

In conversation with André Hoffmann:

Biodiversity: Philanthropy as a catalyst for innovation

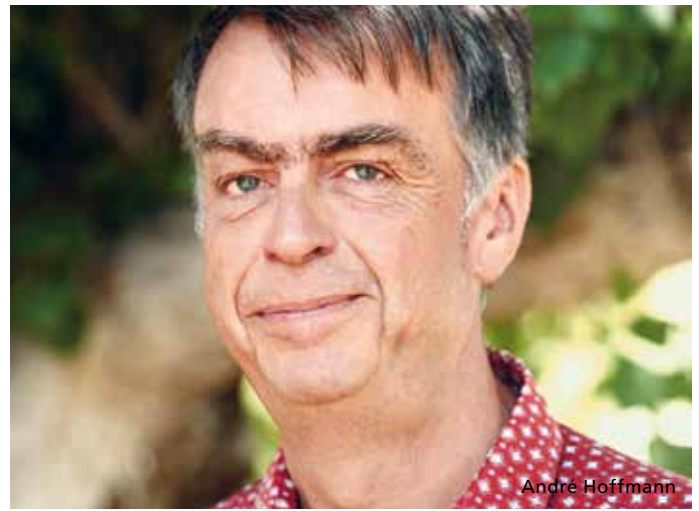
Like his father, André Hoffmann wants to preserve biodiversity. But in order to remain successful in this mission, he has to be innovative.

André Hoffmann answers my video call from the south of France. He is in the Camargue region, where he grew up. “You know, where I am sitting today,” he says. “The sea is 10 kilometers away from my window – but by the end of my life, it will only be five kilometers away. I can either say ‘it’s not happening’, or we can try to change our societies to mitigate climate change and save our planet.” He is on his way to the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Marseille, which represents one step towards the societal change he is talking about.

“Business can be a force for good”

At business school, Hoffmann was taught that management science is about maximizing talent, time and money, and that society must then deal with the resulting collateral damage. “That’s simply absurd,” he says. “You’ll notice there is absolutely no reference to how we live together as a society... yet I am absolutely convinced that business can be a force for good.” Hoffmann explains that it’s an obsession with short-term profit maximization that has destroyed the planet. “Nature is our life support system, and humanity cannot last very long without it. We have overexploited natural capital and abused social systems – we now need to be cooperative and regenerative in our approach – net positive rather than net zero – because we have gone too far already.”

Hoffmann is the great-grandson of Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche, who founded, in 1896, F. Hoffmann-La Roche & Co., which is today Roche Holding. He tells me how his forefathers’ motivation was to deliver the right therapy for patients. In 2021, as Roche celebrates its 125th anniversary, the company is a social innovation leader in a world that’s moving faster than ever. As part of the controlling shareholder group of Roche Holding, Hoffmann explains: “I have the luxury, because of stable ownership, of thinking about the next generation, to make sure that how we make the money is as important as how we give it.”



Philanthropy with a focus on nature conservation is a field that Hoffmann knows well. A long-serving board member of WWF International, he is now President of the Fondation Tour du Valat, an organization dedicated to wetland conservation. He is also president of MAVA, a biodiversity conservation foundation set up by his father, Luc Hoffmann. MAVA will be sunsetting in 2022, having donated more than 1 billion Swiss francs to 180 global conservation projects over 25 years. “We have to accept that my father passed away six years ago, and we cannot be doing work that corresponds to what we think he would be thinking of today – it’s a bit of a lie,” Hoffmann explains. He doesn’t want to exit biodiversity conservation – he just wants to do things differently.

A new goal: Self-sustaining projects

Hoffmann believes that a paradigm shift is needed in philanthropy. “The idea of giving money to a project that stops existing when you stop giving money is a failure. There is no successful project without positive cash flows; there is no real sustainability without financial sustainability,” he explains. “You should not only look at the issues, but at the systems and how you can change them,” says Hoffmann. “If you want to create a sustainable solution, you need to look at the impact that your decisions are having on social systems, the way we live together and the natural environment.”

That’s what he likes about one of MAVA’s projects, the Luc Hoffmann Institute, which focuses on innovation and transformative change to maintain biodiversity. The Luc Hoffmann Institute seeks out talented, unusual innovators who tackle systemic change in social systems. It aims to ask the right questions to solve complex environmental issues. “I gave it the name of my father to make sure that we find new ways of funding conservation,” Hoffmann explains. Even for the Luc Hoffmann Institute, MAVA funding will end and the name will probably

disappear, but, says Hoffmann, “the impetus we’ve launched with this thinking process, including how we can find new ways of funding nature, is a very exciting one. I strongly recommend the Luc Hoffmann Institute as a source for innovation and new ideas.”

“Flip that switch”

Hoffmann is convinced that we are surrounded by people with the talent and capacity to resolve issues. But that things go wrong when people ask the wrong questions. “Asking how much is needed to increase one’s salary and retirement bene-

fits is the wrong question – the real question is: how can I be happy? With the right questions, you get the right answers quite often,” he says philosophically. “We all have friends with whom we have a glass of wine, who worry about the future and our children, water rising, or CO₂ emissions, and then they go back to the office and the only thing they do is execute the budget. They’re not bad people, they’re just not given the opportunity to develop in the way that will bring them and their local entourage the happiness that they seek. And that’s what gives me hope – if we could ‘flip that switch’ we could make a huge difference.”

Article by: Nina Hoas, LGT Philanthropy Advisory
Photo: generously provided by André Hoffmann