoo. But it's clear that his interests lie in the field: the conversation regularly turns back to life in the rainforest. As we are winding up he tells me tales of walking into bears and being chased by giant cattle. "But these are just field stories" he shrugs. "Most things just want to

stay away from you. Mostly I've seen just shit and footprints". Glyn Davies may be a suit these days, but he still sounds like a field biologist to me.

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