

# Helping the State of Nature – public duty and political evasion

*Following the May 2013 launch of the State of Nature report, ECOS asked around for reflections on the publication and the mainly negative trend it confirmed for Britain's wildlife species. A consistent message is apparent amongst our commentators: how to keep engaging people with wildlife while reporting bad news? Alas RSPB, which led the Report, had nothing to say on the matter after our requests, but here are the forthright views of four authors...*

## False choices and political blind spots

ADRIAN PHILLIPS

When the editor asked me to write a thousand words about my response to the *State of Nature* report, my first thoughts were surely widely shared by ECOS readers – I was depressed, but not surprised. The loss of our native wildlife has been remorseless during my lifetime (73 years). Until a few years ago, we lived in a Gloucestershire village. In 23 years there, we lost cuckoos and flycatchers; and once common hedgehogs, yellowhammers and greenfinches became rarities. Last year I saw a grass verge near Winchcombe covered in early purple orchids; this year it was promptly mown in a householder's mania for tidiness.

But my depression soon gave way to anger and (a little) hope. My anger is really about the politics of this. *The State of Nature* was reported on the Today programme just before the Prime Minister was interviewed. Naively, I was waiting for James Naughtie to ask him about the report, something like: "Mr Cameron: millions of people care deeply about the way that nature is being squeezed out of our lives – given the shocking findings of today's *State of Nature* report, what will your government do to give them hope that the tide of destruction can be turned?" Of course there was no such question: nature is treated by the BBC as a great money-earning spectacle (David Attenborough and all that) and an occasional item for the science pages of their web site, but not as a serious grown-up topic to discuss with politicians.

Lucky Mr Cameron: he would have had nothing to say since all pretence to be the 'greenest government ever' has now gone. Fumbling around for an answer, he might have said he would ask his Secretary of State for the Environment. But Owen Paterson's contribution to saving nature since he took up this post has been to reorganise Defra's priorities thus: "to grow the rural economy, improve

the environment and safeguard animal and plant health". From his speeches and his actions, it seems clear to me that we have a good, old-fashioned MAFF minister in charge of nature: the uncritical farmers' friend who will always put short-term employment considerations ahead of long-term environmental ones. His Junior Minister, Richard Benyon, has shown neither ambition nor urgency in his underwhelming response to the marine protection challenge. While Defra's flagship for nature conservation (actually more like a lone rowing boat, as there is no 'fleet' of initiatives to be seen), Nature Improvement Areas, is a great idea, the budget for the 12 areas, £7.5m, is pitiable. Meanwhile poor Natural England has been emasculated: its funding and staffing have been savaged and it's been told to keep out of policy (like the pizza boy, it just does "delivery"). On the day that the State of Nature report was launched, the Natural England press office was defending its decision to issue a licence to destroy buzzards' nests.

### The Nation's real wealth

Other politicians also fail nature. Last year, George Osborne said that the Habitats Directive, placed "ridiculous costs on British businesses", and added: "We shouldn't price British business out of the world economy. If we burden them with endless social and environmental goals .... businesses will fail, jobs will be lost, and our country will be poorer." The last phrase bears repeating – "our country will be poorer". The *State of Nature* report is about our country being poorer, not in terms that George Osborne or his business friends might recognise but in a far more profound way. I thought the "jobs before beauty" argument was buried somewhere along the road to the first Rio Earth Summit, but it surfaces in the mouths of today's politicians who use environmental regulations, habitat protection and planning controls as excuses for their failure to manage the economy. If anyone thinks the absence of such controls will lead to sustained economic growth, take a look at Greece, Ireland and Spain: all have a notably lax attitude to development and land use.

In the interests of balance, I should add that I haven't heard Ed Miliband (relatively good as he may be on energy policy) speak up for nature either. The Labour Party has had individuals who got the message – Hilary Benn for example – but it's not in the party's DNA to care about such matters.

Of course the politicians will say that this topic is low down on the list of public concerns, though that depends on how you phrase the question. If people are asked to prioritise an abstraction called nature against a concrete thing, such as their jobs, the latter will win out every time, especially as the question implies there is a trade off. But if the question is framed around what kind of world people want their children to inherit – one rich in birds, flowers and greenery or one largely devoid of nature? – views may be different.

What we do know is that millions of people care passionately about wildlife and wish their leaders could share and express that passion. So I long to hear a leading politician say: "You know what, Mr Paxman, when we are all dead, the only thing that will matter is what kind of world we have bequeathed to our descendants. Of course I want my grandchildren to go to good schools, and to have good jobs and

good health, but I also want them to live in a world where they can connect to the things that *really* matter – heritage, the arts and above all access to the riches of nature. The future can't vote and my vision is way, way beyond the horizon of the next election of course - but that is the legacy by which this government should eventually be judged".

Well dream on, Adrian! Let's clutch instead at the little bits of hope that we can find in the report. There are the small success stories here and there, like red kites, and some once rare species have spread unexpectedly (egrets or collared doves) whilst others now flock in towns (like goldfinches or even parakeets - god bless them!). There is indeed one chapter that is quite encouraging, that on brownfield sites: "the best (of these) even match ancient woodlands in terms of the number of species, especially rare ones". This tells us about the resilience of wildlife and its opportunistic capacity to exploit the most unlikely of niches.

And that surely is the moral behind the *State of Nature* in our environmentally degraded islands. It is forgiving and it has the ability to recover if we give it half a chance. All we need to do is to find space for it, on our land, in our seas and in our hearts.

*Adrian Phillips* was long ago CEO of the Countryside Commission. Since then, he has worked with many environmental NGOs, nationally and internationally. [adrian.phillips@gmx.com](mailto:adrian.phillips@gmx.com)

## The limit of shock tactics

MICHAEL JEEVES

I was on my annual holiday in Scotland when I heard a news item about the publication of the *State of Nature* report. When the reporter asked a Chief Executive from an NGO for his reaction to the report he said that it was "not very good news". Perhaps the CEO's words were an obvious under-statement because he was consciously trying not to give listeners the idea that nature is a hopeless cause, or perhaps the phrase was just a figure of speech.

The facts in the report came as absolutely no surprise to me and I doubt that they did to most professional conservationists or amateur naturalists, although many of the younger ones will not be able to remember when there was a lot more wildlife around. Take the Skylark as just one example. On a Leicestershire farm 28 territory holding males were recorded in a Common Bird Census in 1974. Numbers declined steeply in the late 1970s and early 1980s until there was just one territory holding male in 1982. There then followed a slight recovery and numbers remained fairly stable, with around four territory holding males for quite a few years, but there were none in 1999, the last year of the survey. I have no reason to believe that the situation has improved since then.

While the report is useful in that it includes lots of facts and a new 'Watchlist Indicator', many reports and books have already been published starkly setting out

the dire situation. For example, *Silent Summer*<sup>1</sup> was not published to much of a fanfare as I recall, yet it contains much detailed information and indeed constructive ideas on what needs to be done to restore nature. Have many people read it I wonder and what did it achieve? Will the *State of Nature* report achieve more?

Anyway, back in Scotland I was reminded that although the landscape remains wild and spectacular, and despite some inspiring large-scale projects, there have been some substantial declines in wildlife there too. My notebook indicates that I recorded numerous whinchats in 1974, yet I saw none in 2013. Snipe were also common in the earlier year, their drumming display a delight to see and hear, but I only came across one in 2013. The presence of breeding waders was a feature of my 1974 visit, with one Perthshire glen positively alive with lapwing, oystercatcher, curlew, redshank and snipe. Breeding waders in general are clearly struggling. Many seabirds, too, have noticeably declined.

### Living in denial?

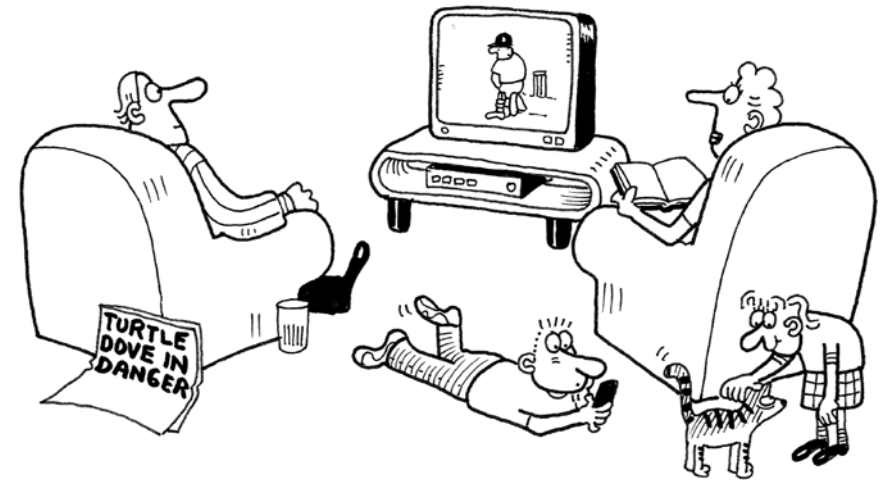
So, returning to the *State of Nature* report, what do I hope comes from it? Well, obviously I would wish it to galvanize more conservation action, but sadly I cannot see that happening. Bad news stories do not seem to have the influence that we would hope. Indeed, not everyone believes what they read. For example, a bulletin of the National Farmers Union in February 2012 stated that although 86% of farmers think that conservation is an 'integral part' of what they do, only 10% of respondents to surveys said that they believed evidence of a decline in farmland bird numbers. More than half (52%) said that species such as skylarks and lapwings had in fact become more common in their area.

Farmers are crucial players in any attempt to restore nature in most of the UK. Many of them are paid large sums of money to manage their land to produce environmental, including wildlife, benefits. Publicly available information indicates that the farmer who farms the land next to the village where I live receives more than £40,000 annually from the Environmental Stewardship Scheme. The details are not available, but I can see that the hedges are now cut every other year instead of annually and a few sadly inappropriate trees have been planted, yet when I walk the footpaths it is like a desert. There are no skylarks, hardly any arable plants and little of anything else. How can this be? One problem is probably that the best options are not always being taken up, but also there is insufficient funding available for Natural England, which administers the scheme, to employ enough skilled advisors to work closely with the farmers. What is particularly depressing is that only three miles away is a field next to a nature reserve, alongside a river, that had evidently been neglected by the farmer to such an extent that trees and rough grassland were growing on it. Kestrels, short-eared owls and many other birds were seen, but then, suddenly, the trees were removed and the grass cut. Presumably the farmer needed to bring the field back into good agricultural condition in order to obtain his Single Farm Payment.

### Who cares?

Charities such as Save the Children are employing shock tactics in their advertisements in order to raise money. Presumably it is working for them, but in

NEIL BENNETT



nature conservation we play down the bad news, so the *State of Nature* report is 'not very good news' rather than 'terrible' news. The interesting report *Branding Biodiversity: the new nature message*<sup>2</sup> makes the point that "communicators have learnt the hard way that supplying technically correct, logical information does not seem to change behaviours" and that "we are better off engaging and inspiring rather than informing". I suspect that many professional nature conservationists are more comfortable with informing rather than inspiring, but the first method is clearly not working.

As things stand nature conservation remains a minority interest, albeit a substantial one. We surely need far more people to care about nature and to be prepared to do something positive to help the nature conservation cause, before we will really make significant progress. The trustees of the Wildlife Trust that I am employed by has recognised that improved communications are essential to the success of our organisation. If we cannot reach out and inspire others, especially tomorrow's decision makers, then we will never deliver our goal of a 'Living Landscape' and much of our good work on Leicestershire and Rutland's remaining and now ecologically isolated good sites will have been to no avail.

### References

1. Macean, N. (Ed) (2010) *Silent Summer: The State of Wildlife in Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Futerra Sustainability Communications. *Branding Biodiversity: the new nature message*. [http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Branding\\_Biodiversity.pdf](http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Branding_Biodiversity.pdf)

**Michael Jeeves** is Head of Conservation, Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. [mjeeves@lrwt.org.uk](mailto:mjeeves@lrwt.org.uk)

## Living in hope

### IAN BOND

I've been up since 3am and having tried the standard sleep inducers (I say standard though they never actually work after midnight) of sitting cross-legged, a bowl of milky cereal and a David Attenborough documentary, I decide I might as well do something useful like try and get on with a review of the *State of Nature* Report.

I'm looking for a few key stats to hook on to, something suitably jaw-dropping, stirring anger or depression but leaving enough room for a little hope. I'm usually good at all those emotions anyway. I'm angry that the "greenest government ever" only tossed £7.5m of scraps to be fought over to show itself as repairing the fabric of the natural environment, yet pledged £125m a year to Olympic hopefuls to demonstrate that Britain is somehow better than other countries ("better" in this case being rather like the biologist's word "fitter", meaningless except in narrowly defined circumstances). I'm depressed because I read statistics like this most days. Not that I can ever remember the actual statistics, I just know that something else has declined/not been seen for several years/is presumed extinct (delete as applicable).

Hope though is what I tend to be especially good at. I'm notoriously 'glass half-full', bobbing around the issue until I find a chink of light. I can cope with the decline of a single species, as there is always an action that you can do for it, even if we can't call it a Biodiversity Action Plan any more. I think I've come to terms with the extinction of the Baiji, on the basis that there are still other river dolphins so it wasn't completely unique. I even tell myself that I could be reconciled to the inevitable loss, possibly even in my lifetime, of perhaps a quarter of the world's biodiversity, because in 10 million years, when we've migrated to Mars, evolution will drive a diversity of new forms.

But this is the second time I've had a look through this report and my neck is getting stiff from all the bobbing. Yes, as David Attenborough says in his introduction, there are positives in there; certain bat species are gradually regaining their former numbers and stone curlews are somehow good for brown hares; but overwhelmingly the impression, and it is just an impression as my head is spinning with the statistics, is that most things are somewhere between bad and very bad. Even what might be good news such as an increase in deer numbers (after all, people remember for years their encounter with a deer) is spun as bad news (deer destroy our woodlands).

### Taking action, not moaning

How might we respond to this report? My first reaction, though the horse has bolted, is "Please don't tell the public about this!" If we think that these shocking statistics will do any good, ie effect any change, then I think we are fooling ourselves. If the report has left someone like me, who combines deep-seated ecological concerns with pathological enthusiasm, feeling like someone has just counted to eight over my prostrate body, how is the public likely to respond? I can bet they're not jumping

up and down shouting "Sod the Olympics, we want more lowland heath". I suspect that most people just become a bit more deadened and accept that it's becoming a lost cause.

That isn't of course to say that this report is not of great importance. We need this overarching picture, where the trend of one habitat or taxon is set in the context of what is happening to others. After all I'm one of the volunteers who goes out and counts the things that are declining and I want to know the context and the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of the trends. It's just that I wish they would break it to me gently.

What this report has done for me is convince me of the truth of another report that I read recently entitled, *Branding Biodiversity – the new nature message*, by Futerra. The report's strapline "Its time to kill off the extinction message", stuck in my throat because I want to scream about all these amazing life forms dying out, but, engaging my less emotional processes, I do think they have a point. They recommend communicating messages that connect people with nature and at the same time combining this with actions that people can actually do. We might debate whether or not their equation needs a few factors to balance it, but even so I can't help but agree that we need a different approach. I think we should keep the *State of Nature* report to ourselves and come up with another one that focuses more on the positives, applauds the contributions that people are making, however minor, but points out that there is much to be done and suggests ways to do it. Hope, said Aristotle, is a waking dream. Hope, say I, is what's needed for a good night's sleep...

*Ian Bond works as an ecologist in Local Government. He once won a BBC Wildlife magazine writing competition with an essay bemoaning the decline of Britain's wildlife but these days tries to remain upbeat. [ravenonthewing@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:ravenonthewing@hotmail.co.uk)*

## Earnestness or delight?

### PETER SHIRLEY

My first reaction to the *State of Nature* report was that I had entered a timewarp. A generation ago, when I came into nature conservation, all the talk was about losses. Losses of species, habitats, and a mythical green past when people lived in harmony with nature, in a 'Lark Rise to Candleford' sort of way. In the 1980s the British Wildlife Appeal even sent the last named vision on a musical tour with the Albion Band. As a contrast to the doom and gloom it was wistful, whimsical and wonderful.

### Different outlooks and different starting points

The reality of course is that humans have long appropriated nature; moulded, changed, managed and dominated it. The actual as distinct from the mythical green past provided a countryside richer in wildlife than is generally the case today, but it was no more natural than it is now, or indeed than today's often wildlife-rich suburbia. For some reason we hanker after 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century landscapes,

complete with artefacts like hedgerows, and expend a lot of our hard-earned resources on re-creating these.

Ten years or so ago there seemed to be a change in our thinking and approach. Instead of focusing on past losses and nostalgia-based conservation we concentrated more on what we had and where we could go with it, to look at future gains. Nature reserves, long the mainstay of conservation were seen as only part of the answer, and no longer as the solution itself. We developed the idea of extensive rather than intensive nature conservation, and worked to achieve living landscapes, ambitious schemes like the Great Fen Project, and focused on whole catchments rather than just stretches of rivers.

This is why the *State of Nature* report seems in a way to be retrograde. It takes us back to a hand-wringing, head-shaking 'isn't this awful' state of mind. It might be argued that this is a necessary reality check. We have, after all, spent years building and applying resources, knowledge and influence: if the net result seems to be that we have failed to stem the losses and things continue to get worse then it is right that we ask why. To be fair the Report does say that "we should not ignore the gains", highlighting successes, either planned or not, such as increases in otters and certain birds, butterflies and bats. Although it does bemoan increases in deer and grey squirrels.

Woodland illustrates the general problem well. It has increased in extent over the last 40 years but the Report says that of more than 1200 species studied which rely on it, 60% have declined. Might we be doing the wrong things or - perish the thought-..., not really know what we are doing at all? Another issue is technology. Having the power to count and number-crunch, and to engage thousands of people in surveys of everything from earthworms and ladybirds to bats and butterflies, we have become hypnotised by figures. We worry about declines in farmland birds and butterflies, yet their populations were at artificially high levels when we started to count them.

Is nature in fact already so profoundly damaged by human activities that our whole philosophy should change? A lot of our work after all stems from trying to conserve species and habitats in the places where they were found and catalogued in the first half of the last century. The ecological enlightenment of that time has bequeathed us this holy grail of conservation, always sought for but never found. Would it not be better to accept the *status quo* and prioritise maintaining and improving ecosystem functions and services, whatever the species and habitats involved? Should we not take a qualitative approach rather than a numbers-driven quantitative approach?

That thought leads me to George Monbiot's book on rewilding *Feral*, published at the same time as the *State of Nature* report (see Simon Ayres' review article in this edition). Monbiot is very late to this party, but his book reminds us that there is more than one approach to our relationship with nature, and 'wild' nature in particular. Rewilding presents us with bold possibilities, even in our crowded islands. The fells and downs for example do not have to be 'sheep-wrecked' as Monbiot puts it (the

*State of Nature* report – p31 – also touches upon this subject). The uplands could, if left more to their own devices after suitable reintroductions, develop into proxies of what once was. (Now I am guilty of looking back!). Elephants may be a step too far, but such as wolves, lynx and beavers may not be. The last named are apparently doing well in Scotland, and as a keystone species will no doubt effect profound and positive changes on their surroundings.

We have here the opposite ends of a spectrum. At one end is the strictly scientific, reductionist, conventional, but perhaps now old-fashioned, approach to nature conservation. (There is no room here to go into the 'scientific' or 'value-driven' argument, except to say that the line between these is always blurred; ecologists have values too.) This is where we were decades ago, and the *State of Nature* report seems to be rooted in that time. At the other end is the more flamboyant idea of rewilding, allowing nature to take its own course.

In the middle is the present, both temporally and, it seems to me operationally. The major conservation NGOs and their partners have numerous projects based on an holistic large (or larger) area approach. These range from green infrastructure schemes in urban areas to the Wildlife Trusts' Living Landscapes and the RSPB's Futurescapes. They, and others, are trying to move on from nostalgia and number-crunching, to an ecosystems rather than a zoo-based approach to wildlife. Perhaps the fault, if there is one, has been with the way the Report was presented. As an earnest technical report it provides a necessary baseline, as a marketing and promotional tool it lacks rewilding's element of delight.

### Meanwhile... Money talks

PS. The latest spending review does nothing to help hard-pressed conservation NGOs whatever their preferred ways of working. Defra's 10% cut is in stark contrast to increased or protected budgets elsewhere. It's no good being sucked into the 'cuts are inevitable we have to suffer them' Government excuses. They find money for what they want, or to be more precise what big business wants. The HS2 gravy train for example rolls on – latest estimates for this now top £50bn. This and other schemes will never have the payback that the same investment in the environment would have.

Never mind, we are going to have a pollinators' strategy now, let's hope that after the usual delays, diversion of scant resources and endless committee meetings the bees and hoverflies will still be around to enjoy its benefits. If two things make a strategy, how about providing the right incentives to farmers and other land owners and banning known harmful pesticides and herbicides? Simple...

*Peter Shirley* is former Director of the Urban Wildlife Trust in the West Midlands.  
petershirley@blueyonder.co.uk