

## **Lessons from a conservation visionary**

### **Tim Mackrill**

When you look back over the last century there are many people who could be regarded as conservation visionaries. One who really stands out for me, is George Waterston.

Born in Edinburgh in 1911 to a wealthy family of printers and stationers, Waterston's main passion from childhood, was birds. While working in the family business he founded the Midlothian Ornithologist's club – which went on to become the Scottish Ornithologists' Club – and established a bird migration study station on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth. His interest in bird migration also took him north to Fair Isle in the Shetlands. He became an annual visitor following his first trip in 1935 and began to think about setting up a Bird Observatory on the island. But then came the second World War.

As a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery, Waterston was involved in the Battle of Crete, and was captured by German troops in 1941. He was held as a prisoner of war in Germany for the next two-and-a-half years before his repatriation to the UK due to ill health in October 1943. Remarkably, during his time in the prisoner of war camp, Waterston conducted ornithological studies and even contributed a paper to a German scientific journal based on his observations of bird migration in Crete in the spring of 1941. Amazingly, he also worked on his plans to set-up the Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust with the help of fellow prisoner, Ian Pitman.

Once the war was over, and thanks to his family's wealth, Waterston bought Fair Isle from Robert Bruce of Sumburgh in 1948 and the Fair Isle Bird Observatory was launched as a public trust. The original Observatory was housed in old Naval headquarters in a complex of huts and was officially opened on 28th August 1948. Today Fair Isle remains one of the most important places for breeding seabirds and for the study of bird migration, in the UK.

Waterston's legacy isn't limited to Fair Isle. He became the full-time Director of the RSPB in Scotland in 1959 and this coincided with the return of Ospreys to Scotland. Waterston assembled a team to protect the breeding Ospreys at Loch Garten from egg collectors, but also took the visionary decision to publicise the location of the nest and actively encourage the general public to come and watch the birds from a specially manned viewpoint. It was a decision that raised eyebrows amongst conservationists at the time, but over the course of seven weeks that summer more than 14,000 people took the opportunity to see the Ospreys at their nest. By inviting people to view the birds in this way, Waterston had created a model for modern-day eco-tourism that endures to this day. This summer Operation Osprey as Waterston named it, celebrated its 60th anniversary at Loch Garten.

One of the many things I find inspiring about Waterston is that not only did he possess remarkable and pioneering vision, but also the determination and drive to make that vision reality. Even his time in the German prisoner of war camp wasn't wasted: it was there that he began planning how he would turn his dream of the establishing a Fair Isle Bird Observatory into action. Just three years after the end of the war, the Observatory opened its doors for the first time. He also wasn't afraid to embrace change, as he demonstrated at Loch Garten. At the time, the nests of rare breeding birds were usually kept a strict secret; so actively promoting the location of the Osprey nest to enable people to come and view it was regarded as controversial by some. Waterston was unwavering in the face of this criticism, however, convinced that the best way of protecting birds like Ospreys was to generate public support for them; and the most effective way of doing that, he believed, was to encourage people to travel north to see them. And, of course, he was absolutely right.

If I'm honest I sometimes find reading about the exploits of real conservation pioneers like Waterston, a little overwhelming. How can we as modern-day conservationists ever hope to replicate the remarkable work that he, and others like him, carried out? The answer of course, is that we live in very different times, with different challenges. We may not all be able to buy a Scottish island (if only!) but we can certainly all make a difference. We can use the example of people like Waterston to motivate us in our day-to-day work and to drive much needed change.

Many people see change as daunting, and something to be avoided; but as leaders we should embrace it, and see it as an opportunity. We need to be the people who make change happen. We're all aware of the continued decline of our wildlife – both locally and globally – so the status quo is simply not acceptable. We have to do more. We have to push for change. And that's the beauty of leadership: it doesn't matter what role you have in conservation, or how senior you are in an organisation, it is possible for anyone to create change if you approach things in the right way.

If you really want to make a difference, then it is essential to give yourself time to think and to 'zoom out' as Barry discusses this week. We're all busy, but if you don't make time to take a step-back and to think about the bigger picture, then all you're likely to do is to maintain the status quo. The chances are that if you work in conservation, or aspire to work in conservation, that you already have a vision of how you would like to see things change. If so, I would urge you to think about the change you would like to see, and then devise a plan based around that vision. You might feel that in the grand scheme of things you alone cannot make a difference, but if you approach every project – no matter how small and insignificant you might feel it is – with a positive attitude and a carefully considered plan ([Kotter's eight stage process](#) is a great place to start) which you are able to communicate engagingly with your team, volunteers, or other colleagues, then it's amazing what you will start to achieve.