

The complexities of life



Robert Napier

World Wildlife Fund? World Wide Fund for Nature? What is the WWF and what does it do? Simon Hodgson puts the questions to Robert Napier.

"It's not about putting a fence around some panda somewhere and patting it on its head," says the Chief Executive of the WWF, whose iconic logo is one of the best recognised brands in the environmental field. What kind of heresy is this? Some mistake, surely? But Robert Napier is a quick and energetic Scotsman, who speaks in a tumbling rush and has been at the helm in Panda House (truly – look it up), for six years. So he should know his own strategy.

"The WWF started off on biodiversity," he says, "then moved to recognising that this is about people as well as wildlife – the two are mutually dependent – and we've now moved to the next stage ... 'people' includes not just the communities in Namibia, but also the communities in Newark, because of the key role that they have in the developing world via their ecological footprint. I know that's quite a complicated message and you can ask whether it takes you away from the panda, but I think it doesn't."

In fact it is playing, in Napier's opinion, to the organisation's strengths. I

ask him about distinctiveness: with Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth well established as top predators, and smaller eco-charities scuttling out from every threatened habitat, what is the WWF's place in the ecosystem?

Unsurprisingly Napier is quick with his answer. "We have a reputation of being science based, of being sound, of being solutions orientated," he offers. "It's not our position to go into hair shirts. You'll lose everybody if you go down that road. What we've got to say is 'here are the consequences of your actions' and 'here are the choices you can make'." The combination of practicality and a global perspective allows WWF uniquely to make the connections required to understand these worldwide problems. "It's about making that link between your behaviour, and the UK Government's and British companies' behaviours and the influence that they can have on global biodiversity," says Napier. "It does make sense – it makes sense emotionally, morally and intellectually. That's why I find it very appealing."



This last statement is particularly believable. Napier clearly combines a sharp intellect and a clear moral compass, so it is easy to understand how the job suits him down to the ground. His academic foundation starts with a degree in natural sciences from Cambridge, something which lingers in his system still. "There are times when I am frustrated, because so many of the subjects are deeply interesting and there is a little bit of me that it intrigued by the

science and would love to go digging," he complains, "whether it's on the chemicals or statistical analysis of climate change. But in my job, I cannot be an expert on everything." The art lies, he says, in "knowing which experts to listen to".

After science, he read economics, which also has left a long-term impact. "I'm very driven by the theoretical and economic arguments of externalities," explains Napier, referring to the economic idea that polluters can often avoid ('externalise') the costs of their actions. "It is just a nonsense that we do not pay the full cost of the damage we are doing to the planet. The set of national accounts do not reflect what our true consumption of resources is." This is a theme he returns to time and again, swiping at perverse incentives, missing taxation and sloping playing fields.

For Robert Napier isn't really a scientist, or an economist or a conservationist. Measured purely using length of service he is a corporate man; a genuine, no-messing, high-flying executive. And – whisper it not – he earned his spurs in the extractive industry. "I even sold uranium for two years," he says. His early career included Rio Tinto – at that time (and possibly still) the *bête noir* of environmentalists – and spells at a merchant bank and pharmaceutical company Fisons. He eventually arrived at Redlands, a large UK firm producing building materials, including a quarrying business. There he "climbed the greasy pole" to become Chief Executive. "In 1997 Redland was taken over in a £2bn hostile takeover bid and at the age of 51 I found myself thrown from the great height of a FTSE Chief Executive," he says without any hint of rancour, going on to add that "I had survived 6.4 years, which is well above the average". He smiles. "We did gobbling up ourselves, and then we were gobbled up. That's corporate life for you."

In writing this column I have met a number of people who have hopped the

fence from a very different career to work in the environmental field, but no leap has been as startling as this: from being CEO in an infamous industry, to running an environmental NGO. But Napier explains it neatly enough.

"There really does come a point where waking up in the morning to maximise shareholder value doesn't excite you very much," he begins. "The timeframe of the investors is getting shorter and shorter and it was deeply unsatisfying and frustrating. I still wanted to run something, and I learned about the WWF job, and learned that they were quite keen to have someone with a business background to take it on. That was six and a half happy years ago."

But why that job spec? Why a business background? "Well firstly it's a business and you need to run it at least partly along business lines. Secondly we are very engaged with the corporate sector. If we want a sustainable planet we want sustainable companies. I hate the phrase 'sustainable development' – what

does it mean? In the corporate world I see it very clearly. It's a process of asking yourself the question 'are you going to be able to do in ten years' time what you are doing today', in terms of the raw material you use, the waste you produce, the

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emissions you have, the relationships with your staff and customers, in a world that is rapidly changing: perverse subsidies are being withdrawn, taxes are being put in place, and regulations changing, never mind the risks to your reputation and how people perceive you, particularly your younger staff. I think there are plenty of companies asleep at

the switch or talking the talk and not doing it."

It convinces me, this argument, and I can see how Napier's address book and background would be a tremendous asset in the corporate world. But what about the 300 or so people working at WWF? What did they think? "I think some of the staff were a bit startled to begin with given that they could all look me up in Who's Who?" Napier admits. "Then they saw that I was committed to the cause and I could bring some energy or practices to them that were of value to the WWF." So was everyone happy with the move? Well, almost. Napier grins. "The Peterborough column of the Daily Telegraph did say that 'putting Robert in charge of the WWF was like putting King Herod in charge of the crèche'," he admits with evident delight.

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