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Frank Fraser Darling 1903-1979: Ecologist, Conservationist, Prophet

How did a man with no first degree, little academic training and little real serious ecological research achieve such a high status in the international world of conservation?

Firstly Fraser Darling's personality, which Professor Newbould described as a mixture of charm and authority. Then there was the fact Fraser Darling was a naturalist with keen observation and a particular gift for assessing, intuitively, field situations. Fraser Darling also possessed special expertise in the areas of ungulates and grazing. Professor Newbould argued that one does not actually need a strong basis in ecological research to develop policies and management (though Fraser Darling himself would argue against this). Professor Newbould went on to point to Fraser Darling's hands-on farming and work experience. The fact that Fraser Darling knew the right people. That Fraser Darling was an exceptionally good writer, making subjects accessible without writing "down" to people. Professor Newbould described Fraser Darling as a prophet somewhat without honour in his own country, and so he did well to move his focus to the United States, with a more romantic/spiritual approach to conservation exemplified by Aldo Leopold's, *Sand County Almanac*. And lastly Professor Newbould identified Fraser Darling's holistic approach, combining plant, animal and human ecology, including spiritual and cultural values and with an initial approach combining behaviour, genetics and ecology.

The main problem for Fraser Darling was that he operated in three areas where there was an interface if not a conflict between commercial or establishment interests and ecological/conservation interests. These three areas were the West Highland Survey, red deer, grey seals.

Professor Newbould concluded that the three key works of Fraser Darling are, *A Herd of Red Deer*, *West Highland Survey* and *The Reith Lectures*. The red deer work was groundbreaking seventy years ago and has had a lasting effect on the study of ungulate, mammal and bird populations. *West Highland Survey* was also innovative but was set in a difficult and fraught political situation. *The Reith Lectures*, at their time 35 years ago, had a major and far-reaching influence. In between Fraser Darling often had too many projects running at the same time. Moving his focus to the States allowed Fraser Darling to work with like-minded people, gave him an adequate income and also supported his roving brief for ecological reconnaissance in Mexico, Alaska and East Africa, which was what he did best. And *The Reith Lectures* restored his status and respect in Britain.

Professor Newbould went on to ask, is that it? Does it end here? Or do we want an anthology of his writing (which would be difficult to choose because there is so much good work), a publication of his lesser known occasional pieces, a biography, a *festschrift*, or, as has proved so successful for Max Nicholson, a website (www.maxnicholson.com)? Or should we simply admit that the Frank Fraser Darling fan club is an ageing community and leave things as they are? "Currently I am too close to his writings and my memories to be dispassionate. Also his four children should have a major say in the outcome."

Finally Professor Newbould wanted to leave the last word to Max Nicholson, another great guru, who died aged 98 last year, making him more or less a contemporary of Fraser Darling.

“Frank Fraser Darling brought to conservation great gifts for observation and profound reflection on ecology, conservation and their relation to human life and ethics. He lacked, however, a number of more mundane capacities that would have fitted him better to serve as a member either of a staff or of a senior committee, and his efforts to adapt to such environments tended to end in mutual frustration. Fortunately his value as a guru and as a detached assessor of complex problems in the field was recognised before too late by the Conservation Foundation in America, who assigned to him between 1959 and 1972 the right kind of roving commission in which he did some of his best work, crowned near the end by his Reith Lectures on *Wilderness and Plenty* for the BBC, at exactly the right time, in 1969. I knew him for thirty years, and had sometimes to share his sufferings over actual or imagined setbacks, but in the end he came into his own, and found a receptive audience for a contribution that was partly scientific, partly ethical or philosophical, and at times even mystical. He belongs at the far end of a spectrum that extends all the way from the most practical or political of conservationists to the poets and dreamers. Both extremes are needed even if the task of getting them to mix can be demanding.”