

Offsetting or upsetting?

So, Natural England escaped a sticky end after this year's triennial review of the agencies, and the Environment Agency will not be empire building at Natural England's expense. For wildlife itself and for the great outdoors, what matters is for the relevant agency to pack some punch. But bureaucratic change usually ends in disheartened people and less of them doing the work that matters. We are better off harnessing the strengths and distinctions of these agencies, than risking a messy and prejudiced merger.

A year of grim news for nature was reinforced by the umbrella body Wildlife and Countryside Link. Nature Check, produced by Link, gauges whether government has kept its green promises. Alas, government is failing to deliver on habitat protection, species decline and animal welfare. Its performance is also getting worse on wildlife measures in general according to Nature Check, but progress is apparent on international wildlife trade, whaling, fisheries reform, and responding to Ash dieback. It is vital that government is held to account, but messages of despair must be measured. As authors in this edition note, people have embraced the cause of rewilding this year. It is just one approach to conservation, but it resonates because it offers hope. We must mix in some cheer for wider audiences, as they hear the 'must do better' message to government.

Much coverage in this issue relates to the ordinary, undesignated landscape. The land which most of us experience, most of the time. The touchy-feely things about these environments feel real and important to us. Yet these are the places which host the most development, the most change, and are most vulnerable to direct and insidious damage. The work of Local Nature Partnerships, discussed by Tony Whitbread, could achieve more collaboration to care for our unprotected wildlife. Meanwhile the looming agenda to reshape agriculture will have major implications for the wider countryside. Gavin Saunders and Simon Brenman suggest a more holistic approach to UK farming. The challenge they set out is both enlightening and daunting.

The conservation sector's tools for protecting the wider countryside and its wildlife are mostly blunt instruments. For instance, time and again we allow environmental assessment in the planning system to have an easy ride. Ecology consultants even endorse this situation. The EIA process is formulaic. It results in token mitigation. Whether the impact is from housing, wind turbines or quarries, we do not fully compensate, and our mantra of 'no net loss' from development should be more ambitiously set as a requirement for 'net gain'. So why not entertain biodiversity offsets as a better, supplementary approach in these situations? Mike Townsend looks at the risks if offsets become a permit system, and Joseph Bull looks at the potential, if an offsets scheme is used with care and intelligence. However we set environmental conditions for developers, we must raise the bar.