



In Remembrance of Dr Jane Goodall: Systematising Empathy for a Planet in Crisis

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By Pey Peili

SYNOPSIS

Dr Jane Goodall's passing is a reminder that the era of relying on singular charismatic "giants" to lead the environmental movement has passed. Confronting today's planetary health crisis now demands collective, systemic action. As this necessary transition unfolds, her legacy of uniting scientific rigour and empathy must be integrated into institutions and policies for enduring and collective change.

COMMENTARY

The passing of Dr Jane Goodall is more than the loss of a singular, beloved icon of the environmental movement and climate action; it also signifies the twilight of an era. Along with Sir David Attenborough, Rachel Carson, Dr Sylvia Earle, and John Muir, Dr Goodall was one of the last environmental titans, a generation of charismatic individuals in the past century who were able to galvanise environmental consciousness across the world through the power of personal narrative.

Dr Goodall's work intuitively brought the issues of planetary crises to the fore, and her research delved into the intrinsic interconnectedness of planet, people, animals, and the ecosystem. Her influence was deeply felt across the globe and even in Asia, where her ["Roots & Shoots" programme](#) inspired youths from Singapore to [China](#) to become environmental stewards. As the environmental movement sees an end of the era of giants, the passing of Dr Goodall highlights these critical questions: What comes next, and what is the most important lesson going forward?

The Method of Empathy: Compassion and Scientific Rigour

To understand Dr Jane Goodall's impact requires understanding her methods. Her contribution to science and environment through primatology was distinguished by its objective observations and revolutionary use of empathy in scientific study.

Instead of the then-traditional methods of using research numbers, she gave her chimpanzee subject names such as [David Greybeard, Flo, and Flint](#). This empathy stretched to her documentation of not just their use of simple tools, but their personalities, family bonds, emotions of joy and grief, and their lives and stories. This approach challenged the detached, quantitative science of her era, and its gradual acceptance worldwide as a scientific method was a testament to and foundation for her scientific and charismatic authority.

While some technocratic circles decried her methods as sentimental and indeed even her [gender as a “weakness”](#) in the male-dominated field, she defended and disproved her critics through several groundbreaking discoveries of complex social dynamics among primates. Dr Goodall’s empathy was not a departure from rigour but a tool for deeper observation and of paramount importance to scientific communication. Empathy translated the hard and oftentimes inaccessible data of environmental crisis and ecological collapse into a [publicly and politically compelling narrative](#).

The New Landscape: Systems Without Empathy

The environmental movement has evolved into one of systemic thinking and responses as a necessary reflection of the scale of present planetary crises (climate change, mass extinction and biodiversity loss, pollution). The focus on scientific data reports such as by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), carbon metrics, international treaties, etc., has dominated the discourse of global environmental and climate solutions. Leadership has also become increasingly decentralised across scientists, activists, collective youth movements and indigenous coalitions.

The transition to systemic responses is essential but carries an inherent risk of losing the empathetic approach pioneered by the environmental titans of the past era. The empathy method that promotes [narratives](#) and a deep understanding of the planet and its species, which has made the environmental movement powerful and persuasive, has become increasingly replaced by a language of abstraction: “net-zero” goals, “the pathway to 1.5 degrees”, and “carbon emissions in parts per million” are for many, an inaccessible and alienating form of communication.

While the world has arguably collected more data and deepened its quantitative scientific understanding, the present environmental movement has arguably struggled with the emotional connection that spurs transformative action. This has been further compounded and challenged by conservative circles, and increasing anti-environmental shifts in the political sphere, which has [vilified the concept of empathy](#).

Building an Architecture of Systemic Empathy

Continuing Dr Goodall’s legacy lies not in finding the “next Jane”, but in institutionalising her method, embedding her empathetic approach into the systems and frameworks of environmental action that are being built. This means creating governance structures aligned with the principles of Planetary Health, which

recognises the value of diverse narratives, and the intrinsic value of all parts of the planet's ecology.

The way forward will include policy innovations such as the [“rights of nature” movement](#) that has gained traction in recent years, whereby legal personhood is accorded to rivers, forests, and ecosystems. This direct and legal embodiment of Dr Goodall's work has brought about profound changes to law and culture: giving nature a standing in courts, value in economic models, and advocating human beings and natural entities as equal in both legal and ecological systems.

This systemic empathy approach is particularly crucial in Asia, where environmental challenges are deeply intertwined with complex geopolitics. For example, in the case of the Mekong River, decades of technical reports on water flow and sediment loads have yielded slow progress amidst [competing national interests](#). While the emerging legal concept offers a visionary path forward, its application to a transboundary river like the Mekong is fraught with political and legal challenges.

As scholars have pointed out, asserting [abstract moral rights](#) is often insufficient to overcome the entrenched economic and political systems that view the river as a resource to be exploited. However, the framework is valuable despite challenges to its legal application, as its [fundamental shift in perspective](#) demands moving beyond a purely utilitarian and calculative view of natural entities. The river is instead an entity with its own right to flourish, especially in consideration of the lives that depend on the river, both human and non-human.

By centring the environmental issue on the interconnected victims of the river's degradation: the fishermen in Cambodia, the farmers in Vietnam, the endangered giant catfish, there is potential to foster regional solidarity and political will with [storytelling](#) and empathy as a method, in a way that purely technical arguments have failed to engender. Already, research on place-based perceptions, and community [social memory](#) is underway to understand and shape human-environment relationships.

The layers of narratives made possible with the empathy method is one of Dr Jane Goodall's final and most enduring lessons. Empathy, when applied systemically, is not a “soft” alternative to policy, but instead an essential foundation upon which rigorous scientific methods are made relevant to daily lived experiences. As one of the last great environmental giants leave the stage, the mandate of the environmental movement in the age of planetary crises is clear: the legacy of her empathy approach must be integrated into global governance, upon which the health of the planet and the health of the people depend on.

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