

Commercial Nature

The emerging relationship between environmentalism and commerce forms part of the new political agenda of the 1990s. *Fred Steward* talks to environmental campaigner and leading green entrepreneur, **David Bellamy**, about the conflicts involved in the green business world

David Bellamy was born in London in 1933. Appointed lecturer in botany at Durham University at the age of 27, he became a world expert in the ecology of bogs. He came to national public attention in 1967 as an outspoken commentator on the Torrey Canyon oil disaster. In the 1970s, he gained prominence by popularising science on tv, particularly through his 1978 *Botanic Man* series.

From the mid-80s, he has played an increasing role as advisor and consultant to business organisations as well as public bodies. He has established a consultancy company, David Bellamy Associates Ltd, in Durham City, which undertakes environmental impact studies and habitat planning services. Clients have included Ford UK, ICI and the Co-Op. He also runs a conservation foundation which advises companies on their eco-image and he chairs the vetting committee for a new green unit trust run by the Trustee Savings Bank, whose portfolio includes Procter and Gamble and British Steel.

Did your interest in nature start at school?

I was a drop-out at school. I wanted to be a ballet dancer but I grew too big. So, like many children these days, I said, 'Sod it,' and did pretty badly in class although I played a good game of rugby. Then I got myself a whole series of jobs, I enjoyed myself immensely working on the factory floor. I found there was something outside the grammar school image of life. But my parents desperately wanted me to be a medic and I didn't want to let them down, although I had an awful lot of catching up to do on education missed.

Eventually I got a job as a lab assistant in a new technical college. There I met two lecturers who said that I had a brain between my ears, and that I should use it.

Five years later I had my degree and was half-way to my PhD when I was offered a university lecturership. I studied the natural sciences simply because they were the only thing that I

was good at, and because by that time I had decided medicine was not for me.

I wanted to become a bio-chemist, but I was watching Attenborough's *Zoo Quest* and realised, 'God there's a wonderful world out there'. So I drifted into the ecological end of the subject.

As an academic I started work on the phytosociology of tropical rainforests. I well remember standing in the rainforest with long lists of Latin names, all clever stuff. The local children would come out to help identify the plants for me by their local ethnic names. Then certain children would disappear. On enquiry we found they were dying of starvation. I asked myself: 'What the bloody hell am I doing? I'm a botanist, botany is the mother science of agriculture and horticulture and these people don't have enough to eat.'

Did this get you interested in environmental action?

It certainly turned me on to trying to

find out what was going wrong to make the people starve and I found it wasn't simply a matter of politics or agriculture. What had gone wrong was the process of development. The development process all too often replaces perfectly sustainable lifestyles with what can only be described as the 'plantation syndrome'. Sustainability is destroyed and with it goes any hope. I learned most of this in Sri Lanka, a country I have visited on a number of occasions. Twenty-five years ago most village families were self-sufficient on between two and five acres. They grew some 100 of the 280 varieties of rice which had sustained the country for 2,000 years before British rule. Today they mainly grow four rice varieties and many starve.

I first took up the cudgels of environmental concern over marine-pollution. Back in the early-60s, I had a research team working on peatland ecosystems in which I developed some expertise. I was worried about the destruction of the peatlands and its effect on river flow and marine pollution. Nobody was that interested in peat bogs so I built up a team of divers working on pollution off the north-east coast of England. I was something of an inspirational lecturer and many students were attracted into the team and into diving.

You gave an increasing amount of time to popularising science. Was there a conflict between that and working in a university department?

No, or perhaps I was very lucky. You see, botany was at that time a sort of poor relation of the sciences. My colleagues, so I am told, realised that every time one of my series went on the air, the number of applications to read botany went up. So, I guess they started saying: 'Bellamy may be bit of a lampon and idiot but he is at least doing the science some good.'

Most scientists find it difficult to explain their ideas to the public.

Well, I do too. I have been campaigning for the environment for 30 bloody years and during that time 97% of all Britain's flower-rich meadows have gone, let alone all the tropical rainforest destroyed and marine pollution increased. I've made a bloody awful job of it, haven't I?

You have succeeded in making science into something which is fun to most people. Why did you feel able to leave the ivory tower when so many others didn't?

Probably because I was a drop-out at school, so I had no academic hang-ups. I've always said if I could be switched on from lay-about to a damn good degree in five years then anyone can.

What role did your family background play in the development of your interest in the environment?

Both my father and grandfather were Baptist lay preachers. This good Christian background certainly played

a major part in my interest in humanity. But my father was also a pharmacist and back in those days plants were an important part of his pills and potions. So I was brought up close to the science of *materia medica*. We lived on the outskirts of London in a new estate which had prewar smashed into greenbelt, there were no 'Nimbys' in those days. Travel was restricted in wartime so I cut my biological teeth on the local brickfield. Once the war was over, I began to enjoy the countryside.

What about politics?

I was brought up in Cheam in Surrey where the Conservative always won with a huge majority. I moved up to the north-east of England, to County Durham where the Labour Party always won so I didn't bother to vote. It seemed a waste of time and so I reckoned I was apolitical. Remember, you are dealing with an extremely thick person, someone who has to see children die of starvation before he wakes up to the problems of the world. In the same way it was not until I sat in prison in Tasmania and talked to Bob Brown that I realised that everything I do is political. At that time, Bob Brown was going through the same sort of transition. He realised that if he wanted to carry the environmental banner to victory it meant going into politics. Now he leads the Greens and the Greens hold the balance of power in Tasmania.

Your interest in the environment goes back over 21 years. In the past decade, we've seen the emergence of what is now called the 'green' movement. What caused the change to this more political role?

People are now frightened. While it was just talk about pandas and whales, it didn't get through to politics.

Have the traditional environmentalists adapted to the new role?

One thing that has been wrong with the conservation movement is that for too long we've held out the begging bowl. If I meet beggars in the street I give them some money and try and find out why society is putting them in that position. Then I try and do something about that. But I wouldn't actually ask them how to run my country. And I think that because the environmental movements have acted as beggars, Mr Kinnock and Mrs Thatcher and Mr Ashdown are not actually going to ask them to come and help them to run the country.

When Mrs Thatcher, whether you like her or not, made that amazing speech on September 29 in 1988, all the green movements should have got together and said: 'Look, Mrs Thatcher, we're the real experts. We will give, no, we will *sell* you the advice on what to do about the situation.' We should have made it clear that this isn't a political football, that we are doing it because we are bloody worried about the environment. But we didn't. All the green groups at this time were shooting each other in the foot. Everyone was going around

'Let's invest in companies which appear to be trying to respond to the new environmental challenge'



saying, 'At last our time has come. Power! Fame!' We didn't speak with one voice so when she wants to do something about the greenhouse effect, the advice comes from the bloody rednecks at the wrong end of the power game. And they say build more atomic power stations.

Isn't the green movement suspicious of experts? Isn't there a feeling that experts have contributed to the problem rather than solving it?

Well I think that they are very suspicious and some are suspicious of me. Yes, you're right!

Do you think the suspicion of scientists has any basis?

I don't actually think that there was a 'Dr No' character who sat down and said 'I'll invent CFCs to puncture a hole in the bloody ozone layer,' he probably wouldn't even know that there was an ozone layer up there.

Some people really do think there are 'Dr No' people sitting around trying to destroy the world, but I certainly haven't met them yet. I've met PR people and I've met the arse end of industry who are in there trying to make money out of things which people have already proved are wrong, but I don't think that the scientists working for ICI and Shell have done this. They have been caught up in these problems and, thank God, because of Green Peace, because of Friends of the Earth, because of David Bellamy, they have now started responding and trying to do things in a very dodgy situation.

In the early 80s you were involved as a leading activist in the environmental movement, in Tasmania for example. In IMS you had a hostile reception from the Iday residents when campaigning to save the peat bogs used by rare geese. Is it true that since then you have shifted towards a different strategy which is based more on business than campaigns?

No and yes. Since 1985, I have been in a lot of campaigns, take for example the one which helped save Whirinaki Forest in New Zealand. Nothing spectacular and good news doesn't sell newspapers, so the media don't report it. They do, however, turn up when, say, there are pickets outside McDonalds saying: 'David Bellamy is a hypocrite, he backs a clean-up Derbyshire campaign, sponsored by McDonalds.' They say: 'McDonalds destroy rainforests.' I say, 'Look at the McFact sheets. They say they don't 'Lies! Lies!' shout the pickets. 'Bellamy is anti-green,' echo the news-papers.

Nobody bothered to take into account the crux of the matter. The Mighty McDonalds had shown concern, they have realised that the destruction of tropical rainforests is wrong and could damage their image. If they are telling lies, good investigative journalism will out, but the facts will remain, the goalposts of environmental concern have been widened to encompass the most successful company in the world.

I have campaigned, and will continue campaigning, in Australia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Solomon Islands. All active, positive things, some trying to stop wrong developments, others in the

field of the new green entrepreneur.

There's no contradiction in your mind between the activist and the green entrepreneur?

No, as long as your activism and your entrepreneurship are heading in the same direction. One of these areas of concern at the moment is my chairing the Trustee Savings Bank's Green Investment Fund. First the antagonists say that the profit motive is wrong, that investment of any kind is a load of rubbish. OK, one day we might get to that stage, but this is 1990 and I reckon it's going to take 30 years to make the general public think in such radical new ways. So let's try and do it through the stock exchange, let's invest in companies which appear to be trying to respond to the new environmental challenge. And I don't mean just the 30 squeaky-green companies, for they have already made the change. If we invest in companies which appear to be going green, we can help nudge them in the right direction, towards even more rapid change and action. Say we invest in a company like Rentokil and find that they won't give way on an important environmental issue, then we can dump their shares and tell them why. All part of the green re-education process.

Problems have arisen when a company attempts to use your name to legitimate actions which you don't actually support. Isn't it a difficult line to tread, acting as the expert advisor to a company when they start using that fact for their own PR?

Yes, but I let them know from the start that I will pull the plug. When approached by the TSB or the Co-Op, or any other company, I tell them that they are picking up a two-edged sword, which will be used either for or against them, by me and especially by the zealous of extreme opinion and the press. Any company which takes me on understands that.

What about the recent case in Hull, where the developers used your name in support of a planning application?

Well they did and they didn't. Let's get the facts right. Part of the farmland in question is home for some 40,000 frogs and I had been supporting the local children's Watch group in their efforts to look after them. This section of the land was owned by a property developer. He couldn't get planning permission for building because the Nature Conservancy Council - God bless 'em - and I don't always say that - said, 'No, the frogs are important'.

Then Hull City Council sold the bulk of the land to the developers so building could commence without disturbing the frogs and someone suggested that my company, David Bellamy Associates, who have expertise in the field of habitat protection and re-creation, should be called in to advise. After the survey we advised the developer to be very careful... but if the development gets the go-ahead, this is the way to protect and

enhance the frog population.

I can't understand why the *Sunday Telegraph* carried the article without checking the facts with me, however, they did carry a very detailed reply.

Does it make you cynical about politics and the press?

Aren't we all cynical?

Do you feel it is possible to get your message across?

Sometimes, no. I must be very honest. A couple of months ago I was all ready to give it all up. Everything I seemed to touch raised problems, good projects appeared to turn sour because the name of Bellamy rather than the truth made good headlines. I began to turn down opportunities, even company directorships I should have taken. But apart from all the problems, the activities of DBA mushroomed to a turnover of £0.5m. We employ 12 people, the majority environmental yuppies, who work extremely hard and do a damn good job, better than some and more environmentally sound than most, because we are ecologists by training and conservationists by conviction. If we opt out now we leave a rapidly expanding and vitally important market to many of the consultancies who, for the past 30 years, have held the market by giving the wrong red-necked advice.

Doesn't your work reflect a desire to work in the mainstream? Isn't it based on a realistic appraisal that business plays a key role in our society and therefore we have to influence what business does?

Yes, one third of the living world has been destroyed, one third grotesquely altered, the balance of another third has been badly altered, all this driven by market forces.

I have just been out to Amsterdam to receive the Order Of The Golden Ark, a Dutch award for conservationists. We flew over the Zuider Zee, much of which has been empoldered and drained at vast cost because market forces demanded more land on which to produce more 'Danish Bacon'. That land is now worth only \$1000 a hectare. A study has now shown that the 'Eco-Systems Services Ltd' - as I like to call them - of the original Zee was worth \$100,000 a hectare. Market forces destroyed all that potential, market forces, I believe, must now help re-create it.

That is what I'm now trying to get across. In this country, with 57m people trying to make a living, we don't have a hope in hell of say, saving our sites of special scientific interest by simply saying, 'Don't'. We have got to make people understand their value and then push the market to re-create those we have already lost. I will therefore work with any legal business which will put its money where those ideas are. And it's not easy because there are many people waiting in the wings to spoil any such initiative.

I well remember David Lange's words after a successful campaign to put

another section of New Zealand into World Heritage status had cost his government some \$2m: 'It must be great fun roaring around the world stopping things and getting patted on the back, but just wait until you have to make things work.' I said: 'Yeah mate, but you haven't been kicked, urinated upon, spat at or chucked in prison have you? There are some bad sides to it as well.' My answer was glib in the extreme. He was quite right, opposition is great fun, holding the reigns is a whole different ball game.

Presumably, you try and follow certain ethical standards in your involvements in the business world. What about tv advertising?

At one time I said no to it. But then, and once again it was while sitting in prison in Tasmania when I almost gave up conservation work to become a prison reformer, I said to myself: 'Look, say I could actually put the conservation message, even subliminally, into the most capitalist thing which happens on television, which is advertising, I'd be getting somewhere. It also puts money into conservation and allows me to spend eight months of my year giving more time to conservation. So I make a living out of four months of the year and eight months I give to conservation.'

What do you think of the emergence of the green parties and the view that green aims can be achieved through a new type of party winning political power?

I've always said that if the Green Party was led by Jonathon Porritt, I would go more for them. He has been a very clear thinker on environmental matters, much clearer than me. But until we get proportional representation, I think that a vote for the Green Party is probably a wasted vote. But as I don't vote at all it doesn't really matter.

Do you see all the parties taking up green issues or are some more inclined to than others?

I was impressed by Waldegrave when he was at the Department of the Environment and I am very impressed by David Clarke, I wish he were shadow minister for the environment, and Chris Patten is now doing a great job. I support a lot of the basic things all the parties said in their manifestos. The thing which worries me about the Green Party is that they don't tell us anything about wealth generation and they don't tell us how population growth can be contained. However, things are changing. Prince Philip, now Linda Chalker and even Mrs Thatcher at the UN are all talking about population. These are heady days.

You are not afraid to publicly admit to your reservations, but do you feel fundamentally optimistic at the moment?

I feel immensely optimistic. I have just talked to 1,200 young people who are concerned about population problems. I have five children, four adopted, three

'If we invest in companies which are going green, we can help nudge them in the right direction'



from Third-World backgrounds, so I have to be optimistic. But the news that really makes me optimistic is the fact that the East Germans are going back to East Germany. I was worried by the fact that the press were not making the links between desire for Reebok shoes and all the other consumerist goods. If the 1 billion people of China did the same, that would be the end of the world. But the East Germans took a look, found freedom and turned back, there is hope.

And how do you deal with that problem? What's the solution?

Real education! Which is the dodgiest economy in the world? Hands up Japan. If world trade stops, the Japanese people start to starve: they have few resources of their own. Which is the safest first-world economy? Hands up New Zealand. If world trade stops tomorrow, they can feed, clothe, house, heat, light and amuse themselves all from their own resources. Whether the world would actually let them is the only matter of debate.

The world has got to realise the true facts of global economy and use the market to rehabilitate those parts of the world it has already destroyed back towards sustainability.

For example, it would be quite easy - not so easy these days - to find, say, 1000 rich Arabs who want a 1000-acre shooting estate in England. Let them come, allow them to build their palace

on five acres and the rest must be burned back to semi-natural woodland and meadowland. They have the shooting, the animal rights groups won't like it, but the local people have access once more to real landscape for most of each year. Green gain could rehabilitate much of Britain.

The real challenge is that 20% of British farmland is going to come out of production in the next decade. Now it's bloody rubbish us paying money to leave land fallow for five years. At the end of that time there will have to be new grants for drainage, management, etc. What we must persuade the government to do is to get the farmers to opt into the scheme for good. Say we buy their farm at the going rate. A single payment. The money is invested and the farmer paid the interest, which would be more than the set-aside payment. The farmer, who has the right to re-buy the land at any time, continues to live on the farm, making money out of farming it in an environmentally friendly way, for wildlife and organic food. Great, and it would cost a lot less in the long term.

Is government policy going to be an important influence? Or is it going to be choices made by business people which will have most effect?

All parliamentary parties, except the Greens who haven't had a go yet, are forced to follow business, after all that is who earns the money they eventually spend. And I do believe that a lot of

businesses are now bending over backwards to find a squeaky-green image. We and the government, I believe, must do everything to help them, thus changing their, and our, ways.

I am just off to Sydney to give a lecture to a green consumer conference. One example I will use is that of Ecover. Some of the big boys in the business got hot under the collar and were considering legal proceedings to prove that some of these new brands were not what they were cracked up to be. My advice to the big boys was not to try to beat them over the head: 'Face them with the right eco-friendly product, and with your marketing clout, you can soon be brand leaders.' I will also quote the case of Procter and Gamble, who then blotted their new green copy book by testing their new green product on animals. Bad practice, bad PR.

The thing that really terrifies me is that I was voted on LBC as the man the people of London would believe on matters concerning the environment. Now, when do I start telling lies? Never, I hope, but it's a complex business. That is why I have sleepless nights... I got about two hours sleep last night because I had a very hard week and weekend on environmental issues. Something woke me up in the middle of the night, a nightmare - 'Did I tell the truth?'

Your own conscience?

Yes, in this position, you have a great weight on your shoulders.©

'Market forces destroyed all that potential, now they must help re-create it'



London's Gay Community Bookshop

Gay's The Word

66 MARCHMONT STREET
LONDON WC1N 1AB
TELEPHONE 01-278 7654

'EUROPE'S LARGEST RADICAL AND BLACK INTERNATIONAL BOOK FAIR AND PUBLISHING EVENT.'

9th INTERNATIONAL BOOK FAIR OF RADICAL, BLACK AND THIRD WORLD BOOKS

Thursday 22nd March-Saturday 24th March 1990
CAMDEN CENTRE, BIDBOROUGH STREET, LONDON NW1
Nearest underground Kings Cross
11.00am-5.30pm Daily

Details of Forums, Film and Cultural events available.

MANCHESTER BOOK FAIR EVENT: SATURDAY 17th MARCH 1990, BANQUETING ROOM, MANCHESTER TOWN HALL

BRADFORD BOOK FAIR EVENT: WEDNESDAY MARCH 28th - FRIDAY MARCH 30th 1990, BRADFORD COMMUNITY CENTRE

Further information from International Book Fair of Radical, Black and Third World Books, 76 Stroud Green Road, London N4 3EN. Tel. 01-272 4889/01-737 2268.