

CBSG philosophy

Bengt Holst*

Bengt Holst is a conservation scientist from Copenhagen who is associated with the Copenhagen Zoo as Curator and now as CBSG Europe convenor. In trying to help our readers know CBSG, his perspective, given as one of the keynote in the opening session is very useful. Eds.

Seventeen years ago, when I attended my first CBSG meeting -- in Bristol, England -- I had no clue of what it was all about. I had heard about CBSG, and I knew it was an organisation working for conservation, but that was all. Yet, after the meeting I was hooked. I can not say exactly why, but there was something during that meeting that caught my attention, something that fascinated me to an extent that I have been hooked ever since.

I have often thought about what it was that was so extraordinary at that meeting. It all started in chaos. We sat around one big table in a sort of meeting room. Some people had to stand or to find a chair next door. So, although we were by far not as many as today's meetings, it felt a bit crowded, and I even felt a bit uncomfortable, having expected an organised conference with nice talks that you could listen to without feeling responsible for anything. Then the meeting started, and slowly the chaos turned into productive discussions where even I, as a newcomer in the zoo world, could make myself heard and even got some of my comments written on a flipchart. It was a fantastic feeling, and I really felt, when it was all over, that WE - me and the whole group - had produced something important. We had been through a process that had undressed a problem layer by layer in a way I had never experienced before, and after that we went through all the different layers to come up with sound recommendations to solve those problems.

It was incredible, and for several years when people asked me why I considered that meeting such a success, my answer would simply be: because of the atmosphere. There was a very special atmosphere or spirit, or even a sense of magic, if you will, at that meeting, and it was not until later when I learned more about the CBSG way of working that I found out it was the way the meeting was run -- the facilitation process - and the whole concept behind CBSG meetings that gave me such a good experience and at the same time ended up with real productive recommendations.

So, I really feel privileged today to get the opportunity to say a few words about the CBSG philosophy as I see it and its unique values. For those of you who have attended lots of CBSG meetings, it will probably be a repetition of your own experience. And for those of you, for whom this is the first CBSG meeting you attend, just take it as a story from someone who truly believes in the CBSG processes.

What is it then that is so unique about CBSG? It all started exactly 25 years ago when Late Dr. U.S. Seal, was appointed chairman of the newly established Captive Breeding Specialist Group, as it was called at that time. He

took over a not very active IUCN group called the Zoo Liaison Committee that primarily was a sort of coordinating link between the zoo world and the conservation community.

But Ulie certainly revived that group and put a lot of substance into it. Based on his scientific background he acknowledged the need for getting solid scientific data on the table before making the necessary decisions. Much too many important decisions were made on gut feelings only or even worse on no background at all. So, CBSG developed a workshop process whereby scientific data could be extracted and used as a basis for the final prioritising and decision making in conservation matters. That itself was a great leap in the right direction -- to base conservation recommendations on scientific data and methods.

Ulie Seal took this development further. Together with good friends and skilled colleagues, among others the current Chairman of CBSG, Dr. Bob Lacy, he developed the conservation tools that we are still using today and constantly developing to secure a systematic and scientific approach to the conservation planning process. I am here thinking about the PHVA process, the CAMPs, the use of computer simulations as we know it from VORTEX etc. -- all scientifically based tools that help us identify the most important conservation actions. So, we are now far beyond the stage where conservation recommendations were made on gut feelings, and have entered the era where conservation recommendations are based on valid, scientific arguments.

The human factor is another unique thing in the CBSG concept. Ulie Seal quickly realised that conservation was much more than considering biological data alone. Conservation is also a question of managing human behaviour. In order to conserve a threatened species you need to be able to manage humans as well as animals and habitats -- both during the decision making process and afterwards when the decisions are going to be implemented in the real world.

Luckily Ulie Seal had a degree in psychology among several other degrees and knew very well the many psychological processes and barriers involved when people get together and try to make decisions. Consequently he managed to improve the decision making process by integrating the principles of group dynamics into the process and thus created a sound basis for future conservation planning.

Part of the same issue is the concept of stakeholder participation. We all know the traditional barrier between the scientist and the man on the ground. For the scientist the man on the ground doesn't know anything about scientific issues and should consequently also not be consulted in such matters. And vice versa with the man on the ground.

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For him the scientist is living in another world where only theories count, and does not know anything about real life. Thus everything that comes from the scientists hands is just theoretical nonsense.

It is not difficult to imagine how conservation recommendations coming from scientists alone, as has often been the case in conservation, will be received by the man on the ground, including politicians. "Scepticism" in this context is a mild word (!) and often, such recommendations, no matter how valid they may be, die a silent death due to lack of understanding from the other side. And the same goes for arguments against the scientific recommendations. They are ignored by the scientists with the argument: "They don't understand what this is all about", and the result is that nothing happens.

The only way to overcome this paradox is to make all parties, all the stakeholders, part of the process and thus also part of the final recommendations, provided everyone is heard during the process, and that you go for consensus and no one is allowed to dominate the process. In practice this means that you need to have hunters, farmers and conservationists around the same table together with the relevant decision makers when planning for conservation. That is by far not an easy task, but CBSG does it, and it works very well! By being part of the decision making process you get a much better understanding of the other side, and you feel responsible for the final outcome of the discussions since you have been involved in the development of those decisions. So, the aim for full stakeholder participation has become a natural element in CBSG workshops since many years.

Stakeholder participation also means access to a much bigger group of people. And that brings me to another

important key factor in the CBSG concept, namely the use of networks. CBSG has a global network of people dedicated to the same philosophy and working with the same scientific tools, and these networks again make use of their own local networks with a profound knowledge of the local culture, local systems and not least local languages. CBSG thus reaches far into the local communities all over the world, and we all know how important that is when talking about conservation. Nobody can do conservation alone. But together we can achieve a lot, and by using the local networks CBSG avoids falling into the cultural pitfalls that are so dangerous for global organisations. Moreover it is recognised that different regions have different strengths, and instead of considering them barriers for a global approach these differences are highly respected by CBSG and considered valuable factors that we all can learn from.

There is of course much more to it, but I am sure you will experience at least some of these key factors I have described during the next few days. I will not end this talk without mentioning the significant importance of good personal relationships and humour in all this work. Good humour can help you through many cramped situations, and good friendships will help you find a way forward if you for some reason feel you have ended in a blind alley with no way out – a feeling you easily can get when working with conservation matters. CBSG networks are very closely woven, and both factors – humour and relationships - play an important role in the daily work – thanks to a bunch of visionary people that took a holistic view on conservation, including the human factor, instead of relying on the traditional narrow approach.

THANK YOU all for listening, and enjoy the next couple of days – and remember: together we do make a difference!

Ulrie Seal Award for Innovation - Frances Westley's remarks

This is the last of our "first person" selections of a better interpretation of CBSG to ZOOS' PRINT readers. Frances Westley and her professional colleague, Harry Vredenburg, were brought into CBSG unceremoniously by Ulrie Seal by over-riding a decision by the CBSG Steering Committee to use another professional team to achieve some goal or other. Ulrie met Frances and Harry, declared them "magic people" and brought them on board, first to lead the first of CBSG's famous Strategic Futures Search workshops and later for many other things. Since then Frances, especially, has been a regular at any important CBSG decision-making meeting. Frances has had an enormous impact on CBSG in identifying and encouraging innovation and innovators, reinforcing freshness of approach, and in steering CBSG into new directions. Her remarks on CBSG more or less complete a picture that we wanted to present to you, which might go some way toward explaining why Zoo Outreach Organisation is so very enamoured with CBSG. In the very early days of ZOO I used to hear of CBSG and Ulrie Seal through my association with ISIS, with Nate Fleisness and with Tom Foose, who was CBSG Programme Officer. What I was trying to do in India with Indian zoos seemed to be very compatible with what CBSG was trying to do with the world, and when ZOO met CBSG, it was love and respect at first

sight. Since then CBSG has contributed immensely to ZOO, so anyone who has contributed to CBSG has contributed to ZOO. ZOO, then, is indebted to Frances and congratulates her on being the first female to be awarded the Ulrie Seal Award for Innovation. Eds.

Thank you very much. I'd like to use this moment in the limelight to talk a little bit about what makes CBSG such an innovative organization. For me it is one of its most precious qualities...but it isn't an easy one to understand or grasp. And while it is immensely gratifying to be recognized with such an award, I actually think that individual initiatives are only a small part of the kind of innovation CBSG is known for. Like so many of us working for CBSG, I have always felt that I was part of a larger stream of energy, a stream of energy directed, against all odds at saving the species and spaces we love. And like so many others I was drawn into that stream by Ulrie Seal.

Now Ulrie was an innovator and he fostered innovation in everything he did: of that much I am sure.. But CBSGs capacity to innovate lay not just with Ulrie but with a kind of interaction which he encouraged and which seemed to release enormous energies for change in those that participated in them and continue to radically alter the