

Conservation – a fading label?

Is 'conservation' an outdated label in today's era of managing nature? This article presents some thoughts on the state of UK conservation as viewed by the author, returning to Britain late in 2012 after a year away, and recognising the times are changing...

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Trends and issues

On my return from a year away on the continent in late 2012 I would pick out the following factors in the media and amongst green debate:

Bird trends: the decline of farmyard birds particularly makes comment and debate, notably skylark, grey partridge, yellowhammer, linnet. I hardly see them from year to year, yet was surrounded by them as a boy. Woodland birds, such as spotted flycatcher, lesser spotted woodpecker and marsh tit have experienced similar big declines. By contrast some raptor populations are on the up, such as red kite, osprey, sea eagle, goshawk, and peregrine.

Climate Change is still the cause of every ill for the left/liberal-greenish press (*Observer, Guardian, Independent*) but not for the centre-right (*Times*) and even less so for the climate-sceptical further-right (*Telegraph, Mail, Express*). Climate trends have changed: both the ocean heat content and the temperature data show a flat-line for the past decade, which is counter to the expectations of the IPCC suite of modelled predictions. However, the past 10 years are also the warmest at least in the 150 record and likely also the warmest since the last 'warm period' of 900-1200 AD when white stork nested in Edinburgh. But there is no indication of climate-linked losses which have been a concern, like snow bunting or ptarmigan on mountain tops.

Energy Policy gets a lot of headline and much political attention, but is seldom linked to anything other than cost and security. Most of the concern relates to subsidies for nuclear power, where stations will not be available until after 2020; the dash-for-gas (again!); and the cost of renewables. Impacts of biofuel policy on wildlife in places such as Sumatra and Borneo (palm-oil plantations) gets attention, and the environmental impacts of wind turbines is a continuing story. Nuclear expansion gets little informed criticism, as if the environmental movement has decided not to oppose it, perhaps because they think carbon molecules are a greater danger. Concern over the climate has fostered a nuclear renaissance in Britain.

World food supplies are critically low as a result of recent climate shifts (different directions in different world regions), with failed harvests in Canada and the USA,

Australia, Russia, China, Mongolia (livestock) and poor yields across Europe, while biofuel demands, particularly in the USA, are forcing prices higher. 2013 may be the critical year for widespread famine, and large scale pressure on marginal land and habitats for both food and biofuels.

Important habitats in Africa and SE Asia are threatened by biofuel and hydro-schemes, all supported by the Clean Development Mechanism of the UN (justified by the thought that climate change can be mitigated); there is also an increasing loss of habitat due to agricultural demand for water in Spain, Greece, Portugal.

Agricultural impacts on wildlife

The CAP should have been able to create a wildlife-friendly agriculture without compromising food supplies. Instead farming practices are the root cause of much of the wildlife loss we see, with some key examples summarised below.

Early silage cuts, for example, with the black bin bags and monoculture rye grass and heavy fertiliser use. This has radically cut the abundance of herbs and flowers and all the insect species dependent on them. Nothing grows to seed anymore, hence the decline of seed-eaters. What is the marginal gain from these agricultural changes and hence the cost of reversing them?

The switch to winter wheat and lack of stubble has also contributed to farmland bird decline.

Wet-meadow species such as curlew and lapwing have declined markedly, so presumably, drainage practices have not altered sufficiently to help them.

The raft of environmental schemes for farmers has not worked, as might have been predicted, and the culture of farming as an industrial sector of the economy has not evolved, with farming still seen as an intensive and clinical land management business. A few exceptions of progressive private landowners and farmers do much to promote wildlife care and management.

The culture of 'cheap food' must have contributed with its 'supermarket' mentality, yet we are a rich country where most people can afford to pay for ecological standards – perhaps as much as 20% more for food (and of course, increased benefit payments for those who cannot afford a rise in their food costs). The population at large could and should prioritise food above drink, tobacco and foreign holidays, but with the number of poverty-line households estimated at 2 million, a substantial benefit increase would be required.

The concern about our farmed environment is, for me, closely followed by the lack of appreciation on the part of conservationists of the value of the *wild* in wildlife. Is that a future trend? Organisations like RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts, and the Hawk and Owl Trust, have perhaps too readily taken the CAP's shilling for their landholdings, rather than lobbied fiercely for regulatory reforms that would have meant freedom for lapwings – even the freedom to be predated which used to be the natural driving force of evolution!

Large-scale conservation' and 'living landscape' initiatives, may go the way of the agri-environment schemes and soak up public and lottery money to little effect on the ground. There could then be a public backlash.

Holistic thinking

I have been heartened by a new wave of holistic thinking – for example the links being made amongst community interests, health professionals, working woodlands and conservationists, and the related links to sustainable new communities, eco-building, localised food and energy production. Some of this thinking was evident at the 2011 Neroche-BANC conference. I detect a broader spiritual dimension emerging in relation to wildlife and landscape in some quarters, although I note that other wildlife conservationists show discomfort with these forms of deeper connection with nature.

New labels for new mindsets?

Is the very word "conservation" a dead parrot? Is it an old paradigm in a new era (Mayan calendar notwithstanding!). Terms like rewilding may have more resonance with many people, but perhaps the biggest obstacle to broader thinking is the conservation mentality. The Welsh Assembly wants to plant 5000 ha of new native woodland every year for the next 20 years, while the current rate is 50 ha/year! The money is on the table and it is enough to persuade some farmers to shift from sheep. But the main obstacle is conservation organisations opposing the loss of grassland, bracken and heath – much of which has little or very esoteric wildlife value.

Do we need a new word for a new concept that is all-embracing. But would many conservationists oppose this in order to conserve their own species as well as their targets – thus perhaps condemning themselves to further decline. We also need, I would argue, more cooperation and more partnerships on a large scale – with organisations like RSPB, National Trust, Forestry Commission, Woodland Trust, and the Wildlife Trusts sharing agendas and participating more openly.

Somewhere out there among the next generation of 'conservationists' may be someone brave enough to call for the word conservation to be ditched. Unless we embrace new bolder concepts, and take action in partnerships, such as buying and influencing larger tracts of strategic land for enlarging and connecting reserves, we may fade away with the skylarks and yellowhammers.

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