

### **‘More Optimistic Than I’ve Ever Been’: On Nature Security and Growth**

Guest Speaker **TONY JUNIPER**

**“Nature is resilient. Nature is strong if we give it a chance. And more and more people are giving it a chance. “**

#### **Nik Gowing**

Welcome to the Thinking the Unthinkable podcast, our latest leadership conversation. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. It's easy to be doomy and gloomy about so much at the moment, whether it be the spiraling conflict in many parts of the Middle East, the extremes of weather, the abuse of nature and depleted biodiversity, all of which are intensifying. It's worth noting, by the way, that the head of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, just told a big gathering of top figures in Tokyo they must all now think the unthinkable.

So take note. But there are good reasons to be positive as we're going to hear from Tony Juniper. Tony is a tireless campaigner, an environmental activist and conservationist who has worn many different hats. He was a leading figure for Friends of the Earth for 18 years, an advisor to Prince, now King Charles, with whom he wrote this marvelous little primer book explaining climate change and much more, including his latest book, Just Earth, how a fairer world will save the planet and being a recognized authority on parrots.

Well, since 2019, Tony has been Chair of Natural England, the UK government's statutory advisor for the natural environment, working to protect, restore and enhance England's landscapes, wildlife and ecosystems. So Tony, a very warm welcome. I've heard you say that the established energy consensus and focus on these issues is shaky now.

Prospects is, as you put it, truly catastrophic. Yet you are quote, more optimistic than you've ever been for some time. Explain what seems to be this contradiction.

#### **Tony Juniper**

Hello, Nik. Yes, it does seem slightly paradoxical, doesn't it? To put it mildly, on the one hand, these rising pressures, which are multiple in nature, becoming ever more serious, and then at the same time, the level of action to meet them not yet sufficient. And so how can we be optimistic? And I think on the climate subject in particular, which is where the consensus has become shaky.

I think some pennies are now dropping in ways that are going to make quite a big difference, a positive difference. And the pennies are dropping in two important ways. One is that more and more people are realizing that climate change is not a future theoretical threat. It's here now and it's real. That changes it from being something that we can think about in the future to something

that we must deal with immediately. And then the other thing that's happened at the same time is that whereas climate change used to be seen as an environmental issue,

People can now see that it is very evidently a question of financial stability, of food security, of geopolitical stability, and therefore it's moving up the table of priorities away from a green issue, which always gets deprioritized in times of difficulties and into being something which is much more a top table issue. So I think both of these things are a cause for optimism. The visible effects of climate change.

And the realization that it's not an environmental issue. And if we wish to have a secure economy into the future, then we're going to have to deal with it in really quite an urgent and systematic way. And I think that's beginning to happen, which is why I'm optimistic.

### **Nik Gowing**

But you did use the words shaky and could be catastrophic, your choice of words.

### **Tony Juniper**

Yes, well, shaky in the sense of the consensus. you can see that shakiness right now in the mainstream media and in social media, where you have some voices arguing that because of the choking off of oil supplies from the Persian Gulf, that we should be opening up other oil and gas supplies as if this will be a solution. And that has opened a debate whereby people can now see actually replacing fossil fuels with fossil fuels is not really the best choice.

The best choice is to displace fossil fuels with renewables. And so that debate is happening now in real time. And it is a direct consequence of that shaky consensus leading to that choice becoming much more pointed. So I do think that that is what's going on right now. It's provoked a discussion that we otherwise wouldn't have had. And then the other thing in terms of the catastrophic nature of all of this. Well, we can see it, can't we?

In terms of the damage being caused to property, tragic loss of life in some circumstances, and then feeding through into matters of food and water security. That is all happening. And that becomes progressively worse as average global temperatures increase. And they are continuing to do so and apparently now at an accelerating pace, according to the most recent analysis of the rate of global heating. So those two things are very true, potential catastrophe and a shaky consensus, but I think both at the same time paradoxically drivers of much more determined action.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now you're here as well to inspire us. And one of the reasons I wanted you to come along is actually to share with us some of the recovery projects that you've been involved in, where you can see big changes on biodiversity and nature and so on from the English perspective I have to add.

### **Tony Juniper**

Yes, well, very happy to think a bit about that, Nik. So in England, it's often said that, you know, or the UK more broadly, that we are one of the most nature depleted countries on earth. And that is true based upon the analysis of data comparing the position we're in now compared to what natural systems would have looked like before major human disturbance. And yet, even in this country where we have had this really very serious decline in wildlife. You don't tend to hear the good news stories as much as you hear the bad news stories, but there are some really good ones in play at the moment. So in relation to wildlife species that went extinct here, there is an ever-growing number of animals and plants that are now back again. And I'm just actually in the process of preparing a book on this subject. It's going to be called, We're back...

And it's about wildlife that went extinct in Britain, but which is now returning or very nearly extinct and now returning. So animals like the beaver, we now have a program at Natural England to have the careful licensing of reintroductions of beavers into the right catchments where they can thrive and create public benefit in terms of flood risk reduction, for example, cleaning up our rivers and providing a real boost for other wildlife.

You can now see white-tailed eagles along the south coast of England. Those birds 240 years ago were wiped out by persecution. They are now back and they are breeding. The large blue butterfly went extinct in Britain a few decades ago, now back again and we have the largest population of those insects anywhere in Europe. The lady slipper orchid, a beautiful plant that was reduced to a single specimen in the Yorkshire Dales in the 1930s.

That plant is now reproducing once more in the wild, a very specific life cycle it has dependent upon particular insects. The system that enables that plant to grow has been restored to the point where they are now beginning to reproduce. The spoonbill, those beautiful white birds of wetlands that we had here until the 1600s, they went extinct because of wetland creation now across the east of England. They're back now and breeding in Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire.

Suffolk and the population rising very quickly. And the pool frog, an amphibian that many people won't have heard of, went extinct here in the 1990s. And we're now reintroducing animals from Scandinavia and the population is beginning to build in the east of England, in the Breckland. I could go on, but suffice to say that this decline and disappearance is reversible.

Nature is resilient. Nature is strong if we give it a chance. And more and more people are giving it a chance. And it's set against this really unhelpful narrative, Nik, that you hear in the media all the time about, looking after nature is going to harm the economy and slow down growth. And what's the point of looking after these bats and snails and newts? Well, the truth is, and we know this very well, that nature underpins our entire economic system.

And that's particular fact is reaching a lot of important places, including people who look after land, who manage food production and who are bringing wildlife back into farmed landscapes alongside

the more familiar organizations who would engage in this work, the conservation groups and indeed organizations like Natural England. So it does feel like a turning of the corner is occurring at ground level in England on that big subject of nature recovery.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now, how are you achieving this? What are you doing in terms of changing the mindsets of the public and those who up to now have been destroying nature or taking nature for granted? What is the process that you're going through, which in a positive way is sort of saying change and look what can be achieved and you can benefit from it as well?

### **Tony Juniper**

Yes, it's very important question and actually it's not the public that need convincing. I don't think you look at poll after poll survey after survey across the political spectrum. The vast majority of British citizens want more wildlife. They want more to be done to restore the beauty and the vibrancy of the places where they live, including the birds animals.

### **Nik Gowing**

Do you think the politicians understand that, Tony?

### **Tony Juniper**

This is where there is a difference and it's not all politicians, but I do think that in the political domain, there is an assumption that's become embedded over decades. It's not just the current government or the one before that. There is an implicit assumption in the way we run Western societies, whereby it is held that looking after nature harms economic growth. mean, that is a kind of mythology that is well established.

And so breaking past that is essential. And it's not just the politicians, it's many business leaders in boardrooms. They will be complaining about the work they have to do to comply with nature regulations in the financial sector. It looks like there is a break on economic growth coming from constraints on natural resource exploitation, et cetera, et cetera. All of this is untrue. We can have a vibrant economy at the same time as restoring nature.

And indeed, longer term, if we wish to have any kind of economy at all, we have to restore the planet's life support system because our economy sits inside that life support system. It's not separate from it. So there's a basic truth here. And you mentioned King Charles earlier in some of the work that he's done. And he talks about the irreducible truth that nature and people coexist together. We are part of nature, not a part from nature.

And so, you know, this is wisdom that is often not visible in some of the conversations that go on, but it is changing. And the people on the ground who are doing the work to enable this bending of the curve from decline towards recovery, they include a very wide range of sectors and organizations, house building companies, some of them get it, farmers, many of them get it, people

working in insurance, many of them get it because they can see that you can reduce risk of damage to property by restoring ecosystems that reduce flood risk, for example.

So pennies are dropping, connections are being made right across the piece. It's not just the environmentalists now making a bit of progress on some of these specific items. This is now something which has got real momentum behind it at grassroots level. And happily, government is investing in some really exciting policy to help this go further and faster.

So the reforming of farming policies post-Brexit in England is now leading to some really big scale nature recovery work going on across England. And that's very exciting. And at Natural England, we're delighted to be working with all of the partners in the landscape, many of them farmers, to be able to join up food production and nature recovery so they become two sides of the same coin.

There's new policies to help. Go ahead, Nik.

### **Nik Gowing**

How much do you fear, Tony? . . . How much do you fear that the new political realities, the new geopolitical realities are really suffocating or are threatening to suffocate and block the political and public will for action, given the real pressures that are now going to be on pockets, on money? And you talk about this in your book.

### **Tony Juniper**

So the geopolitics that lies behind these environmental questions, it's a bit like the economic analysis. You can look at it and say, well, this is more important than looking after the environment. Or you could say, well, that geopolitical situation means that we now really need to double down on meeting our environmental goals. And so the choking off of oil and gas supplies from the Persian Gulf.

What do you do? Do you look for new oil and gas supplies or do you go hell for leather for renewables? That's a real choice now, which has been provoked by a new geopolitical situation. And I think the way it will go is that we will go hell for leather for renewables. I think that is now what is going to happen. And similarly, with looking after our ecosystems here in England, there was a report published, a security assessment published by the government here a few months ago, which revealed how nature underpins our national security. And it looked at ecosystems.

### **Nik Gowing**

It was shocking, I have to say having read it, was a shocking document. Got almost no resonance whatsoever.

### **Tony Juniper**

A shocking document with conclusions, including the idea that the ecosystems upon which we depend, the rainforests, the rangelands, the coral reefs, are all on a pathway to collapse. Now, you

can look at that and say, the geopolitical situation now means that we should abandon our environmental goals at home. Or you could look at that and say security and ecosystem damage are two related subjects, therefore we double down on the restoration of nature in Britain.

And again, you know, this is a real time conversation which is going on right now. And I think a lot of people in politics, in business, in the public, in the media can see that the sensible thing to do is to restore nature and to really double down on our journey to clean energy. I think that's what's happening, which is why I'm optimistic.

### **Nik Gowing**

Do I interpret you correctly? What you're talking about is creating a new societal security. That the security of society can be generated through attention to nature, not just set aside.

### **Tony Juniper**

Exactly that Nik and you know at Natural England, know our new strategy, its headline title is recovering nature for growth, health and security. And it really focuses on exactly what I've just been talking about. The fact, not the theory, the fact that the economy relies 100 % on natural systems to be able to function, never mind grow.

We know that public health is hugely determined by the quality of the environments that we live in, in terms of clean air and water, obviously, but also access to beautiful, vibrant, natural green spaces with birdsong and butterflies and gorgeous views. That is really good for physical and psychological health. And that will save us billions and billions of pounds on public health budgets if we can get more access for more nature, for more people. And then the security dimension.

### **Nik Gowing**

Do you think the public, Tony, do you think the public have made that connection though?

### **Tony Juniper**

Yes, of course. the public really do get this. I don't think the public need convincing. As I said before, Nik, I think this is about convincing people who've got their hands on some of the big levers of how society works in terms of major sectors, finance, water, housing, and also the way in which the economy is designed for the long term and the extent to which we can join this stuff up. And all of this health, growth and security, we can do these things better.

Through investing in the recovery of the natural environment. This is not to say that we have to stop growing or we have to have less security. It's saying the opposite. If we invest in the recovery of the natural world, we become more resilient. We become more prosperous and we become healthier. And all of these things are going to be economically valuable.

So my main point, I mean, if you want to really boil down my main point is that we can do both and growth, security and nature, rather than seeing nature as an alternative to all of those things. And

again, as the King has said, know, people are not apart from nature. We are a part of nature. And it's that simple framing that just now needs to get over the line. And events are helping us, I think, on this. There's some terrible things happening in the world just at the moment.

But I do think they're going to open people's eyes as we begin to join the dots between, for example, energy security and a terrible conflict going on across the Middle East. What's the best response to that from an energy point of view? Do we extract more fossil fuels and extend our addiction to those resources? Or do we say actually far better now to focus on energy efficiency and renewables and the electrification of our economy? And I think it is the latter is where we're heading.

### **Nik Gowing**

Tony, we're almost out of time, but I want you just to pick up briefly, if you can, on the core message from your book about equality or inequality. You say that inequality is a core issue here, fuels more consumption because of what you call status anxiety. In a couple of minutes only, just explain what you mean, because that's at the heart of what you're saying of how things can develop more positively.

### **Tony Juniper**

Yes, so that book, Nik, Just Earth, How a Fairer World Will Save the Planet, is looking at social inequalities in the sense of the connections to the environmental issues and just pointing out how they're fundamentally connected. And there are many connections.

And one of them is this link with consumerism, which I observe in the book works much better in more unequal societies and consumerism is one of the drivers of ecological damage, seen in our ever more throwaway society. And I reflect on when I was a child and the idea of clothing being disposable, just being an utterly alien concept. But that's the world we now live in with cheap fashion is a good example of how consumerism has led us down this path of just having no sense of the impacts of all of this. But it's driven in part by inequality. And you see that style of throwaway consumerism.

It is more prevalent and more deep rooted in more unequal societies because of this driver coming from this psychological phenomenon of status anxiety. And this is in societies where you've got big extremes of inequality and the people at the bottom of society, they feel as though they're being left behind. They feel as though they're not respected. They feel as though they're not living the good life. And so they try to keep up. They get into debt. They buy all sorts of things they don't need.

In order to have that visible display of status derived from having loads of fashionable new stuff. And so that is just one example of how inequality plays through into some of these big environmental questions, including through this phenomenon of ever more extreme consumerism, which is a pretty recent invention. I mean, it's really a post-war thing, post-Second World War. We never used to live like this before. It's become so embedded now and it is driven in many countries.

By that difference between the better off and the worst off. And very interesting to note that the more unequal a society becomes, the bigger the proportion of its economy is spent on advertising because it works better under those circumstances. So there's a lot packed in there.

### **Nik Gowing**

All right Tony, right, yeah, there is most certainly we've got half a minute left. Just give us something to inspire those who are watching thinking, I want to shift in this direction. What have they got to do?

### **Tony Juniper**

Well, everybody has got a lot of power, how they vote and then more importantly, how they interact with their representatives after elections. think that's really important. Encouraging your councillors, your MPs and those who we put into office to be sticking with this. And there's always a temptation to talk green before an election, less so afterwards. So being able to encourage politicians to be able to stick with the agenda, I think is something we can all do. We can all consume differently.

I try not to chuck anything out if I could avoid it. And the other side of that is not buying things in the first place that you don't need. I try to just buy things and have things that are beautiful and useful rather than stuff that just happens to be attached to some kind of advertising or promotional campaign. And then, of course, you can speak to the people who provide you with all the things you need. Is your bank investing in the low carbon journey and nature positive journey?

Is your supermarket invested in supply chains that avoid deforestation and microplastics going into the sea. And so through those three headings, personal behavior, political engagement, and working with the constellation of companies that supply everything we need, we are all very, very powerful people. And so just have a think about all of that in terms of how you can make a difference, because we all can. And in the end, that is the only thing that is going to make a difference.

### **Nik Gowing**

Well thanks Tony and I should reassure you that I'm paranoid about waste so I take exactly the same line as you. Everything has to be re-consumable or circular in any way. So thank you so much Tony. You can reference every detail that Tony has given us. That's because a transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website along with contact details for us and for Tony so you can be in touch with him. Do please share your experiences.

And join us when we next have a conversation about thinking the unthinkable. Subscribe to our YouTube channel where you'll find our podcasts every much, very much in the same vein of frankness. From me, Nik Gowing, until next time, keep thinking unthinkable. More than ever, it's both necessary and possible. So from Tony and from me, bye bye.