

# A Rocha

**'A Rocha' means 'the Rock' in Portuguese, and refers to A Rocha's beginnings, to Christ our rock, and to geology as the foundation of good science.**



At a time when the words 'Christian' and 'creation' are too often associated with circular debates over evolution and creationism, some Christians are trying to make a real difference to the planet. Amongst them, A Rocha, celebrating its 21st birthday in 2004, has recently seen dramatic growth in its work in the UK and around the world. In this article, Dave Bookless, Director of A Rocha UK, explains some of A Rocha's story and ethos, with a particular eye on what schools may find useful.

## 1984

When I completed my PGCE in 1984, I imagined a career in Religious Education – and began teaching in inner-city Bradford (ACT was a great help to me back then!). I would have laughed if somebody had told me then, that twenty years later I'd be leading an environmental charity. Still, God has a sense of humour, and (having been a vicar for a while in between), God took one very ordinary Christian teacher, with a very average interest in the environment ... and in early 2001 my wife and I launched out to start A Rocha UK.

We first became involved in A Rocha in the early nineties, when it was still a single project, on the Algarve coast of southern Portugal. Here, a field-studies centre located on the important but threatened Alvor estuary had developed a reputation for solid scientific research, successful campaigning and great hospitality. Uniquely it was founded as a

Christian project, based on the biblical call to 'serve and preserve' the garden of God's creation (Genesis 2:15). What attracted us to A Rocha then was the holistic view of mission that had emerged, where the Christian team lived in a community with volunteers and visitors of any faith or none, and where bird-ringing, washing-up, administration and late-night conversations about God were all seen equally as part of 'worship'.

## Global

So compelling was the vision of integrated Christian life and mission developed by A Rocha's first project, that when the vision was shared it spread rapidly. In the mid nineties, new A Rocha projects began in France (the Vallée des Baux, near Arles), Lebanon (the Ammiq marsh in the Bekaa valley) and Kenya (Watamu, near the Arabuko Sokoke forest). With the new millennium, growth has accelerated, and A Rocha is now working in 15 countries in five continents: Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Ghana, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Netherlands, Peru, Portugal, South Africa, the UK and the USA. Others, including Brazil, New Zealand, Romania and Chile, are hoping to start national 'A Rochas' soon.

Each A Rocha project is in very different cultural and ecological settings, but all share common values and five core commitments:

- **Christian** Underlying all we do is our biblical faith in the living God, who made the world, loves it and entrusts it to the care of human society.
- **Conservation** We carry out research for the conservation and restoration of the natural world and run environmental education programmes for people of all ages.

***Bird-ringing, washing-up, administration and late-night conversations about God were all seen equally as part of 'worship'***



- **Community** Through our commitment to God, each other and the wider creation, we aim to develop good relationships both within the A Rocha family and in our local communities.
- **Cross-cultural** We draw on the insights and skills of people from diverse cultures, both locally and around the world.
- **Co-operation** We work in partnership with a wide variety of organisations and individuals who share our concerns for a sustainable world.



**Dave Bookless will be one of our ACT Day 2004 speakers.**

with the aim of ‘a greener, cleaner Southall and Hayes’. There are three main dimensions to the project: ‘Science and Conservation’; ‘Community Transformation’; ‘Environmental Education’.

- **Science and Conservation:** working to turn 90 acres of formerly derelict public open space (the Minet site) into a Country Park and Nature Reserve, and to manage it for people and wildlife. The park opened in summer 2003, and A Rocha has been short-listed for a London Planning Award for its partnership with the local council (the landowners). We conduct rigorous scientific surveys (with links to national, regional and local organisations), popular wildlife events, and practical conservation working parties. We are also in discussions with British Waterways regarding an adjacent strip of land becoming an educational nature reserve, and provide advice and consultancy on local conservation issues.
- **Community Transformation:** acting as a local catalyst in encouraging sustainable attitudes, lifestyles and decisions. This has included projects helping local estates create ‘green oases’, and getting local faith leaders to sign an ‘eco-pledge’ committing themselves to teaching and practising the environmental content of

## Local

In the UK there had always been considerable support for A Rocha, and the dream of a project here. My wife and I felt torn – we’d been working in a multiracial parish in Southall for some years and felt a call to urban ministry. At the same time we were deeply attracted to A Rocha’s vision of practical creation-care and an inclusive Christian community. It took a while for the penny to drop – why not an urban A Rocha right where we lived? There are plenty of good conservation organisations protecting Britain’s beautiful coasts and islands, but who’s tackling urban environmental deprivation?

So A Rocha UK was born in February 2001, as I left my parish to work full-time for A Rocha. It has grown very quickly, and we now have a staff team of 12, with many volunteers, and support from, amongst others, the Bishops of London (Rt Revd Richard Chartres) and Liverpool (Rt Revd James Jones), Sir Ghillelan Prance (Science Director of the Eden Project, Cornwall and former Director of Kew Gardens, London), Sir John Houghton (former Chairman of the Royal Commission on Atmospheric Pollution), Professor Graham Ashworth (former Chairman of ENCAMS – the government’s Environmental body), and Ram Gidoomal CBE (London mayoral candidate for the Christian Peoples’ Alliance and Chair of the London Sustainability Forum). Our main focus has been on establishing ‘A Rocha Living Waterways’,



The Minet site in 1999 before its transformation into a Country Park.

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their faiths. It has also meant recruiting and supervising over 60 diverse local volunteers – many of them asylum seekers, or adults with special needs. All are welcomed into A Rocha's community ethos, including communal lunches and social activities in the former nursing home that has been acquired as our Centre.

- **Environmental Education:** with funding from Bridge House Estates, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Sainsbury Family Trusts, we have two full-time education officers working in both formal and informal education. This includes assemblies and a major outdoor education programme based on the Minet site, linked to the National Curriculum for 7–11s and successfully trialled with local schools. In addition we run after-school clubs, summer play schemes, one-off family events, and in 2003 took a dozen local inner-city children for an 'Amazing Creation' week in Cornwall. Finally, we are part of the West London Floating Classroom project, seeking to create a canal-based mobile resource for environmental education, which should be launched in 2004.

### **Resourcing schools**

There are many opportunities to look at Christianity and the environment – short-course RE GCSE, Citizenship, Science, Geography and assemblies are obvious starters. A Rocha aims to develop resources to help in these areas, and is building a network of Christians in education to help write and trial resources. Currently we can offer:

- A membership scheme (for individuals and groups – including schools) with a high quality quarterly newsletter.
- A regularly updated website, with material from all of A Rocha's established projects around the world.
- Limited availability of speakers for assemblies, lessons, sixth-form conferences and churches.
- Materials produced for schools and play schemes in London that can be freely adapted for use elsewhere.



Team Leaders from 15 nations gathered for A Rocha's 2003 Conference in Portugal.

- Volunteering and placement opportunities for work experience (Year 9) and summer holidays (Year 11+ and adults).
- School visits to the Minet site (and soon the Floating Classroom) for those local to London.

## *The Church needs to recover within its theology the Biblical vision and moral imperative of caring for the environment*

### **Long-term vision**

Nationally, A Rocha UK has a long-term vision of a network of Christian-based projects in various areas of the country. We also speak widely in churches, schools and conferences (varying from Spring Harvest and New Wine to the British Ecological Society and the Darwin Science Festival). We promote an annual 'Environment Sunday' to coincide with World Environment Day in early June, with a flexible pack designed each year for churches and schools.

With an understanding that this is God's world, designed to bring Him glory, and entrusted to our care, Christians should be leaders in the environmental movement. As Bishop James Jones has said: 'If the Church wishes to find a common agenda with young people who are passionate about the future of the planet, it needs to recover within its theology the Biblical vision and moral imperative of caring for the environment.' A Rocha is playing a part in trying to work this out in practice. If you can join us, help us, or spread the word, we'd love to hear from you!



### **More information**

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