

have been as important to Western civilization for such a long time. Maggio prompts the reader to wonder why we are doing so little now to conserve tuna for future generations. Perhaps her account will enlighten more of us with the need for an immediate solution for bluefin tuna conservation, especially in Europe, so that the Atlantic bluefin does not meet the fate of the buffalo or the *tonnaroti*.

A DAY OUT: ECOLOGY

Wet and Wild

Sandra Knapp

Forty-seven percent of the world's population currently lives in cities, and by 2030 more than sixty percent will be urban dwellers. As commerce and culture become more globalized, natural habitats become more remote for most of us. Even the countryside is becoming ever increasingly managed, with agribusiness often dictating how habitats are constituted. Many of today's children, although fascinated by animals and wildlife on television, have never seen a truly "natural" habitat.

How fitting then that Britain's Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) constructed its Wetland Centre along the River Thames four miles from the center of London, rather than in a more "pristine" habitat elsewhere. Covering 105 acres on the site of a redundant reservoir system, the Centre is Europe's largest urban wetlands reconstruction project. The WWT has created a complex wetlands habitat through a massive recycling project that converted four concrete reservoirs into a series of lakes and ponds. This environmental awareness is reflected throughout the site, which includes sections on sustainable and water-efficient gardening. One looks more like something one might find in New Mexico than in central London—although with global warming, who knows? On a sunny summer weekend I took several children (1) to see how a group of urban dwellers felt about such a potentially innovative installation.

The Wetland Centre is divided into three

principal parts, the Peter Scott Visitor Centre and two path systems. The Visitor Centre houses a lecture theater with a multimedia show, an art gallery dedicated to the work of wildlife artists, a Discovery Centre aimed primarily at children, and an observatory that overlooks the main lake.

The observatory, an enormous glass-fronted room, is perfect for those unable to walk the path systems. Silhouettes and drawings of the common birds allow visitors not already keen birders to begin identifying what they see, and a few computers have games and information on wildfowl migration. The Discovery Centre introduces children and others to the importance of wetlands, a theme that could have been more integrated throughout the site. If tropical rainforests are Earth's lungs, then rivers and wetlands are its blood, as essential to survival and as threatened with destruction. My team felt that if visitors didn't go to the Discovery Centre first, they would miss some of the points—as we did by going for the outside bits first. All agreed, however, that the "Wetlab" upstairs was great. As a biologist, I particularly loved the people-watching activity in which children are encouraged to

zoo," offers a lightning tour of the world's wetlands with samples of areas as diverse as Spitzbergen, Hawaii, and tropical Africa. A few wildfowl species are displayed in each zone. Because the zones themselves are quite small, the ducks and geese can be seen close up, which is excellent for those without binoculars. Computer touch-

screens allow exploration of issues about each habitat, but they were never more interesting than the creatures themselves. A truly wild area beyond the "zoo" features British wetlands. This series of small ponds and reed beds allows visitors to get quite close to nest-

ing birds. Explanatory signs—refreshingly nontechnical, but still with correct scientific names—identified the area's plants and occasionally its animals too. My team preferred the native habitat, and the hide at the end of the road, to the zoo and even to the other main path (Waterlife).

Waterlife was the path we thought we would most enjoy because near its beginning it featured pond-dipping, a favorite childhood occupation. The area devoted to this activity, however, was disappointingly small, and dippers were not allowed more than one or two goes with a rather large-

meshed net. This may have been because we went at the end of the day; keen pond-dippers should go early. The hides, including the multi-story Peacock Tower, were a bigger hit. We spent hours watching lapwings dive-bombing crows, ducks leading their broods along the pond margins, coots tending their nests, and swans gracefully swimming to and fro. It was enjoyable to hear a group of children, all of whom grew up in London (albeit with at least some experience of the countryside), discuss with such vigor and enthusiasm the identities and behaviors of the birds they were watching.

The birds we saw are not exotic or necessarily rare, but conservation begins with the commonplace and in our own backyards.

The verdict of the team? "Great, let's go again!" Their resounding approval made it plain to me that every big city with a river needs a place like this.

The Wetland Centre The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

Queen Elizabeth's Walk,
London SW13 9SF.
www.wetlandcentre.
org.uk



Reservoir recycled. The former Barn Elms reservoirs have been replaced by a complex of wetland habitat.

view other visitors in the courtyard below with a telescope (just as they had watched birds earlier on) and record their plumage, family groups, and behavioral interactions. Such a subtle and clever way of showing humans as another species is definitely worth repeating elsewhere.

It is outside, however, that the Wetland Centre truly shines. The two path systems are nonintersecting and lead visitors through the site. One (Wildside), a kind of "wetlands

Notes

1. My review team consisted of Philippa De Lacey and Alfred, Isabel, Victor, and Jim Mallet.