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An interview with PBI's new executive director

We introduced PBI's new executive director, Dr Phoebe Barnard, earlier this year. But we'd like to invite you to get to know Phoebe better, in her conversation below with one of our fantastic board members, writer and citizen scientist Jan Hersey.

Where did you grow up? What first tickled your interest in the environment?

I was born in 1961 – the era of DDT and polluted industrial rivers catching fire -- to a Massachusetts family for whom nature, the environment and love were our core. I learned that passion, scientific curiosity, and activism all spring from love. My dad was a roofer, a geologist and birdwatcher. He took us birding and walking in the forests, and took me fishing on the coast. So I studied ornithology, evolution and conservation biology. As a teenager, I spent my summers raking Irish moss, fishing for striped bass, and gathering mussels and clams for the table. All of us went into the sciences. We didn't have too much money, but we had love, kindness, curiosity and a good education.

You bring a wealth of experience to PBI from your work in Africa and with international partners. How does that inform the path you see ahead with PBI?

I've been lucky to live and work 34 years in Africa (and another 4 in Canada). I guess this taught me that public policy can turn countries into either sustainability success stories or abject failures. After colonialism, independence and democracy gave African countries the chance to choose – and they often chose rather well. People in the USA often know very little about the rest of the world. Stereotypes of Africa as a sad, corrupt, poverty- and famine-stricken region are often completely misguided.

In southern Africa, I spent 10 years in the “Dream Team” of smart, visionary people in Namibia's Directorate of Environmental Affairs. I was incredibly fortunate to be given the space there to set up and run national programs, on biodiversity conservation and climate change. Namibia was at the cusp of independence from a long and tangled colonial history under German, British and South African rule. Yet it was also a visionary country, with the protection of biodiversity, essential ecological processes and sustainable natural resource use all written into its constitution. The USA can't say that!

From my African work on biodiversity, invasive species, climate change and environmental observation systems, I learned how easy it is to make positive change from the top down. We had a very conducive policy framework in both Namibia and South Africa. But top-down change isn't enough. We need to work from every angle: top-down, bottom-up, and with lateral shifts from all sides. We need change in the way families, schools, corporations, faith communities, social media and organizations all operate and collaborate. As I always say, life doesn't have to be this way. We can change it!

PBI's challenges ahead are framed by this difficult moment in world history. Governments in several countries, including the USA, seem to be turning their backs on the future -- embracing profits and fading industries over planetary health or human social justice. I often ask myself: have we passed the peak of a cooperative, wise global society, where people and the planet actually matter in the economy? I hope not. My African experiences teach me that the economy, societal values, and good governance underpin everything we do in biodiversity conservation. Without making changes in the economy, in our values, and in our governments, it's impossible to protect nature. A failure of national leadership can reverse decades of progress within weeks. And when this happens, extinction accelerates, people lapse into poverty, and social and political conflict escalate. These are serious times. To be effective, a small organization like PBI must work in coalition with strong and diverse partners to achieve our aims.

Being back in the United States after 38 years outside the country gives you a unique perspective on the environmental challenges faced here. How would you assess these and is there a priority for addressing them?

Phew. The USA has particular problems addressing our environmental challenges, because Americans have tended to give individual rights priority over the common good. This is worsened by the divisive political and social climate we have today. It's tragic that the USA can backtrack so far from its position of global leadership in 50 short years. I think most people agree that current policy changes are unraveling our social fabric. We're still ahead of many countries on our level of social activism and engagement in environmental protection, on large science programs, on many kinds of technology development. And, of course, on great bookstores and coffee bars! But our advances have happened in too much of a moral and ethical vacuum. We are undermined by an exploitative economic system and inconsistent political leadership.

So in my lifetime, we've fallen behind in many of the things that underlie environmental progress -- from fuel efficiency to social well-being, to geography and science education -- despite the amazing efforts of so many committed teachers and researchers. It's no longer controversial for me to say that our US political system is broken and corrupt, and urgently needs fixing. All our environmental challenges -- from climate change to nutrient pollution, marine plastics pollution, land conflicts and invasive ('non-native') species -- arise from the roots of this broken system. In other countries where PBI works, such as Argentina, we see much greater environmental leadership at the moment.

Tell us something about your approach to addressing environmental needs, and how is this impacted by the current challenging environment?

I tend to work consultatively and by building teams. I don't believe in working alone. Small organizations like PBI can achieve much more through coalitions. So my normal approach is first to get a diverse group of people together. Then we brainstorm both the problems and the solutions. We then usually break into groups to drill down into how to solve different problems. I try to get a second level of inputs from a wide array of people, from as different backgrounds as possible, so we see things from many perspectives. We then strategize a bunch of solutions, prioritize these according to urgency, impact and feasibility. Then we get underway with the most urgent or impactful practical actions.

I've worked a lot in academia and conservation organizations, so I know that we can only find solutions through collaboration. Yes, this is difficult under the current political environment. I've never seen the USA so terribly divided. However, the new politics have also made people challenge their own values,

stand up, and work together across political parties, cultures, and regions. And that's profoundly inspiring!

Have there been people who have inspired your work? In what way did they do that?

Sure. So many people! As a teenager, I was inspired by Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Thoreau, Emerson, Alfred Russell Wallace, all the usual suspects. But also by literally hundreds of people around the world who have rejected the idea that nature is a commodity, put there for our exploitation and degradation. People who know that there is a better way to run the world and that it's up to them, to us, to create it.

I've just come back from the most gloriously inspiring leadership expedition to Antarctica for women in science – the Homeward Bound expedition (see <http://homewardboundprojects.com.au/>), in which I was supported for 3 weeks by about 80 of the most incredible women on the planet. I also worked with the late Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai and many other impressive changemakers on the board of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. And my sister Sue Barnard Lamdin, an environmental science teacher in Maine, is one of my inspirations who's changed a lot of lives! But many of the immediate inspirations in my life and work have been men – my dad, my brothers, my filmmaker husband John Bowey, and three talented male directors with whom I worked in Namibia – Chris Brown, Peter Tarr and Sem Shikongo. I find inspiration in many places.

The Pacific Northwest has an active environmental community of academic, governmental, private, and citizen entities. What do you see as PBI's role among them?

Yes, it's a very crowded landscape. Our roles in PBI are to catalyze and facilitate change in biodiversity conservation, build a technical support hub for conservation data and action, and be a leadership training hub for the next generation. So we work in coalitions and teams. We need funding to do this. To strengthen our own and our coalition's work, we are launching a Biodiversity Trust Fund: an important platform where visionary companies, agencies, and people can visibly stand up for nature. Collectively, we can help keep species and ecosystems from falling through the cracks of a political and economic system that has failed us all.

We hear a lot these days about "citizen science" and "citizen scientists." What role do you see for individuals in addressing our ecological needs?

Citizen scientists are incredibly important in our society. They help track environmental change, and therefore enable scientists and policymakers to predict this change and take action before it's too late – before species become locally extinct or habitats are lost. We used to think governments would employ specialists to do all the work, and that we could just go out in nature and enjoy it. That was a silly paradigm. It took away ordinary people's sense of stewardship and knowledge. But in these days of federal government dismantling its own agencies, it's also a dangerous paradigm. Environmental stewardship is everyone's responsibility, albeit under the guidance of specialist agencies and scientists.

Who is Phoebe Barnard when she's not wearing her PBI hat? What are your personal interests, what's your relaxing reading?

Hmm! I'm a low-key mountaineer, a hiker, a volcano-climber, a birdwatcher and bird-bander, a community activist, a very happily married wife and mother of two wonderful daughters. I'm interested in what makes people tick, why they choose their partners, how they change their minds, and what

creates tipping points in our society. I love music of many kinds, and reading Gibran, Rumi, or Whitman with my gorgeous man.

Tell us something we might not have guessed about you?

My high school friend John Raible and I were boogie funk dancers in 1979 - Doobie Brothers, Traffic, and Earth, Wind & Fire. I used to play jazz piano, improvising to Keith Jarrett and Chick Corea LPs. Not many people know that!