

IGNACE SCHOPS

**SAVED
BY
THE
TREE
FROG**

A BRIGHT FUTURE
FOR MANKIND AND NATURE

**Lannoo
Campus**

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International praise for Ignace Schops's work

'To Ignace: Because of the work that you and your team have done, bringing nature to people, reconnecting nature with nature and with people, and involving business and involving government policy, so that you've proved with all your efforts, you and your team, that preserving nature is not only good for the natural world and wildlife, but for us as well. We need that connection with nature. We are part of the natural world, and we depend on it.'

'I guess, Ignace, that you are one of those indomitable spirits, because during all these efforts to create the national parks, I know you've met many obstacles but you've stuck with it, and you won through, and proved that it can be done.'

DAME JANE GOODALL

British primatologist and anthropologist

‘Had a great conversation with Ignace Schops on the origins of climate reality and personal experiences as Climate Reality Leaders. Keep up the great work as you continue to #LeadOnClimate!’

AL GORE

Former Vice President of the United States of America, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, author of *An Inconvenient Truth*

‘Dear Ignace: never give up.’

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

British broadcaster, biologist, natural historian and author

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“I am because we are.”

– Ubuntu philosophy

**“Faith is the bird that feels
the light and sings when
the dawn is still dark.”**

– Rabindranath Tagore



ECONOMY VERSUS ECOLOGY?

*How nature is helping us save the climate,
biodiversity and our economy*

Nothing tastes as intense as a memory. It was April 1991 when – as a passionate conservationist – I stood in the lake’s water in my waders, face to face with a tiny grass-green tree frog. Its toes were adorned with characteristic suction cup-like adhesive pads, and it had a distinctive dark stripe that seemed to emerge from its nose, dash across its back and run under its belly like a sharp line dividing the frog in two. Tree frogs are always a striking and unusual sight, but especially during mating season when hundreds of male tree frogs drift together in a giant flotilla. They call out in unison, producing a hellish and staccato barrage of sound that lures females from miles away to mate.

This special experience seemed more powerful than usual on that distant April day. Soon the racket of the males that had permeated the air gave way to a catchy and gripping concert of rhythmic ‘squawking’ sounds. I remember, as if it were yesterday, my surprise that the tree frog floating closest to me did not jump away but looked me straight in the eye while continuing to croak loudly. It was as if he wanted to tell me something, or to be precise, to shout something at me. Even though I did not understand the tree frog’s message, I immediately understood its metaphorical meaning: let me live and stop destroying nature. As remarkable as it may seem, that small frog offered me a vision that has never left me. And his message did not end there. Still the frog did not jump away but kept croaking loudly in my direction: do something!

I was transfixed by an inspiration of almost magical dimensions. On that day it became crystal clear to me that our disposable economy is rapidly undoing millions of years of evolution. The importance of diversity, of the fact that our environment is an interdependent network, and that we are dependent upon that network, became self-evident to me. Also, that the environment holds within it the seeds for the future of humanity and nature, that we are, in fact, one and the same. I was awakened to the reality that every animal, every life form has a right to exist, and has a place and purpose in a wider ecosystem.

If we recognise and accept our interdependence and demonstrate this in our behaviour and in the economy, then we can recognise our own potential. The logical and critical conclusion is that we must invest in nature because nature is precisely what keeps us alive. We have reached a crucial point of departure in our evolution, one which demands that we discard our self-centred human perspectives and reconnect with nature and all its life forms. As a society, and as individuals, we bear a crushing responsibility. It is we who determine the value of a tree frog's life. It is we who decide if the tree frogs should live at all. We decide. We human beings are an inseparable part of nature. We are nature. From the moment we really start understanding this, we will start doing something about it. To save the tree frog is to save ourselves. It is as simple as that.

For now, we are on an uncertain track. Our current economic model and our actions show that we embrace the disconcerting notion of the eternal burning lamp and pretend that doing this is the most natural thing in the world. The error in our thinking is illustrated by the following story of a lightbulb in California that demonstrates in a surprising manner how our economy works.

In 1901 an old paraffin lantern at a fire station in the small town of Livermore, California was replaced by a light bulb manufactured by the Shelby Electric Company. A fireman switched on the light, unaware of the miraculous phenomenon he had started. That switch

was turned on more than 120 years ago, but that same bulb has burnt ever since. In truth, it was turned off for a very short time when the fire station was relocated, but that does not detract from this remarkable lighting achievement. No one could have guessed that a bulb could burn for that long. The town has become world-famous for the bulb and promotes itself as: 'Livermore, California's Centennial Light. Home of the world's longest burning light bulb.' A webcam allows us to watch the bulb burning online at www.centennialbulb.org. As extraordinary as this story is, indirectly this lamp has cast a long shadow over our relentless hunger for more. This perspective demands our attention.

From landfill to circular vision

Thomas Edison's invention of the light bulb literally brought light into the darkness. But the history of its commercialisation exemplifies how we have come to organise our western economy. So, what happened? Shortly after its invention, clever engineers figured out how to improve the quality and performance of light bulbs. Spurred on by the mechanisation of production, light bulbs could be made in large numbers relatively quickly. A bulb that could glow for a very long time would be attractive to consumers. By the early twentieth century, light bulb design had been perfected to the degree that bulbs could burn for 2500 hours! And as we now know, light bulbs that lasted more than a century could be produced.

Companies like Philips, Osram, and General Electric were keen to cement their stake in the future of artificial lighting. For this reason, *Phoebus SA Compagnie Industrielle pour le Développement de l'Éclairage*, later called the Phoebus cartel, was formed in 1925. Their aim was to improve inter-corporate cooperation between bulb manufacturers, exchange patents and increase the quality of lighting. The fact that all lamps had the same screw thread – incidentally, like the light bulb, also one of Edison's inventions – was agreed through the Phoebus cartel. So far so good. But there was great concern about the extraordinary performance of light bulbs. The product was too

durable, too good in other words. The global cartel felt that continued improvements to light bulbs was 'a bad business model' because it meant they could sell far fewer bulbs. They decided the following: to sell more lamps, sell more bulbs and make more profit, they would reduce the maximum allowed performance per bulb from 2,500 light hours to a maximum of 1,000 light hours, a drop of 60 per cent. All new light bulb models would henceforth be tested in a laboratory in Basel, Switzerland. Manufacturers who produced bulbs that exceeded this rating were punished with a fine that increased as a function of length of time the bulbs burned beyond 1,000 light hours. What the Phoebus cartel decided was out of order, you might think, but it was a model for the way we have organised our western disposable economy. In other words, we operate under an economic model driven only by profit, with no regard for the finite nature of raw materials and no acknowledgement of its impact on nature and society. This story is the forerunner of today's business credo, best summarised as: new means almost broken, designed to break down quickly, to quickly become waste, in essence new means designed for landfill.

Designing products to be destined for landfill can be considered literally as a universally valid business model. Have we any idea of the impact of our Western lifestyle over the last 50 years? We often buy things we don't need, with money we don't have, and an environmental impact we don't want. We fly to Rome or Barcelona without wondering how this could be made possible for a 16 euro return ticket. We visit the zoo, excited to see the ring-tailed lemurs displayed in a fake jungle, without a thought about where these magnificent creatures come from and the fate of their wild relatives in the real jungle of Madagascar. We have adopted a lifestyle that has lost any connection with nature.

We are like frogs in a cooking pot that is heated little by little, realising too late that they are being cooked. Meanwhile, we are preoccupied with trivialities. Why do we get so upset at the death of Princess Diana or Diego Maradona, yet we think nothing of the death of Lonesome George, the last endemic Pinta tortoise in the Galápagos Islands, and the threat to the natural environment that is home to billions of people? Why is it, after all, that we are distressed by the COVID pandemic or the dioxin crisis but not about the loss of biodiversity and climate

change? We expect the fire brigade will put out every blaze and follow up to prevent possible flare-ups, but we seem resigned to our failure to act on the much more dangerous consequences of climate change and the destruction of natural ecosystems. We know we are heading for a fire that no fire brigade can withstand if we do not try to prevent and put out the first fires now. And yet very little is happening ...

In this book, I try to make it clear that nature with all its biodiversity must again be put first and lead our thinking and our personal, political and economic actions. In the first chapter, I show that we simply have no choice and must take immediate action. The simple message is: there will be no business on a dead planet. I also show that taking action requires leadership of the calibre we had when we decided to set foot on the moon within ten years, only this time we need a leadership to decide to keep human life possible on earth: in other words, from a Moonshot to an Earthshot.

In Chapter 2, I try to shed light on the noise surrounding issues like biodiversity and climate problems and try to clarify exactly what we are talking about. What is the uncomfortable, unambiguous and clear truth about the state of our nature, about our chances of survival and about our possibilities? What exactly are the uncomfortable facts that scientists agree on? In Chapter 3, I explain how we can define a process to save our planet, collaborating globally, but also on an individual level. I address how we can continue to earn a living while securing the basis of our existence: nature. I do this using the so-called (Re)connection Model, a model I have developed over the years with the brightest minds and with the decisive support of the Regionaal Landschap Kempen, a nature reserve in Maasland, Belgium. I will also introduce you to a new world and new financing models. I show how financing logic can be changed by putting the planet on the stock market and keeping climate investments off budget, how we can create a booster for nature with a Green Tax Shelter and the voluntary carbon market. I talk about how the value of nature can be included in cost analysis and explain how the (Re)connection Model can serve as an inspiration of how we can save nature on the one hand and find a way to make our society more beautiful on the other. I will describe a new and logical way of assigning value that takes into

account how humans have taken most of their existence for granted, which is extraordinarily similar to how scientists see the future. In Chapter 4, I talk about the rights of nature as a successor to the rights we have acquired as humans: a game-changer in our approach to saving biodiversity and our climate.

Overall, my objective for this book is to show that we need not hang our heads, because the control of our relationship with nature is within our zone of control both locally and globally. I will show readers how an old mining region has been developed into a genuine national park, the Hoge Kempen National Park in Belgium, where nature has been saved and people have regained a dignified perspective, decades after so many of their family members in the same area had lost their jobs in the closing of the Belgian coal mining industry. Nature has been given its own space there, while outside the park guests are welcomed and pampered by proud residents of the region. In addition, I show readers that no matter how big the challenges around climate change and biodiversity are, we must push forward now. ‘The most dangerous worldview is the worldview of those who have not viewed the world,’ said the recently deceased Edward O. Wilson, renowned worldwide

We need to look more openly, broadly and honestly at the world around us. No more thinking in terms of zero sum, but in terms of win-win.

for his contributions in the fields of biodiversity and biogeography. We need to look more openly, broadly and honestly at the world around us. No more thinking in terms of zero sum, but in terms of win-win.

No more looking only at the monkey sitting on the top of the rock, but also at all those other animals and micro-organisms that shape nature. Not just thinking in terms of struggle, but also in terms of working together, exactly as nature presents itself to us.

But first let me tell you a little story to illustrate the situation we are in now. Imagine that it is about 15 years ago you have booked a city trip to Barcelona. You pack and arrive at the airport two hours before your flight as requested, your passport is checked, and you pass through security with flying colours. You have ample time to dream about the delightful prospect of a steel-blue sky and the warm rays

of the Spanish sun on your face. You are startled by the sound of a friendly female voice on the public address system: ‘Dear passengers travelling to Barcelona, we are about to commence boarding. Please have your passport and boarding pass ready.’ Finally! Everyone jumps up and rushes to the gate, lining up for a final security check before boarding the plane. But another announcement is made: ‘Dear passengers travelling to Barcelona. We would like to draw your attention to the fact that the plane is missing six parts and twelve screws. Please board at your own risk. Have a nice trip!’ So, what do you do? Board or not? What do you do when the risk of danger is so immediate and obvious to everyone? Right. You curse and rant and wonder how such a thing could be possible. You consider legal action. You cannot understand how the government could allow such irresponsible behaviour. Indignant and angry, you return home. And even now, fifteen years later, you still tell the story to your children and grandchildren: ‘If I had boarded that plane, I would not be here now.’ At the time, you had the knowledge you needed to make the right decision. You may have realised by now that this little story is analogous to where we are today. This story is even more real and current than we might realise. Try thinking of our planet, with all its forms of life, as an immense plane, like one big living machine with each species functioning as an essential part. You realise that just one cog in a clock will stop your watch from keeping time, that one missing connection in a microchip will prevent your laptop from starting. How many cogs or microchips do we need to keep our unique and well-tuned living engine functioning forever? If you knew that every day many forms of life would vanish, never to return, how would you react? Indifferent? Wait-and-see? Or not? The good news is that there is a way out...

Lessons from the pandemic

As I write this, I am sitting in ‘diversity’, one of the three think boxes in LABIOMISTA, the home base of my good friend and world renowned artist Koen Vanmechelen. LABIOMISTA – literally meaning ‘mix of life’ – is an evolving work of art on the foundations of

the former mine and zoo of Zwartberg in the Belgian city of Genk. Koen's work is based on cultural and biological diversity and he is one of the most versatile thinkers I know. The coronavirus is still not completely off our radars yet. Meanwhile, despite the turmoil and all the grief, the pandemic has made us a lot wiser. Yes, now that it is over or more or less over, we have quickly relapsed into our old habits. But we still learned something about equality. Even if the future sometimes seems hopeless, maybe now is the time for connection and introspection. This pandemic is a warning, a wake-up call. No matter how lost we sometimes feel these days, perhaps the time has come to think deeply and reflect on who we are, how we relate to our human and non-human surroundings far away and nearby. Perhaps the pandemic can help us gain that insight? Can we build a nature-rich, sustainable and warm society? Will we succeed in learning to appreciate again the comfort, power and value of everyday life? Few of us thought that what is happening today, right before our eyes, could ever be possible. The pandemic is proof that sound decisions can be made based on scientific insights from experts and scientists. In record time, we not only developed a coronavirus vaccine, but we also confirmed its safety and efficacy at lightning speed. We proved capable of rapid changes in our behaviour to live and survive. We kept our distance and even today many continue to wear mouth masks to protect others. Most of us have learned to see things from the perspective of a group over that of the individual. We have reawakened to the fact that we get much further as a society than as individuals. We also sometimes marvel at the incredible selfishness that the corona crisis has revealed in a minority of people. Above all, the pandemic has taught us that – when it comes down to it – cost is not an obstacle. We suddenly have the guts and decisiveness to find the billions of euros when it is necessary.

We seem to be moving back towards a more inclusive system where we realise that we can only make something good out of bad situations when we work together. In doing so, we can learn from the traditional and age-old South African Ubuntu philosophy: 'I am because we are'. This means that only by working together can we survive as a community. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who

died in December 2021, described that philosophy in 1999 as follows: 'A person with Ubuntu is open to and accessible to others, devotes himself or herself to others, does not feel threatened by the ability of others because he or she draws enough self-confidence from the knowledge that he or she is part of a greater whole, and cringes when others are humiliated or when others are tortured or oppressed.' This may sound a bit edifying, but it touches on the world we face more and more every day. There is no more room for selfish individual behaviour. A world where climate issues are already banging loudly on our doors and where we hear the unsettling rumble of a tsunami in the background, of the collapse of our world's biodiversity. A world we can only save together. The answers are there for the taking and it all starts with simply thinking differently and more honestly about the world we live in.

From Paris to your own backyard

Our planet is currently in an existential state of emergency, sending out alarm signals that are not obvious to everyone and do not always sound convincing. At the last climate summit before the publication of this book, in Sharm-el-Sheikh in Egypt, world leaders looked each other in the eye for the umpteenth time. Speakers from countries that might survive the next few decades took the floor, but also those from countries that are first in line to suffer from the effects of the damage we have caused to the environment. Many millions of people cannot afford or do not have the luxury to ignore the risks even for a moment, while others do not feel the need. Yet we will all suffer the disastrous consequences if we do not take action. As President Obama said in 2014, 'We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it.' Following the latest synthesis report (2023) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres warned: 'We are on a highway to climate hell with our foot still on the accelerator'. The next decade is extremely important. Do we succeed in giving the tree

frog – nature – back its rightful place and can we change the climate before the climate will change us? Can we find a sustainable balance that respects both people and nature? Can we save ourselves, can we let the tree frog help us?

In a world where many feel lonely, but where just about everything and everyone seems to be digitally connected, finding transformative solutions is extremely complex and confounded by an ever-changing context. But just because something seems hopeless or complex doesn't mean we do not have a damned duty to find a way out. I am genuinely outraged by the way we treat our Mother Earth, how we as humans saw off the branch on which we ourselves sit. I want to turn that indignation not just into anger and negative energy but use it as a source of renewable energy. Into positive energy and strength that shows we can actually get the job done together, through rock-solid confidence, by thinking clearly, by turning our thinking around, by making choices and by taking effective action. Locally and globally. It really can be done.

I wrote this book because I believe that in the problem lies the solution. That the systemic and sustainable transition is in the connection, rather than in the opposition. Sustainable change pays off better in cooperation than in opposition. For too long have we deluded ourselves that everything is a battle of all against all and that only a few of us get to sit atop the monkey rock. Too seldom have we noticed that nature is not just a battle of survival of the fittest, but that it is also a continuous chain of cooperation, of adapting to each other and exchanging to survive, together.

Not long ago, we were surprised by the scientific insight that trees actually communicate with each other, that their roots cooperate with fungi that in turn cooperate with roots of other trees. A great insight that makes us realise that we need to connect with each other and with nature. Everything is connected to everything and very often the battle to be won has been a battle we have fought together. In this sense, economics and ecology need not be enemies of each other, just as agriculture need not be an opponent of nature. More than that, they can – and should – become each other's allies. While the systemic transformation, the reversal, the journey towards a sustainable planet