

Back to basics

“The picture is bleak for the foreseeable future – fundraising and finance shortfalls are likely to continue.” This is the grim but expected outlook for nature conservation, as concluded by Jonathan Somper in his review of economic trends in this issue. Looking at market intelligence in the volatile world of funding, he notes that conservation activity has fared better than some sectors, and there are winners and losers amongst specific strands of wildlife and environmental work. His tips for survival include harnessing the world of social media, and striving to win hearts and minds, as conservation battles to keep public attention.

Peter Shirley's contribution reminds us that the big players in conservation have built strong empires in past decades, with expanding staff levels and much more land acquired during the good times, as interest in the natural world has flourished. But Peter Shirley has worries too. Politically, things now seem to be on the slide for nature. He notes we have “a Government dedicated to economic growth at the expense of all else, itself a symptom of a world in thrall to big business”. We may have had years of mainstreaming wildlife and landscape protection in policy, and demonstrating that the natural world is a force for economic health, but the Chancellor and his allies reject this. Their ideology views the environment as something to be railroaded, even (or especially) if there are European regulations involved. We will explore these dangers in the next *ECOS*, as the formal protection of prime sites and landscapes seems in jeopardy.

Meanwhile, should we be cheered by new measures like Local Nature Partnerships, Nature Improvement Areas, and Biodiversity Offsetting? Could these have much to offer if wisely implemented and properly resourced? Alas, they have emerged at such awkward times in the public sector that they seem destined to struggle. Our good friends at the Association of Local Government Ecologists recently surveyed their members, and found that council ecologists were in a beleaguered state. The survey report declared: “It seems increasingly unlikely that local government will have the capacity to engage in these initiatives in the way Central Government would wish. Never before have so few been expected to do so much with so little!”

Despite government rhetoric and a hopeful White Paper, we now face losing many of the past generations' carefully crafted conservation gains, as a fundamentalist approach to development and jobs holds sway. As our resolve is tested further, we should avoid responding with fundamentalism of our own – that will be counterproductive. There is ample evidence for nature's central role in human wellbeing, and we should keep making the case.

Geoffrey Wain