

THE
MAN
WHO

bought

THE
WORLD

John Burton was a pioneer for the concept of buying an acre of rainforest to protect it. As he steps down from running the World Land Trust, he talks to **James Fair** about conservation, eco-colonialism – and cats.

Back in May 1989, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister and General Manuel Noriega was nullifying an election that had ousted him as president of Panama, down the road in the tiny Central American country of Belize, plans were afoot to buy 44,000 hectares (ha) of land for the purpose of conserving the rainforest and its wildlife.

John Burton, a 45-year-old British conservationist who had recently quit his role as head of Fauna & Flora International (FFI), was asked by a contact at the US Audubon Society to help raise the \$6.5m (then about £4m) needed for the purchase.

John approached the now defunct newspaper *Today*, which promised him £25,000 for a six-page feature on the condition that he got the plan endorsed by the three most notable conservationists in the country: David Attenborough, David Bellamy and Gerald Durrell.

“I think it took Viv [Burton, John’s wife] all of half an hour,” John recalls. “I don’t think they realised how much of a network we were. These were people I’d known a long time, so it simply wasn’t a problem.”

In the end, the Burtons raised £250,000, much of it through asking the British public, including readers of *BBC Wildlife Magazine*, to donate ▶



John Burton is stepping down from running the WLT after almost three decades. It all began with a campaign to buy land in Belize for the purpose of conserving the rainforest in 1989.



JOHN BURTON

money by 'buying an acre'. While John admits that it wasn't his idea – "It came from America, and Friends of the Earth had done a similar thing with Alice's Meadow in Oxfordshire" – this was one of the earliest uses of the model.

On the back of this success, John set up the Worldwide Land Conservation Trust, later shortening the name to the World Land Trust (WLT) "because David Bellamy kept getting it wrong". In the intervening years, the WLT has raised more than £25m and been instrumental in the purchase and protection of some 500,000 acres (more than 200,000 ha – an area greater than all of the RSPB's reserves in Britain) of tropical rainforest and other threatened habitats. Strategic purchases that connect isolated habitats have helped ensure that some 1.6m ha are actively managed and protected.

GROWING AWARENESS

John was born in Streatham, south-west London, and says his earliest memory is of finding a common lizard in his sandpit at the age four or five. He was fascinated by wildlife – and reptiles, especially – had a vivarium by the age of eight or nine and started reading books by David Attenborough and Gerald Durrell.

"They were all collectors, so I started catching hedgehogs in the woods and selling them to Harrods at five shillings each," he says. "I collected crayfish from local rivers when I was about 15 and sold them to the school for dissection."

Thereafter, his career path was inevitably going to be entwined with animals: he joined the Natural History Museum after leaving school, worked in natural history publishing – including on this magazine when it was still called *Animals* – wrote a field guide to reptiles and amphibians, helped found the wildlife-trade monitoring group Traffic and then joined what was then the Fauna & Flora Protection Society, later to become FFI.

It was around this time that naturalists around the world first realised that wildlife was in trouble. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was founded in 1961, and Friends of the Earth in the early 1970s. In the 70s, Greenpeace began its long-running campaign against whaling that eventually led to the ban in 1986.

The conservation movement – initially more of a club for educated, often wealthy amateur naturalists – was slowly becoming democratised, leading to the anti-road-building campaigns in Britain in the mid-1980s.

Inviting the public to participate in saving species

John began collecting after reading books by Sir David Attenborough.



around the world from extinction by purchasing acres of rainforest was the next, perhaps in hindsight inevitable, development.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. While John felt he was tapping into a zeitgeist, he couldn't get backing from the now-established conservation groups. "We felt we had identified a niche in the market," he says. "No one was doing land conservation, but WWF wouldn't support us, and Friends of the Earth opposed us, saying governments should do this. But governments weren't doing it, so we said we would."

CULTURE CLASH

While the original (and still main) focus of the WLT's work has been largely in countries such as Ecuador, Belize, Costa Rica and Brazil in Central and South America, it is also involved in conservation projects in areas such as Georgia in the Caucasus and an island in the Philippines, and in creating elephant corridors in India.

One central tenet of its operation, however, is that WLT doesn't actually buy any land itself – it works with grassroots conservation groups in the relevant countries, thereby at least partially avoiding accusations of 'eco-colonialism' that have dogged the 'buy-an-acre' model in recent years.

One particular issue highlighted by groups such as Survival International and the Forest Peoples Programme is where indigenous, tribal people are evicted from their land, or stopped from carrying out activities such as hunting when western conservationists move in. To an extent, this is a criticism that's always been made about the developed world's approach to conservation, but most conservation groups are more sensitive to this now than they were when they began operating in the 1960s and 70s.

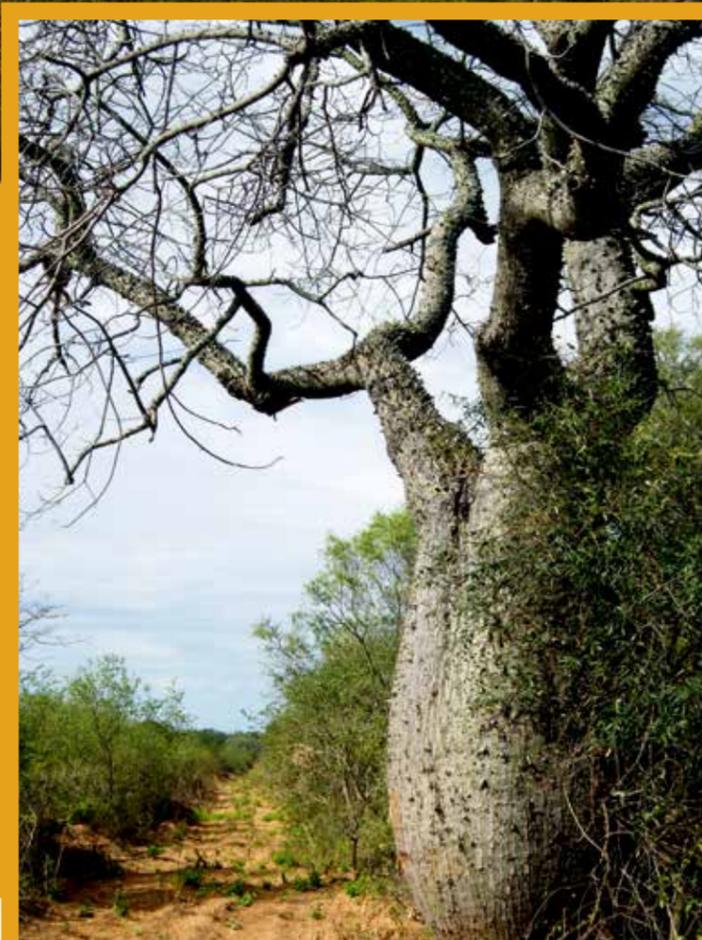
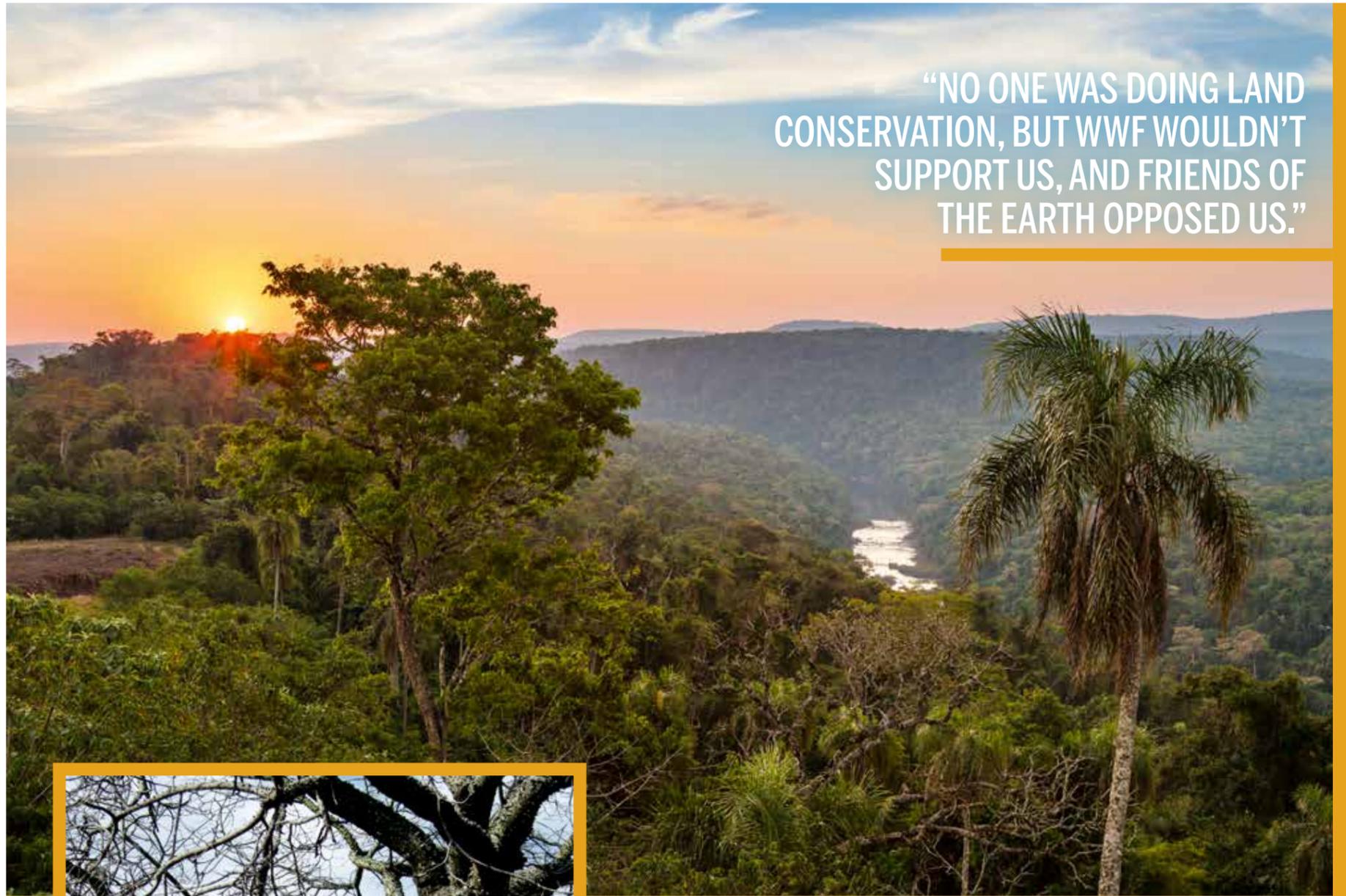
WLT, John says, has mainly stayed away from purchases where people are living on and from the land, although a project (the Misiones Rainforest Corridor) that he describes as the highlight of his career did involve negotiating with a local tribe of Guarani people in Argentina. A tract of land owned by a logging company and that connected a state park in Brazil with a provincial park in Argentina came up for sale, and the trust immediately expressed its interest.

"The owner was a young man who had grown up on Attenborough films and he was really keen to do the right thing,"

John says. "But after two years of getting these people round the table, we'd got nowhere. How do you get the Guarani people to trust you when they've had 500 years of lies?"

Eventually, WLT and its local partners realised the Guarani

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Far left: land purchased in the Chaco has been recognised by the Paraguayan government as the Campo Iris Private Nature Reserve. Above: Guarani people in Argentina wanted to continue hunting in Mocona. Left: although WLT's main focus has been South America, it is working to develop corridors in India to stop elephant populations becoming isolated.

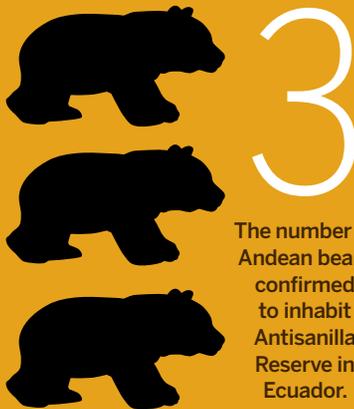
WORLD LAND TRUST IN NUMBERS

500,000

acres – equivalent to a county the size of Leicestershire – bought and protected by the WLT.

4,000,000

acres – an area greater than Lancashire and Yorkshire under active protection because of the WLT.



The number of Andean bears confirmed to inhabit Antisanilla Reserve in Ecuador.

£25m

The amount of money put into buying land for conservation purposes across the world.

£100

The average amount the WLT spends on an acre of land.



Land purchase in the Americas could help the powerful harpy eagle to survive.

not only wanted stricter protection for the forest than that afforded by national park status, they also wanted the right to hunt.

“Some sustainable forestry would have been acceptable to us, but they wanted no trees cut down and help with policing it. And while I have serious reservations about the way they hunt – killing a monkey with a bow and arrow can take about an hour – the alternative is to give them guns to make it clean, and then they wipe out everything.”

WORLD'S WEIRDEST FOREST

Another project close to John's heart is in Paraguay, and involves an ecosystem most of us have never heard of – the Chaco. “Chaco is forest, but it's the world's weirdest forest,” he says. “For nine months of the year, it's bone dry and 50°C, then for three it's a wetland and up to 1m deep in water. It's got jaguars, condors and peccaries. Everything's got spines on and is vicious.”

Because it's so different, there are many Chaco endemics (because it covers three separate countries – Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia – they are not country endemics) but it's also under threat from cattle ranchers and soya farmers.

“You don't need to take my word for it,” John says. “Just look at it on Google Earth

– straight lines where they are going to chop down the forest, pale, greyish yellow where they have already. Eventually, it will just become a huge desert.”

With local Paraguayan NGO

Guyra Paraguay, WLT has helped purchase 3,500ha in the Chaco, but this is not without controversy. Tom Griffiths, of the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) says the organisation has questioned whether the principle of “free, prior and informed consent” was properly adhered to.

“We were assured that everything was above board, but we still think the mechanics of the land purchase were questionable on legal grounds because the land is owned by the NGO, not the community,” he says.

FPP questions the whole basis of ‘buy-an-acre’ schemes in areas where there are indigenous people. He says: “There is a risk you could be infringing on the rights of the people who live on the land, and most people [buying into a scheme] wouldn't want to do that.”

John will be stepping down from running WLT full time in 2017, but will still have an active role within the organisation. He takes a simple and uncompromising approach to conservation and

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says any NGO that has more than 50 or 60 employees has got too big (WLT has 23, and not all are full-time). WLT spends less than 18 per cent of its income on overheads, he says, the rest goes into buying land.

“I have seen so many plans, strategies and biodiversity action plans that never did anything and could never have done anything for political reasons,” he says. “Why worry about something in the Amazon if the land isn't for sale when you've got 20,000ha of land in the Patagonian steppe that's goes for \$9 an acre? If you have 20,000ha anywhere in the world, there's going to be something [worth saving] there.”

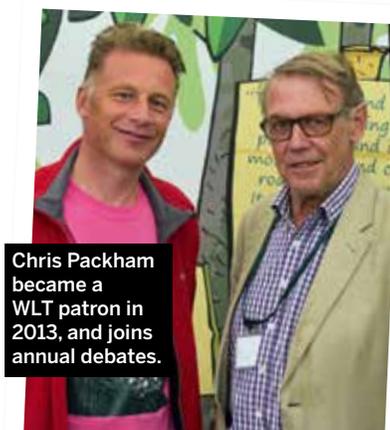
Money can be wasted on monitoring, he says. The IUCN draws up hundreds of actions plans that are hugely costly but achieve nothing. “How much research do we need to do for half these species? We don't need any more – if you get big enough areas, on the whole, things look after themselves. If I have £100,000 to spend, why would I do more monitoring when I can buy land?”

CHILDREN AND CATS

By his own admission, John has ruffled feathers all his life, and he's not going to stop now. From claiming we should put a tax on children (“rather than dishing out grants to have them”) to arguing that no cat should be allowed outside off a lead (“There's no evidence that cats are taking only sick and injured animals, the RSPB has to say that, it needs the old ladies' money.”) he's quite prepared to voice opinions that run counter to prevailing orthodoxies.

Still, it's hard to argue with what he's achieved. “I am a pessimist,” he says. “The world is not in a good state, but is there any alternative to trying to do something? I work in conservation because I can't think of anything else and because I like doing it. I hope other people like what I do, too.”

JAMES FAIR is Environment Editor at BBC Wildlife



Chris Packham became a WLT patron in 2013, and joins annual debates.