



*African Fish Eagle swooping in for a catch on the shores of Lake Naivasha.*

## Conservation, money and a teenager: Finding a balance

By Munir Virani

As a child, I never really appreciated what the phrase charity begins at home meant. I grew up in the city of Nairobi with my brothers in the glorious eighties, when we had the luxury of being able to walk freely across the city, without an inherent fear of being mugged or kidnapped. Fast-forward to the now, when every teenager is exposed to a miasma of grit, grime and gory, available across every form of media gadgetry. I have overheard teenagers rate from 1 to 10 the magnitude of how gruesome a murder or carjacking scene is, as depicted on YouTube. I am blessed with two lovely boys and I cannot help but worry about their future, especially at the rate at which technology is advancing. My seven year old sometimes teaches me how an app works. This article however is not about cell phone technology or violent crime scenes. It is about a conversation that I had with a young teenage boy a couple of months ago. It really got me thinking not only as a professional in conservation, but

as a parent and more importantly as a member of a global society.

As I stood outside Jamat Khana, waiting for my better half, on a pleasant Friday evening, my friend Azim introduced me to his son. I gazed at him from top to bottom. A young suave 16-year old dressed in an impeccable pinstriped Gucci suit, upturned polished shoes and a silk tie, he could have come out from any office on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue.

"I am Farhaan," he said in a soft voice, almost inaudible. He gave me a limp handshake, which suggested he had been forced to talk to me.

"Tell him what you do," his father prodded me. Slightly embarrassed, I looked at Farhaan square in the eye and said,

"Well, I am a lion tamer."

His eyes almost popped out, and he exclaimed.

"What?"

"Well, I got your attention didn't I", I replied with a grin. He smiled and appeared a little more relaxed and comfortable.

"Actually, I like using that line because it gets people's attention. I work for an organization that protects endangered raptors around the world,"

I continued. I knew he didn't understand the word raptors, so I explained to him that it meant birds of prey, like Eagles, Falcons, Hawks, Vultures and Owls. Nothing prepared me for the next words that came out of his mouth.

"So how do you make money?" he asked almost nonchalantly.

I remained calm and replied, "Well, I am quite fortunate to have developed my passion into a career. I am incredibly passionate about wildlife, nature and especially birds."

He raised his eyebrows, not thoroughly convinced and added,

"So, it's a job and you get paid for it."

I realized that I was getting embroiled in an interesting discussion with a 'know-it-all' teenager. I had to remain calm. I looked at him and said,

"Gandhi once said that if you can find a job you love, then you never have to do a day's work in your life".

Nothing! I got a blank stare. I tried again.

"Well, let me tell you one of the exciting things that we do. One of our study areas is the Masai Mara National Reserve where we trap vultures and attach satellite transmitters on them to determine their movements and behavior.

"Why vultures?" he asked, "Aren't they ugly and disgusting?"

"Maybe for you," I replied. "They are pretty cool birds and provide vital ecosystem services. They are our natural garbage collectors, they decompose rotting carcasses, which would otherwise spread



*A Peregrine Falcon perching on Munir's gloved hand*

diseases and they have been revered by ancient Egyptian and Turkish civilizations. However, they need our support and appreciation because of all the animals on the African continent; they are the most highly threatened group.

"How so?" he asked, now showing a hint of interest. That was my cue to continue.

"Some individuals from the Maasai and other pastoral communities poison predators in retaliation to livestock depredation. When they lose a cow to a lion or a hyena, there is no compensation and therefore they deliberately poison the carcass to kill the predator. In the process, hundreds of vultures that feed on the poisoned carcass die. As a result, East Africa has lost nearly 60% of all its vultures to poisoning events. In addition, we have lost hundreds of lions and other scavengers"

"How does that affect me?" he asked defiantly. That was not a question I was expecting, but I was prepared.

"Well, let me ask you something Farhaan, what's your passion?"

He looked straight into my eyes with focused concentration and was clear about his response.

"My passion is to make money."

"Isn't money a by-product of one's passion?" I asked. "For example, Sachin Tendulkar's passion was cricket, while Steve Job's passion was to invent a unique product like the MacBook or the iPhone, the money came as a result of

that, isn't it?"

"I don't think you understand me," Farhaan said rather emphatically. "My passion is to make money, lots of it. That's my passion."

He could not have been clearer and yet, instead of getting agitated, I felt a hint of admiration for him. At least he was being brutally honest about what his ambition was.

"So, how are you going to fulfill your passion of making money?" I asked, trying to hide my facetiousness.

"I am working on it," he said.

"And what are you going to give back to society?" I continued.

"What do you mean give back? Why should I give back?" he exclaimed.

"Well, if I assume that you are going to be a great big businessman, then you must have some sort of corporate social responsibility and give back to society or the planet. Don't you think?" I asked him.

"I don't think so," said Farhaan. "It's a tough competitive world out there and I intend to make lots of money."

"At any cost?" I asked. "Even if it means to destroy forests, pollute rivers and pillage the earth?"

"Oh you bet," he replied. "Life is too short, we get one chance at it and we have to do anything and everything to survive. It's human nature!"





Vultures soaring.

With that closing statement, he looked at his watch and said, "I really enjoyed meeting you, but I have to go."

Now I was the one with the blank stare. Twenty years in the field of raptor conservation boiled down to this conversation with a 16-year old teenager intent on making money at all costs. Is Farhaan representative of today's affluent youth I wondered? I shuddered at the thought. Naturally, as a scientist, I was now keen to find out whether the "Farhaans" of Kenya (or East Africa for that matter) were concerned about environmental issues like ecosystem impoverishment, species extinctions, climate change, and sustainable conservation development.

We, in Africa, are blessed to be living on one of the most ecologically diverse continents and yet the economic growth rate is exerting gargantuan pressure on the continent's natural resources. It is time to pause and think about how we can help make a difference to ensure that our grandchildren can still see, amongst many things, a majestic African Fish Eagle

fly out of from the Acacia trees on the shores of Lake Naivasha and grab a fish in its talons - for that was the image that captivated me as a 12-year old, when my dad took me fishing and helped inspire me to nurture and cultivate my passion for wildlife.

Now I know what it means when people say, "Charity begins at home". I am now keener than ever to reach out to our youth and help change their attitudes about understanding the basic principles of conservation ecology and how the wellbeing of this planet is crucial towards the quality of human life and the future of life on Earth.

We need to start taking responsibility for our own actions. For instance, Shabir Ally's study of the interpretation of the Quran calls on us to recognise our own contribution to the environmental crisis: *Corruption doth appear on land and sea because of (the evil) which men's hands have done, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, in order that they may return.* (Quran 30:41)

For me the verse implies that we are getting a taste of our own medicine so that we may return from the wrong direction we have taken in life. If we are to reverse the deterioration of our environment, then we have to make some hard choices and change our practices. In other words, ecological change calls for personal change.

My conversation with Farhaan reinforced my ideals and strengthened my resolve and commitment for conservation. I continually take inspiration from Gandhi's words: *"Whatever you do in life will be insignificant. But it is important that you do it."*

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