

Tim Cockerill on Insects, Rainforests, and the Fragility of Life

A photograph of a man in a dark forest, holding a camera up to his eye. A large fern leaf is visible in the foreground on the left. The scene is dimly lit, with some light filtering through the trees.

Tim Cockerill

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Tim Cockerills' deep connection to the natural world began in a modest suburban garden in northern England, where what most would overlook became, for Tim, a revelation of Earth's staggering biodiversity. With a small Collins insect field guide in hand, every exploration uncovered new species. "Every single time I went, and I opened my little insect book," he recalls, "I would find something completely new." This discovery at an early age sparked a lifelong realization: biodiversity is not confined to distant rainforests or dramatic savannas; it thrives in the smallest, most simple places, often in the form of insects.

Insects represent the overwhelming majority of life on Earth. Their species count dwarfs that of all vertebrates combined: mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. When including individuals, the numbers are even more astonishing. There are more insects on the planet than all other animals put together. Cockerill emphasizes that these "little things that run the world" are the true foundation of terrestrial biodiversity. They act as keystone engineers, pollinators, decomposers, and soil aerators, shaping ecosystems from the ground up. "Flowering plants... we only see flowers because flowering plants have coevolved with insects," he explains.

Yet human appreciation rarely matches this reality. Most people are drawn to large, charismatic mammals, elephants, lions, and primates, while the vastly more diverse world of insects remains underappreciated and even reproached. Cockerill points to evolutionary biases (our preference for animals with faces and social behaviors like our own), learned cultural aversions, and the sheer scale difference as reasons for this imbalance.

A powerful field experience in Botswana drove this point home. While leading students through a savannah inhabited by lions and elephants, Cockerill's group found themselves directly in the path of a massive, spooked herd of charging elephants. With no other refuge, they climbed the only elevated ground nearby. As the matriarch thundered toward them in a full warning charge, ears flapping, trumpeting loudly, she stopped just inches away.

Only after the heart-stopping moment did they realize their saving "mound" was a towering termite mound, built by millions of tiny insects.

"I looked down, and we're on a termite mound," Cockerill remembers. "And that was the thing that saved us from the elephants... realizing that actually my life had been saved by a million tiny, tiny insects rather than anything else." In that instant, he saw the profound truth of biodiversity: the most visible giants of an ecosystem depend entirely on the invisible, collective work of count-less small organisms. "We noticed these giant animals within the landscape," he reflects, "but actually some of the most important things... [are] this incredible complement of insects."



Today, this extraordinary biodiversity faces unprecedented threats, largely driven by human activities: deforestation for agriculture (palm oil, coffee, chocolate, and timber), habitat fragmentation, and climate change. Insects serve as vital early indicators, "canaries in the coal mine" of broader collapse. Their rapid life cycles and central ecological roles mean their declines signal cascading failures long before large animals show distress, collapsing pollination, disrupted food webs, failing decomposition, and lost ecosystem services that humanity depends upon for food security, soil health, and climate stability. Protecting biodiversity at all scales, from microscopic invertebrates to towering trees and megafauna, is not optional but essential for maintaining the complex systems that sustain life.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Cockrill finds genuine hope in biodiversity's inherent resilience and in human potential. Rainforests can recover when given protection and time. A new generation is far more aware of these issues than ever before. Through his teaching and work as a professional insect wrangler for television productions, he urges storytellers to move beyond human-centered narratives and champion the full spectrum of life, especially the underappreciated architects of biodiversity. "I've really pushed people as much as possible to push themselves out of their comfort zone," he says, "to move away from those stories that are just about humans and to talk about biodiversity and to tell those stories more."

His message is clear: follow your curiosity, consume consciously, and recognize that every scale of life matters. The suburban garden that first amazed him and the termite mound that saved him both prove the same truth: biodiversity's strength lies in its incredible variety and interconnectedness. In safeguarding it, we safeguard our own future on this planet.

