

Integrating nature and agriculture - towards a new vision

The conservation sector in the UK needs to engage more fully with the debate over the future of agriculture in Britain, and to recognise – despite the enormity of the subject – the need for our approach to nature, farming and society to become more integrated.

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Agricultural reform - recognising the challenge

On 2 November 2013, *The Guardian* editorial began thus: “We need to talk about farming. There’s a lot to talk about. There’s the brilliant green of close-cropped grassland and the tidy hedges of tourist brochure England. And there is the environmental impact of so much human intervention on a landscape. There are the golden grain plains of the east and the value of those regular hectares of weed-free, lifeless barley and the hundreds of cattle it will one day feed. And there’s the cost of finding horse in your burger again. And over the grey Cumbrian fells hovers the question: might the barren landscape be more ecologically diverse with more scrub and fewer sheep?”

This exposition, on a subject which doesn’t normally get a lot of attention from the metropolitan media, was sparked by the launch of a very significant consultation by Defra on the implementation of CAP reform in England. Much attention in this consultation has been on whether the Secretary of State should allocate the maximum 15% of the £2 billion in CAP spending to Pillar 2 rural development, paving the way for agri-environment spending, in turn, to be secured. There are signs that the full 15% may indeed be earmarked in this way. However, the so-called ‘greening’ measures which could be attached to the remaining 85% spending on direct payments under Pillar 1, look set to be minimal and unambitious, a huge missed opportunity driven by a governmental focus on bureaucratic efficiency rather than a real interest in public value for public money.

If the Pillar 2 allocation battle is won, schemes like Higher Level Stewardship in the new CAP may end up with a budget allocation similar to what they have had to date, which will be good news as far as it goes. But the real war, we would suggest, is not going to be won that way. For all the very great importance those schemes carry, they put wildlife and environment into a conveniently separate box. For those who regard environmental payments as a mere distraction from the real game of maximising agricultural outputs, it is the neatest way of dealing with the issue – a targeted, voluntary, self-contained set of schemes which bracket conservation into a corner.

Much energy has been spent in campaigning for the agri-environment provisions we have enjoyed hitherto, and in delivering them on the ground, and all that effort deserves fulsome praise. Schemes like Higher Level Stewardship in England not only deliver a large proportion of the conservation-focused habitat management outside statutory sites, but they provide a bridge between farmers and conservationists. Bodies like Wildlife Trusts have brokered those schemes for farmers and have provided a positive service to them in the process, countering the impression of farmer-bashing which is the easy caricature to lay at conservation’s door. Those schemes have, meanwhile, provided a lifeline of economic support, quite apart from their environmental outcomes, for farms operating at the edge of business viability.

But what about the wider landscape? By playing this game, have conservationists unwittingly fallen into the trap of encouraging a divergence between nature and food?

A diverging agenda

For the last half-century nature conservation policy has tended to separate wildlife conservation from food production. Its focus on special sites and the margins of conventionally farmed land has been a necessary rearguard action to protect the best remaining habitats before they are lost. But while conservationists acknowledge that most valued habitats need to be ‘farmed’ in some sense, provided the legislation and agri-environment programmes enable that management, they have not seemed too concerned about what happens to the rest of the farmed countryside. The result is an increasingly stark partition between the majority of farmed land, and the areas ‘reserved’ for different treatment under environmental schemes.

The organic movement promotes farming practices that are sustainable and holistic but it has had to establish a premium market to make these practices affordable. This in turn has created a black and white divergence between those farms prepared to certify themselves as fully organic, and the rest - with the unintended consequence that many sympathetic farmers have been alienated because they don’t quite make the grade.

A huge new opportunity to sell western style meat- and dairy-rich diets to developing global markets and talk of ‘sustainable intensification’, risks exacerbating these divisions further, as the American agri-business lobby seductively tries to suggest that we must farm the good land more intensively, in order to preserve the wild places.

And finally there is a potential risk that the rhetoric of the nature conservation lobby itself, in advocating re-wilding and large-scale habitat restoration (for example in the recent debate over farming in the uplands spurred by journalist George Monbiot’s book *Feral*), could play into the hands of this separatist agenda, creating an unintended Faustian pact.

Does any of this matter? Is the way we farm the wider countryside something conservationists should care about, or can we continue to just fight for the ‘good bits’, and press for these to be expanded and more joined up, at least in some areas?

We think it does matter. We think the biggest factor affecting the state of nature in this country is the way we farm the land – all of the land – and the way we farm is currently not working well for society as a whole, not just for wildlife. The trajectory of the current CAP reform proposals will not change the balance substantially, and so this is a critical moment to be asking some fundamental questions.

The crisis in agriculture

We believe that we have a crisis in agriculture – in the whole system from field to plate. We challenge the convention that industrial efficiency and a free market should drive farming policy. While conventional measures of agricultural productivity may seem favourable, the current paradigm is bad for biodiversity, and bad for just about everything else – bad at preventing flooding, bad at producing good quality water, bad in inducing a vulnerability to plant disease, bad for livestock health, bad in terms of carbon emissions, often bad in terms of food quality, often bad for the quality of life for many farmers and their families, bad at promoting fair access to food, and bad at improving public health.

Agricultural policy in Britain has been focused on producing more food, more cheaply, but while doing so it has presided over a continuing dissolution of wildlife habitats and species, a massive loss of rural employment (with associated knock on effects on rural society), the break up of family farms, the dilution of mixed patterns of livestock and cropping towards monocultures, increasing problems with nutrient enrichment in our drinking water, a loss of public trust, and twin crises in diet-related public health and growing food poverty.

The effects of the current farming system on wildlife are clear, from the findings of the recent State of Nature report. Not all the woes of wildlife can be laid at the door of agriculture, but as the major determinant of land use in this country, it is the main factor.

Why has agriculture reached this point? Why does it no longer serve the common good?

What we have seen in farming over recent decades is an over-simplification of systems, in the name of production efficiency (an industrial term), which strips out complexity and loses sight of the human scale. Enlargement of scale, simplification of pattern and genetics, rationalisation of timing, and industrialisation of process, have been pursued allegedly to improve yields, but in truth leading to an ever greater lack of time for farmers and farm workers, a loss of good husbandry skills, a restriction in financial flexibility, and a dearth of social contact. In addition to simplification and scale, the need to maximise yields has driven huge changes in the timings and types of cultivations, and the extended use of agrochemicals.

This relentless over-simplification weakens the resilience of our agricultural landscapes, which require diversity in order to absorb and contain adverse effects of pests, diseases and climatic stress. In nature by contrast, large systems are generally diverse and complex.



How can we integrate nature better across England's patchwork quilt landscape?

In human terms, over-simplified and over-scale systems tend to become undemocratic and inhuman, with few participants feeling any satisfying degree of self-determination. Working class experience since the beginning of the industrial revolution has borne this out. As self-determination declines, care and attention to quality tend to decline also. The loss of vitality which follows is a negative feature even in the most organically barren, tightly controlled factory environment. In the open, living landscape it is doubly detrimental.

Though it may seem easy to label this as farmer bashing, it is not. Many farmers are suffering at the hands of this system as much as the land itself, working too hard for too little, suffering depression, losing social contact and a sense of pride, feeding monsters they have no energy to tackle, with no time to challenge or question the pressures being put on them.

This is a criticism of agricultural policy. Policy that serves agri-business rather than agri-culture. Policy that is promoted by lobbyists for the chemical, seed and feed industries, the processors and the supermarkets. Policy that should be challenged

(rather than championed) by the NFU, which has consistently failed to speak for the smaller or more progressive farmer, and is too closely allied to those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo.

The crisis with food

Despite the apparent cornucopia of foods in our supermarkets, the quality of average diets in Britain has declined, with more of us eating more processed foods and less fresh food, and losing any sense of what is seasonal, and where food actually comes from. Meanwhile our appetite for meat is fed by devoting an ever-increasing proportion of our arable land to the growing of feed for livestock – a hugely inefficient use of space, fertility, water and energy.

While food banks proliferate and diet-related obesity spirals, we throw away huge quantities of food. Tesco has recently reported that it threw away 30,000 tonnes of bagged salad, bread, fruit and other foodstuffs in just the first six months of 2013. Taking food producers, retailers and consumers together, about one third of all the food we produce in the UK is either not harvested, rejected before sale, or binned once it reaches our homes. For us to suggest, as a nation, that we should try and crank up the intensity of primary production from the land, with all the consequences of doing so, without first dealing properly with this extraordinary profligacy, is shameful.

Sustainable intensification

Some believe in the concept of sustainable intensification (a land and livestock management model in which agricultural productivity increases whilst use of harmful inputs reduces). The phrase is being used increasingly as a mantra for a somewhat vague notion of ever-greater outputs without all the disbenefits of the current approach, achieved via unspecified technological fixes.

Others see it as simply an oxymoron, regarding any further increase in the amount of food that is wringed out of our farmed landscape as being anathema to any serious notion of sustainability.

In truth, production can be 'intensified' in some situations, in some senses. There is a case for genuine sustainable intensification in developing countries, where the intensification needed is about intensified skills, knowledge, husbandry, genetic resources, community involvement, labour, storage facilities and complexity.

And in those areas of farmland in the UK which have been simplified into grass or grain factories, 'intensifying' those landscapes by enriching them with more crops, rotations, mixes and methods, together with workers, volunteers, added-value businesses and messy edges, would be a good thing. They could become more intensely alive and more sustainable.

Building a solution

Addressing this massive set of issues demands a holistic vision, and an end to narrow perspectives. It demands the courage not to be put off by the fear that questioning



Fragmented nature? An isolated habitat on Wiltshire downland.

Photo: Simon Brenman

the juggernaut of agri-business is a sign of naivety in the face of a looming crisis of food security. It demands a dialogue between those who grow things, and those who manage habitats; between conservationists and soil scientists; between environmentalists, food campaigners and public health experts. It demands the preparedness to stop and listen to the 'quiet few' amongst the farming community who already know full well how to integrate nature and food. Most of all it demands responsible and far-sighted leadership – the kind of leadership that insists that we pay the real and full costs for the necessities in life.

First of all we need to **acknowledge that we have a problem**, and we have to acknowledge that current problems are not going to be solved by technological advancements alone. As part of that acceptance process, conservationists have to acknowledge that a continuing separation between mainstream farming and mainstream nature conservation is exacerbating the problem. To move forward successfully we have to start thinking about agriculture as a means by which we can achieve multiple benefits for society rather than a singularly focussed production process.

In addressing the need for integration in terms of nature and agriculture, we need to **acknowledge the web of issues** surrounding farming, wildlife and wider society which have to be considered holistically: the proportion of food being wasted, the proportion of crops used to feed livestock to feed demand for cheap meat, and the balance in public diets between processed and fresh foods. Conservationists need

to recognise – and then help others to recognise – that campaigning for a move towards fresh, unprocessed, seasonal food, with less emphasis on meat and dairy, is a conservation issue, not just a public health one.

Thirdly we need to **understand the components of 'good' agriculture**. An integrated agricultural land use would conserve soil biology and structure, building and securing organic matter rather than depleting it. It would encourage farming systems that are complex and diverse, spatially, genetically and temporally (mixed cropping patterns and enterprises, rotations, etc). It would allow pollinators to benefit from diverse nectar sources, while checking pathogens and pests by limiting the amount of any one host or food plant. It would encourage producers to embrace diversity in their seed and breed selection, and to share seed locally to fit genotypes to localities. It would promote a proliferation of people and businesses on the land – a variety of scales and types of business, including specialists and generalists, organic and non-organic, producing both commodities and added value products. It would create less leaky economic, nutrient and energy cycles, conserving fertility and reducing reliance on fossil fuels, in turn reducing costs and emissions. It would embrace the good sense offered to us by permaculture and the organic movement, without adopting the all-excluding dogmas of those creeds.

Fourthly we need to **recognise and encourage 'good' when we see it**. This means creating an environment where good practice and innovation are noticed and rewarded. We need to notice those quiet, committed farmers who are unusual only in that they do not accept the status quo, and have the personal and professional ingredients to farm at a human yet effective scale, caring for the land and also yielding a good, but sustainable harvest.

Conservationists need to expand their consciousness of what is really good for biodiversity. We need to look for the actual and potential diversity in swards where more forbs and weedy species are encouraged, in arable fields where cropping patterns and crop choices complement the needs of pollinators, beneficial insects and birds, and in soils where home-grown organic matter is seen as a precious resource, with the effervescence of soil biodiversity it carries. None of this should or need be at the expense of semi-natural habitat, but is an inescapable partner to it.

This argument draws attention to a cultural blind spot which has affected some parts of British conservation for decades – the lack of acknowledgement of the soil as a conservation issue. Yes, nature conservationists bemoan soil that gets washed off the fields into the rivers, for the effects it has downstream. And yes, we recognise that the degradation and erosion of soil is a bad thing. But we've tended perhaps to see soil conservation as the concern only of those whose business is growing things. Actually, the abundance and trophic complexity of biodiversity in the soil is a massive iceberg beneath the surface, with direct links between above and below-ground wildlife. We tend to concern ourselves only with the biodiversity we can see.

The conventional farming lobby's response to this type of argument is to dismiss it for failing to offer a way for society to produce the food it needs, and meet

the growing global demand for food. And it is true that an integrated, genuinely sustainable farming system will not produce ever more food. We can only rebalance our approach to agriculture if we address the question of what we want from our countryside, what we eat, how much we need, and how we avoid wasting or destroying what the land gives us. But we must not succumb to a panic-inducing cry that future food security demands that we abuse the land even more.

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The views expressed here are those of the authors.

