

# Cometh the hour?

*This article discusses the current forces affecting the role and the influence of wildlife bodies, and considers why providing leadership in the conservation movement is such a challenge in present circumstances.*

## PETER SHIRLEY

Drafting this on the bicentenary of Dickens' birth I cannot resist the thought that for nature conservation this may be the best of times and the worst of times. It is the best of times because never before have we had so many people and organisations working in the sector. Despite the recent decline in resources there is still an enormous amount of money available, at least outside government. The amount being wholly inadequate to meet perceived needs masks this, and leads to constant protestations of poverty in the sector.

### Reasons to be cheerful or cheerless?

The positive things include the Natural Environment White Paper and the National Ecosystem Assessment. There is a National Biodiversity Network, broad agreement about priority habitats and species, and understanding that these need to be placed in the context of wider landscapes. Citizen science is booming, with tens of thousands of people engaged in recording birds, insects and animals, all facilitated by modern communications technology. Organisations such as the Wildlife Trusts, the RSPB, the National Trust and the Woodland Trust are managing large, if fragmented estates, for nature conservation and public access and enjoyment.

The negative things include a Government dedicated to economic growth at the expense of all else, itself a symptom of a world in thrall to big business. We have continuing and unaddressed widespread ecological illiteracy, gross pollution and declining biodiversity. Nature protection policies, nurtured and developed over many years, are under threat, and cuts in public expenditure are bearing more heavily on environmental activities than elsewhere. Badgers are to be culled and the implementation of the Habitats Regulations is to be reviewed.

### Mixed messages amongst NGOs

Natural England, which long ago lost any resemblance to the old Nature Conservancy, is weighed down with the bureaucracy of agricultural payments and other farm support, shackled by having to be silent on government policy, and emasculated by staff cuts. Would 'Neutered England' be a better name? It and the Environment Agency are losing 5,000 to 8,000 jobs out of an initial total of about 30,000. Overall, government environmental spending is being cut by about 30%, compared to all government spending for which the average reduction is 17%.

So, with the major conservation NGOs having their hands full doing the good stuff, but operating as contractors as much as campaigners, and certainly as corporate entities

rather than member-driven bodies, questions are being asked as to where is the political leadership needed to address the bad stuff. As Peter Marren said last November: "Nature conservation in Britain has been under political attack for the past twelve months, and its defenders, to put it as mildly as possible, seem to have left the battleground".<sup>1</sup>

These questions were brought into sharp focus during last year's forestry debacle, the fallout from which continues. The details are well documented elsewhere, but it seems that the major NGOs completely misjudged the public mood about the need for our forests and woodlands to remain as public goods largely in public ownership. It is ironic that in their constant striving to engage people they turned a golden opportunity to do this into a hideous own goal. The NGOs were perceived by many as being in league with government and eager to expand their own land holdings rather than to address the wider issues involved.

To be fair to the NGOs their reaction was not really surprising. Two of the most involved, the Wildlife Trusts and the National Trust, have land acquisition hard-wired into their cultural DNA. It's why they were originally founded, and although the founders are long gone they would naturally have worked with the sort of Government and the people in it which we now have.

Whatever the reasons, conscious and unconscious, others, in particular Jonathon Porritt, picked up on the popular feeling. Starting with fair criticism of the NGOs he has moved on to vituperative and unfair criticism. For example he has made requests under the Freedom of Information Act to obtain details of the discussions between the NGOs and Government officials, including so-called 'shopping lists' of the sites each would want to acquire. There are in fact very good reasons for the NGOs to take on some of these sites, and in the normal course of events they might have changed hands unremarked.

For some reason Porritt seemed to need to turn the knife. He went on to say that the NGOs "...betrayed their members absolutely"<sup>2</sup>, a bit of an overstatement, and further criticised them for discussing various options for the forest estate with the Government. This latter criticism must arise either from naivety or disingenuousness. As an experienced negotiator himself he must know that subjects are raised in discussions to elicit thinking, attitudes and expectations, and to allow positions and strategies to be developed, often in order to better resist the other side's intentions and wishes.

### Take me to your leader

Which brings us back to the leadership issue. In his own blog Porritt waxes vengefully against the NGOs, on the 5 February 2011 he said that their inaction "...represents a massive failure of collective leadership".<sup>3</sup> In *the Guardian*<sup>4</sup> although Porritt's invective is very well responded to by the Wildlife Trusts' 'spokeswoman', this is an anonymous source carrying little weight against the guru. Simon Pryor, natural environment director at the National Trust had the decency to admit "The scale of public support for the forests of England caught everyone by surprise ...".<sup>5</sup> With respect to Simon how much more impact could have been generated by a more well known public figure answering the charges.

In saying this I am not criticising the NGOs and what may be called their 'internal leadership' of CEOs and other officers, I am rather bemoaning the lack of 'external leadership' and a public face for the movement as a whole. The public will respond to the right cues: it took the Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB about a century to accrete nearly two million members.<sup>6</sup> It took a web-based body (38 Degrees) a matter of days to collect over half a million signatures on an e-petition about forests.<sup>7</sup>

In my time in nature conservation, and in this context, three individuals stand out for me: Max Nicholson, David Bellamy and David Attenborough. Of these Max, although enormously influential, was never a household name. He worked in a different age when operating behind the scenes was how to make a difference, before the all-seeing eye of the media captured everything.

The two Davids remain, I suggest, the best known faces of nature conservation. Others will have a different view, but the one is still before us with increasingly stunning television series, and the other is still known, even to people who could never have seen much of his original work. They have both served as Presidents of the Wildlife Trusts (and no doubt in honorary capacities with other organisations) and at various times commanded the public's attention and respect. I mention them not as candidates to fill the current leadership vacuum, but as examples of people who at one time did so or could have done so, and for whom there does not seem to be a current equivalent.

### Stepping on toes?

Mark Avery, once the RSPB's Conservation Director now runs a lively blog. Amongst the e-chatter the idea of a 'super NGO' was floated and largely rejected – see the adapted article from his blog on this matter in this edition. Such a beast would surely be mired in corporate consensus speak, hardly cutting edge or incisive. Countryside Link may already be that organisation, notwithstanding its many virtues. It has not been prominent in the current debates.

The problem seems to be with what may be called a 'mature' nature conservation sector. There is not enough common ground, or willingness to give ground, between the major players. They all have vested interests and vulnerable activities to preserve. Some have a history of battling with each other for members and land, they have different histories and cultures. Derek Moore and Peter Marren wrote that they think that the biggest enemies of wildlife are nature conservationists! What Derek wrote was: "... more than once I have considered that nature conservationists themselves might be the biggest threat to our wildlife." He concludes by calling for 'REVOLUTION'.<sup>8</sup>

A side-show in this debate has been the perennial 'there are too many nature conservation organisations, why cannot they merge, share services, work together more?' Both Derek Moore and I have experience of trying to facilitate these things: for various reasons what seems to be common sense rarely turns out to be either welcome or practical. Curiously though Porritt is now fronting a new body called 'Our Forests' which everyone will have to make space for. Perhaps it could merge with the Woodland Trust?

Do not leaders, whether organisations or individuals, emerge in response to an opportunity or crisis, or both? They are not generally set up by committees, joint or otherwise, they are not created out of the fog of policy-making, visioning, planning and evaluation. The need and the niche seems to be there, who is going to fill it? This is not a job for a hard-pressed chief executive, or even one of the regiment of public relations people now working in the sector.

Many people like me could write the job description, but where do we look for the candidates? The old saying has it that 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man (or woman)': well, if there is anybody there will they please make themselves known to the nearest steward.

### References

1. Mark Avery's Blog 13/11/11. [www.markavery.info/blog](http://www.markavery.info/blog)
2. Damien Carrington, *The Guardian*
3. Jonathon Porritt's Blog 05/02/11
4. Damien Carrington, *The Guardian*
5. Ibid
6. <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/who-we-are>, <http://www.rspb.org.uk/about/facts.aspx>
7. <http://www.38degrees.org.uk/campaigns>
8. Mark Avery's Blog 19/09/11

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