

News > [Q&A: This is the time when we can choose to have a different future for the next generations](#)

THURSDAY, 21 MAY 2020, 10:55

Q&A: This is the time when we can choose to have a different future for the next generations



The annual European Natura 2000 Day is a reminder of achievements, lessons learned, and an inspiration for further action for nature. This year's edition puts the spotlight on young people.

To celebrate it, I spoke to Dr Mike Clarke, who recently became an [IEEP associate](#) and is the former Chief Executive of the [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds \(RSPB\)](#), Europe's largest civil society organisation for nature.

SEARCH

Natura 2000: Interview with Mike Clarke, IEEP associate an...



Anya Coutinho: Mike, can you think of a memory or a very special moment in your career that's related to conservation and the Natura 2000?

Mike Clarke: I've got so many. I'll have to go for two, not one. So, the first one was actually when I started my professional career and I became responsible for trying to protect the areas for nature where I grew up.

I went back to where I used to be at school, and I was fighting the huge number of proposals in very early 1990 to develop a project below London in wetlands of Thames estuary. One day I had to go out and I already started pouring concrete and I realized the only way we could stop this was through stronger laws than in the UK through international legislation.

That was the moment I realised we had to start campaigning internationally, and that was in 1990. Then in 2015, I was very proud to be part of the 'Nature Alert' campaign to defend the Nature Directives. During the Brussels Green week, we mobilised lots of people, the entire global Birdlife International network that I am a council member of.

One of my dear friends from Africa – Achilles Byaruhanga – speaking in the Parliament, he said: "Africa is watching. This is our nature too", and you could hear a pin drop.

At the plenary at the end of Brussels Green week, we had a campaign to which tens of thousands of people were signing up every day, and you could see that even the most powerful politicians were realising that people care and there was a voice of young people who spoke for nature and that made me incredibly proud.

Natura 2000 has contributed a lot to nature conservation and is considered a success but there are still many actors who think otherwise. Having worked with

SEARCH

that covers 18% of our land, 4% of our marine environment and protects hundreds of habitats and thousands of species. It is really unique in the world to have such a network.

A lot of the issues – and actually IEEP has been one of the organisations that has brought the evidence together over the years for this – are about implementation certainly, for farmers and foresters, especially smaller family farms and small-scale forestry. They don't have the capacity to deal with lots of complexity.

And that is where implementation becomes so key. So, we know it can be made to work. To keep the natural assets these sectors of employment need, we know we've got to maintain that natural fabric of the environment. So, we have to work together in the future.

There are many ways that this will contribute. Nature-based solutions is going to be a huge part in responding to climate. There is a whole Farm to Fork strategy, so how we can make sure that we have regenerative agriculture that is good for people, for jobs, for nature.

Also we need to look more fundamentally at things like financial frameworks and how to invest in this future to make it possible for businesses to get the benefits, like sharing the benefits they are delivering for the public as a whole.

This is hugely complex. It requires lots of evidence and a lot of complex policy, and those are the areas where IEEP has a huge strength, but fundamentally this is about being able to imagine a vision for a new future. That is really a rethought agenda, looking at 2030 where we need to be heading.



SEARCH

they commit to economic growth? During this lockdown and pandemic, many of us –

especially younger generations – are worried about our future and jobs. How can Natura 2000 help younger people to get the right type of skills for jobs which will ultimately contribute to a sustainable economy?

Ultimately, all of these choices are political choices. What that means is that they are choices which you and I, and everybody else, help make, and I think it is very important for people to be engaged in policymaking and the political process. So, that is the first thing to say.

I think we are in the moment where we need to rethink the economy and rethink it systemically, on a large scale. One thing, that the lockdown has shown is that health beats GDP. Governments have shown that health and security of citizens are more important than simply a very crude measure of economic output.

And you know what? We were already in the crisis before we went into the pandemic crisis. We were in a crisis of climate and nature, which were already impacting people's lives and it will get worse unless we choose to have a different future – and in many ways I think what we need to do now while we have this lockdown in Europe is we need to be reframing the whole question that you just posed in many ways.

We need to be thinking of one health. We need to be thinking about planetary health and human health as going together. That is how we will have livelihoods in the future that we can operate safely and have an economy.

This means we have got to rebuild and choose economics that are more sustainable, and this is all about skills for the future. The young people will be the generation that has to grow and develop these skills and they have the choice going forward.

Many young people nowadays have grown up in cities and often they see nature as something alien and distant. How can we make Natura 2000 and its values become part of everyone's reality? How can we rediscover this somehow lost bond that people have with nature?

I think of a very famous song from the environmental movement that Joni Mitchell wrote – *Big yellow taxi* – and there is a sentence in it that says “you don't know what you've got until it's gone”.

The lockdown has shown us what it's like to live without access to green space, what it's like not to be able to step outside and feel the wind in your hair and sun on your face. People are really noticing the difference. I think it is about deep change in culture and values and this is the time.

I know my well-being depends on being connected with nature. We all know that. We know that this really affects people's lives. On the IEEP's website, you've got a brilliant [briefing on health and well-being in nature](#). So, I think this is a moment when we really need to believe that we can have a different future.

This is really a tough time: people are losing jobs across Europe; we've got people dying. We find ourselves in a massive crisis

This is a tough time for many people across Europe and across the world, but it is also the time when we can choose to have a different future for the next generations.

This is going to be a generational task, but that is why it will be so important for the young people to actually get involved in this agenda and find out all the evidence that can help form their views to articulate for a better future.

AUTHORS

Anya Coutinho

RELATED

First impressions of the EU biodiversity strategy to 2030

Farm to fork strategy: The first step towards an EU sustainable food and farming policy framework?

Life under COVID-19: Role of nature for mental and physical well-being

What the Green Deal means for Europe's biodiversity

KEYWORDS

Think2030

TEEB

protected area

policy instruments

nature conservation

nature-based solutions

natural resources

SEARCH

Habitats Directive
