

# Hedging our bets

There is a fertile sense of both decay and new growth in this issue of *ECOS*. Decay of old assumptions. Struggling shoots of new thinking. As the negotiations over CAP reform plough on, the roots of a quarter century of agri-environment thinking are being turned over and reassessed. What has all that effort – the lobbying, the thousands of discussions around farm kitchen tables – actually achieved? And with all that experience behind us, what do conservationists really want now from environmental incentives in farming?

Without ESAs, Countryside Stewardship, Entry and Higher Level Stewardship, many of our most precious wildlife-rich landscapes would have been impoverished much more severely – of that there can be little doubt. Lisa Schneidau supports the environmental measures focused on farming, but John Bowers suggests that agri-environment schemes have not succeeded, in the round, in their objective of halting farmland biodiversity decline. He argues that the reason for this failure is inherent in a European agricultural policy that has created the conditions where intensification is profitable, while at the same time trying to prevent that intensification by paying farmers not to pursue it. Logically, the only way out of this crazy conflict is to remove the subsidy on land and on output prices – to expose farming more to market risk.

Robert Deane reminds us that we rely on a particular snap-shot in the history of agriculture as our template for what 'good' traditional, mixed farming should look like. Yet we know that back then, when farmed landscapes were rich and varied, farmers did not manage the land out of selfless regard for wildlife. They took decisions based on viability for their enterprise, just as they do now. But those economics were riskier, so they hedged their bets – and hedges, meadows, and all the rest was the natural consequence.

Meanwhile the debacle over the flooding of the Somerset Levels this past winter highlighted how short-termism and political opportunism continue to dominate, offering no guaranteed support either to wildlife or to flooded home owners. Yet the personal hardship, political reaction and environmentalist frustration have offered us a huge opportunity to raise public understanding of the links between land, nature, farming and the harsh consequences of climatic extremes. Can we grasp that opportunity? Only – as Mark Robins tells us – if we can summon a different kind of leadership, which builds connections and consensus rather than letting timidity masquerade as strength.

Where is real land 'husbandry' in this picture? And what voice for the soil itself? In truth, the deep, earthy, tactile emotion which motivates many – perhaps most - farmers parallels the elemental link to nature felt by most of us who still call ourselves conservationists. That ineffable feeling is the gravitational pull of the Land – earth, soil, life. We should celebrate what connects us, rather than what divides us.