

OPINION Mark Ereira-Guyer

“Sadly, too many people are disconnected from nature, from themselves and ultimately others around them”

I don't know about you, but I always feel inside when I am outdoors. It's in these bountiful eco-centric moments when I am fully in nature – going for a dip in the river at Brandon, spying a Stonechat or Linnet at Cavenham Heath, trying to get that close-to wonder photo shot – then I feel that ultimate sense of connection, and get that buzz, that pervading sense of wellbeing and togetherness. It's then too that I imagine writing a poem or perhaps creating a print, trying to capture the moment, the colours, the jizz of a bird. We all need these moments of wonder – and they are so good for our creative health!

Too much of our everyday lives can feel mechanised, digitised – an antiseptic world with all the delight and curiosities squeezed out. However, there is a growing movement of nature connectors – and I hope you're already one of them, or soon will be.

Just like trees, we all have it within us to grow. To learn and encourage others. As someone who is part of the burgeoning 'baby boomer' generation in their 'elderhood', I am keen to see everyone delighted by the joys of nature – connecting better with the planet's 'more-than-human-beings' who share it with us – and of course, arresting its terrifying decline and often wilful destruction. It is vitally important to take this positive eco-centric route and share it with others as part of our personal legacy – and which I believe is instinctive, intuitive and really integral to our own nature and sense of being.

Connected lives – this is what my colleagues and I are so enthusiastic about. In fact, we have been running a national project called 'Steps to Togetherness' designed to bring people and communities from different backgrounds

together. This has involved delivering training on building connections in diverse locations, such as Stoke, Haverhill, Lewisham and Rochdale. Recently, we delivered the training with BTO itself in Thetford – with a host of local organisations, the Town Council and committed nature connectors – to further BTO's ambition to increase inclusion and accessibility to nature in the town where the charity resides, and one known for its welcome to newly arrived communities, including from London's East End after the Second World War.

DISCONNECTION AND ITS PRICE

As a member of the Cockney diaspora myself, I want to see local working-class communities, and others from urban and diverse backgrounds – migrants, younger people, members of LGBTQIA+ communities, ethnic minorities and different faiths – enjoying nature, and doing their bit for it. It's so important to make conservation welcoming and that there are exemplar nature and community friendly 'hubs' which everyone can access and be included – conservation needs fresh faces and the commitment of all people to have a chance of meeting the mounting climate chaos that we and the more-than-human-beings now face.

Sadly, too many people are disconnected from nature, from themselves and ultimately others around them. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have accelerated a process of disconnection which has propelled us all into what looks like being a truly lonely century. Many people do not have their eyes to the skies and the nature around them, but their heads



permanently lowered and screen-internted. It's happening to everyone, all at the same time. You and me, too.

As one young man who I met at the BTO HQ said to me "I feel that my generation have had a phone thrust into our face since birth!" Many people are spending too much time on their own, cocooned in a digital world – and this is so much not how to lead a flourishing life. It is making communities lonelier and more brittle with higher levels of anxiety, mistrust and less participation in activities outside the home. Our personal and communal relationships, and much needed sense of belonging, are severely diminished.

Social solidarity sits at the heart of our organisational mission, and one group appears to be quietly slipping further through society's safety nets: boys and men. Statistics around male loneliness, addictions, obesity and mental health crises tell a stark story. Male suicide has

Many people are spending too much time on their own, cocooned in a digital world

sky rocketed. When men feel disconnected – from friends, families, community, or purpose – everyone loses: partners, children, neighbourhoods, workplaces and ultimately, the very social cohesion we all need to keep society itself together.

As part of our work, we're now bringing together a coalition of partners with shared values to develop urgent solutions and embrace a collaborative endeavour to reconnect people and communities. Connected lives really matter. We'd really welcome hearing from you about your ideas.

Too much of life is negatively ego-centric rather than positively eco-centric. Manipulative marketeers and devil-take-the-highroad politicians have stepped in, capitalising on an emerging sense of cultural despair, and now so many of us are so disconnected from the natural world that it in no way figures in any of their cold, financially driven calculations.

FORMING COHESIVE COMMUNITIES

At times, you can't help thinking that this is a deliberate and well-calibrated exercise by a callous elite feathering its own nest to create a feeling of disordered disorientation. This detracts from the social connection and cohesion within communities that we all need instead, and which are good for our creative health. Only in cohesive communities can our natural world, society, economy and ultimately democracy itself function properly and harmoniously. We have started a civil society movement which aims to promote small behavioural changes that build better connections and motivate more people from all communities and backgrounds to take more active roles in their communities – come and join us, build connected lives and connect more with our very special natural environment too. [n](#)

Find out more Find out more:
www.civilsocietyconsulting.co.uk/32-steps

Mark Ereira-Guyer was born in East London with Portuguese Jewish heritage. He now lives in Suffolk but is active across civil society in the UK and Europe. He is co-founder of a social enterprise Civil Society Consulting with a team of colleagues dedicated to creating healthier, equitable and cohesive communities.