



Stanford eCorner

Birth of Conservation International

Peter Seligmann, *Conservation International*

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Peter Seligmann, co-founder, chairman and CEO of Conservation International, talks about how he got interested in forestry. He discusses how Conservation International got started and the company's motto.



Transcript

It was really just that pursuit of the study of forestry that got me into the work that I'm in. And so what I would like to tell you a little bit about is how we started Conservation International. Then I'd like to talk to you a little bit about some of the examples of where we work. Because if you're going to work in global conservation, you have to be an entrepreneur. If you're not, you will not succeed. My work career began working for The Nature Conservancy, a great organization that works at that time--it was in 1976--in the United States. And I loved the idea of finding beautiful places and then being able to work in a stable environment to acquire and protect them. But being interested in wildlife and in flora and fauna, I realized very quickly that the United States actually is not the most important place on Earth when it comes to the life forms that inhabit this earth. And so I moved to South America. And there, I found that traditional conservation efforts just didn't apply.

People were poor. People needed revenues. They had to make different types of decisions. And a standing tree was an asset that had not yet been collected. I also was exposed to the idea that at that particular time in our history in the late '80s, when we started Conservation International in 1987, what I learned in the late '80s was that there was an enormous crisis, the debt crisis, and that nations that were poor had to look at all the resources as assets to convert them to dollars so they just could pay debt. And what struck me when I was traveling in Peru and enjoying the beauty of nature in Peru, and yet being stunned by the poverty, was that there was an opportunity for a deal. And the deal was, perhaps we could encourage the countries that owned the debt of Peru and Bolivia and other countries to reduce that debt in exchange for what the northerners wanted, and that was conservation of areas like the Amazon. And so we came up with an idea in 1987 called Debt for Nature. And we actually purchased debt on the secondary market for five cents and a dollar, and then ended up swapping that debt with the governments in exchange for big conservation areas. So they reduced their debt and we were able to secure and protect important places.

That was a nice way to replace the land acquisition issue that was being done in the United States by many conservation organizations, but it didn't address jobs. And if we don't address jobs in the developing world, conservation will fail. So at Conservation International, we decided, let's see if we can create jobs, build economies around conservation. And that really launched us into exploration of, what are the business opportunities from a healthy forest? And what we learned, again, just a little bit of luck, was that there's a fruit from a palm tree called tagua, and that palm tree and that little nut actually is vegetable ivory. And you can make buttons out of it. So we entered into a relationship with Patagonia and with The Gap and began to manufacture buttons to create jobs that would keep the forest standing. And that was all at a tiny scale. So out of that initial beginning in 1987, when we began to look at the relationship between conservation and jobs, that's really what was the birth of

this organization, Conservation International. Our motto is, 'You need to have your head in the sky to see the scale of the problem, but your feet have to be in the mud if you're going to deal with the reality of making operations on the ground work'.