

Navigating nature

How to heal our blurred vision of wildlife

Parents, grandparents, and even teachers, are no longer able to 'introduce young children to nature' because they can't really see nature themselves. This article calls for a national campaign of remedial action to motivate a population which has become 'nature blind'. Such a drive needs to learn the lessons of marketing and large-scale campaigns that have influenced public priorities.

CHRIS ROSE

In 2008 a National Trust survey of children found that:

- Only 53 per cent of children could correctly identify an oak leaf, Britain's national tree
- 29 per cent could not recognize a magpie, although they had increased in despite numbers soaring three-fold over the preceding three decades
- Only 47 per cent could identify a barn owl
- One in three failed to recognise Britain's best-known butterfly, the Red Admiral.

And apparently, half could not tell the difference between a bee and a wasp.¹ On the other hand, in 2002 Cambridge University Zoologist Andrew Balmford and colleagues found that children could identify more Pokémon characters than native British wildlife.²

Nature links lost

In the days before farms were industrialised, working on the land meant many generations encountered nature in huge variety. Hundreds of plant and animals were both common and familiar. The connection to nature is evident in the 39 local names for 'cowslip' recorded by Geoffrey Grigson in his *The Englishman's Flora* (1958), a selection of which are listed below:

Bunch of Keys - Somerset

Cowflop – Devon, Somerset

Cowpaigle – Hertfordshire



An elf training camp, as run by the Fairyland Trust, provides an imaginative way for young children to make links with nature.

Photo: Chris Rose

Coosloop – Lincolnshire

Cower-Slop – Shropshire

Cuckoo – Cornwall (and Coucou in France)

Culver Keys – Somerset, Kent, Northamptonshire

Fairies' Basins – Somerset

Fairy Bells – Somerset

Fairy Cups – Dorset, Somerset, Lincolnshire

Golden Drops – Somerset

Horse's Buckle – Wiltshire, Kent

Keys of Heaven – (cf German – Himmelschussel) – Devon

Lady's Keys – Somerset, Wiltshire, Kent

Long Legs – Somerset

Milk-Maidens – Lincolnshire

Oddrod – Dorset

Racconals – Cheshire

Tisty-Tosty - (properly a cowslip ball), Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire

Cowslips today are a rare sight in most of our farmland and roadside verges. When Grigson wrote in the 1950s, the engine of agricultural destruction had only just got going and many of these local names were probably still in use, at least by older people. Their diversity reflects the past abundance of wild flowers, and the universal connection to nature enjoyed by generations of our ancestors. Grigson's daughter, Sophie, wrote in the Introduction to the 1996 edition to the book, that: "Reading it takes me straight back to the foraging strolls through my native Wiltshire countryside. My father transformed what might, for a child, have been a penance, into a voyage of discovery. He illuminated the hedgerows and fields with his knowledge of the plants that grew there". It is this knowing, the ability to read the countryside and living places in detail, which makes the connection with nature, and enables it to be passed on from parents to children.

Poor nature-sight in students and teachers

In 2005 Anne Bebbington from the Field Studies Council found that both A-level students and their teachers, as well as trainee teachers attending courses at Juniper Hall Field Centre, had little ability to name 'common' wild plants. A third of students could only name three species. "86% of A-level biology students could only name three or fewer common wild flowers whilst 41% could only name one or less".³

So low is the nature-literacy of modern students emerging from university with biological sciences degrees that Reading University now offers an MSc in Species Identification and Survey Skills, because there is a market for ecologists who can identify wild plants and animals in order to conduct the surveys needed by developers under the European Habitats Directive and similar regulations. This is not a sign of nature-connection but of disconnection.

The experience of the Fairyland Trust

I help my partner Sarah Wise run the small conservation charity The Fairyland Trust.⁴ Its mission is to engage children with nature, and it does so by creating events and activities designed to be attractive to mainstream families, building on their established interest in things 'magical'. It provides creative workshops and 'magical days out' such as the Fairy Fair. Having attracted over 70,000 people to our activities since 2001, our direct experience is that most British people's nature understanding is now too low for them to actually 'introduce children to nature', even if our survey shows that 85% of them think it is 'vital'.



NEIL BENNETT

'Green' but nature-blind

The audience at Glastonbury Festival in the 'Green Fields', is about as environmentally-minded as you can get. Nevertheless, we met parents attending our workshops there who expressed astonishment that there was more than one type of 'hedge tree'. We've also had to simplify our magical nature workshops on moths and butterflies, when we found that most people assume that it is the adult butterflies that require specific food plants, not the caterpillars. Nor have most ever experienced a real hay-meadow of the type that once covered much of England before tractors replaced farm horses. Many think that industrial oil seed rape fields are flower meadows and so post photos of them online, with comments like "beautiful countryside".

Nature disappearing from popular culture

Previous generations knew a different countryside, not just from direct experience but from popular art and culture. Actual nature once featured prominently in commercial art, such as posters designed to encourage excursions on trains or buses. They tell of a time before Alton Towers and the M25 when nature and the seasons were a trip-generating selling point for public transport. Many of the posters, feature such botanically accurate flowers as the 1938 primrose in 'Coming Out?'. Others such as 'Flowers o'the corn' poster designed for London Underground and Bus Group by Edward McKnight Kauffer in the 1920s, showed wild flowers that have long vanished from modern fields.

Contemporary depictions of grasslands and meadows are dominated by dairy product advertisements from the likes of Country Life Butter and Kerrygold. Many of these make great play on nature but give the utter disconnect of modern intensive farming as revealed by the images they use of 'cows on green concrete'.

Nature-blindness in nature groups

Starting from where public audiences are at, rather than where committed conservationists area at, Sarah and I at the Fairyland Trust created something called 'Ecoteering', which in different formats could be a cross between geocaching, treasure trails, nature trails and orienteering. The crux of it being that in order to find hidden treasures and succeed in completing a route, you had to be able to identify some 'navigation species'.

Ecoteering turned out to be popular with the public and we trialled numerous versions of it. To test an early variant, we thought it would be easy to begin with some of Natural England's own staff. We had been wrong to assume that they would be able to identify common plant species. One staff member, who admittedly wasn't a field surveyor or warden, commented in her feedback to us that the 'navigation species' were 'too difficult' and that only a 'specialist' would know such things as the difference between heather and bracken.

This is just one small part of the big picture of societies disengaged with nature: ecologists who understand modelling but can't recognize real plants or animals; and 'education' staff who may know learning theories and 'good practice' for Health and Safety but who see natural history as outside their remit. These people are disconnected from nature because they can't recognise it because nobody showed them, be it grandparents or parents, teachers or work mentors. Nature then becomes a theory, a concept rather than a reality, and as a concept it can survive indefinitely, even as real nature dies out.

Taking nature for granted

Despite their best efforts, organisations like the Field Studies Council and the Wild Flower Society have been left in a backwater, and the explosion of nature on TV has not been a replacement for real natural history. This situation has crept up on us over decades in which conservation groups, who you would assume should naturally be in the front line for engaging the public with nature, have been looking the other way.

Faced with the need to raise funds to operate, conservation NGOs have also focused mainly on their members, a manageable, reachable group, rather than the great 'disinterested' public. This is like running a drive to increase public literacy amongst people who already use libraries. Such an approach is guaranteed to reach mainly the 'converted'. We need to do differently, to get a different result.

The parlous state of national nature-literacy cannot be blamed solely on the education system but that is one element that needs fixing. Lobbying for changes to formal education will get us only so far in reconnecting the population with nature: significant response from 'the system' needs popular demand, not just calls

from advocacy groups with a limited base. A population literate in nature needs to become a political objective.

Getting outdoors ?

Schemes like Forest Schools are great for improving learning through 'outdoor classrooms', which is their objective but the learning may be maths or PE or physics: it is rarely nature *per se*. Much the same goes for the Natural England sponsored 'Access to Nature' and 'Natural Connections' schemes (see specific articles on these initiatives elsewhere in this issue), which principally focus on outdoor learning and getting-children outdoors. Similarly, the main 'ask' of even the Wild Network⁵ project, which includes most of the larger UK NGOs such as National Trust and RSPB and links to National Children's Day, is to 'get outdoors', eg. swapping 'screen time' for time outdoors. All very good but it may not lead to any nature ability or understanding.

On its own, a broadcast call for parents to 'get children outdoors' runs an even greater risk of going nowhere useful for real engagement with nature. We need to do something much more ambitious if Britain's children, and their parents, are going to become genuinely more connected to nature.

If we do little or nothing

Without large scale campaigns of the sort that led to a change in public attitudes to smoking and drink-driving, and taught people road safety, we are on a sure slide to national nature ignorance.

Being blind to nature means not being able to read or discern the quality of your own country, your own place, heritage and environment, and that means being unable to protect nature, or help it recover.

If we cannot see that a local verge is a remnant of ancient grassland rich in native plant species, not just an artificial monoculture of rye grass, how will we know to intervene if we see it being sprayed or re-turfed? And if we have never heard a nightingale, how will we recognize that a local nightingale copse is being destroyed by deer or development?

Starting from where people are at

I don't mean steam rallies or Truckfest but we do need to engage people starting where they are at, for example their interest in their homes and gardens. A ratings scheme for how nature-rich your garden is, would be a good idea. Some German towns offer the equivalent of rate rebates to home-owners who build in nesting places for swifts, and grow creepers on their walls. How would your home and garden rate?

Nature ability needs communicating in ways that fit with leisure time and aspirations. Unlikely as it may seem, those of us who care about nature could learn from the wine marketers. In the 1980s the wine industry and supermarkets educated the British public to understand that there are more than just three varieties (red, pink and white), which was the default assumption in Britain when I grew up. Or we could learn from the architecture lobby. Back in the 1960s the Civic Trust taught

people the difference between real and mock Tudor buildings. We now need to equip Britons with the ability to see the diversity of nature, not just types of wine and houses, before we become a nation of lovers of nature-on-TV, living in a green but nature-free land.

Connect with values

Let's go back to that survey in which 85.2% said they agreed it was 'vital' to introduce young children to nature. We also asked the same people a set of questions which segment them by motivational values⁶ as well as age and sex. The insights this generates go some way to show why conservation groups keep on reaching the same 'converted' subset of the population, why so many people are not 'connected with nature', and who those people are. They also suggest the terms on which we have to engage, if it is to make a difference.

These particular values unconsciously inform our opinions, shape our behaviours and give us our own version of 'common sense'. These 'Maslow groups' are Pioneers (inner directed), Prospectors (outer directed) and Settlers (security driven). The brief descriptors for the three Maslow Groups are:

People with a PIONEER orientation often have the following characteristics:

- Trying to put things together and understand the big picture.
- Concerned about the environment, society, world poverty, etc.
- Always looking for new questions and answers.
- Strong desire for fairness, justice and equality.
- Self-assured and sense of self-agency.
- Generally positive about change, if it is worthwhile.
- Cautiously optimistic about the future.

People with a PROSPECTOR orientation often have the following characteristics:

- Success oriented.
- Welcome opportunities to show abilities.
- Take great pleasure in recognition and reward.
- Will take opportunities for advancement and professional networking.
- Trend and fashion conscious.



As a variation on geocaching and orienteering, ecoteering as illustrated here offers young people a challenge to discover more about the natural world they are visiting.

Photo: Chris Rose

- Like new ideas and new ways.
- Generally optimistic about the future.

People with a SETTLER orientation often have the following characteristics:

- Family and home, and caring for them, tend to be at centre.
- For those living alone, friends take the place of family.
- Tradition and family structure are important.
- Naturally conservative (with a small c).
- Security conscious - wary of crime, violence and terrorism.
- Supportive of tough punishment for criminals.
- Wary of change, especially for its own sake.
- More comfortable with regular and routine situations.
- Concerned about what the future holds.

Matching propositions to values

Pioneers are satisfied with doing something for 'big picture' reasons and because it is ethically right, they don't feel much need to 'get anything' for activity to 'have a point to it', a 'result'. They also positively lap up 'issues' and complicated ideas.

That does not appeal to Prospectors. Their idea of a good day out is more having fun and getting a result, for example in terms of looking good, being seen at a 'recommended' venue, and their children achieving something. A walk around a wood to look at nature might be 'boring' but winning a competition to find 'treasure' species might be more interesting. Making or buying something that other people will envy, to take home, would add value.

This is why you find a lot of Prospectors among the people outdoors doing physical exercise, such as jogging (get fit, look good), mountain biking (with special kit) and in competitive orienteering. If you inserted nature-ability into such activities (as we did in Ecoteering), you've made nature something to be good-at. Otherwise 'nature' will just remain a background factor, not a must-have.

Settlers love tradition and continuity. Steam rallies and railway days out will be heavily supported by Settlers but they also like family-days-out and nature-as-it-was. There are many ways to tune nature to fit with people's values.

The problem conservation groups have is that care-for-nature has been promoted mainly on ethical grounds, and closely associated with 'issues'. This appeals to Pioneers but not the others. Consequently the current 'base' for nature, as represented by membership of and active support for UK green and conservation NGOs, is very skewed to Pioneers. This makes it a politically and socially limited base: the converted.

Steps for reconnecting to nature

1. We need a national programme of campaigns and initiatives to reconnect people to nature by enabling them to become nature-literate. This has to involve adults, not just children.
2. Such a campaign requires the sort of marketing and communications skills and methods that have been used to promote sports, anti-drunk driving and anti-smoking campaigns, equal opportunities and anti-discrimination, and commercially, the promotion of a public appetite for better cooking and wines.
3. Conservation groups need to recognize that simply getting children outdoors, is no guarantee of connection with nature. Government and voluntary-funded projects intended to connect children with nature should measure outcomes in terms of nature literacy and ability, not simply time spent out of doors, or general attitudes to nature.
4. Effective engagement beyond the narrow 'conservation base' (maybe 1 in 20?) will require activities and opportunities that appeal to the psychological groups Prospectors and Settlers as much as Pioneers.

5. Such a campaign would also need nature-engaging activities that match lifestyles and lifestyles: for example courses for the time-rich (retired ?), and activities and opportunities which entertain children and time-poor parents.
6. A nature-literate Britain must become a widely shared political objective.
7. To achieve such political backing, nature ability and quality must become aspirational, for example by being attached to popular past-times like gardening, and being seen as a desirable feature in gardens and homes.

References

1. Wildlife alien to a generation of children. www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356398668159/
2. Balmford A. et al. Why Conservationists Should Heed Pokémon; *Science* 295 (5564): 2367b
3. <http://artplantaetoday.com/2011/11/04/plant-identification-environmental-literacy/>
4. www.fairylandtrust.org
5. www.projectwildthing.com/thewildnetwork
6. www.cultdyn.co.uk

Links to key reports and some images mentioned in the article are at...

<http://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=375>

<http://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=367>

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Ecoteering fact cards.

Photo: Chris Rose