
Wildlife fallback – are we prepared?

Despite the recent advances in nature conservation are we about to see a rapid return to habitat fragmentation following CAP reform (post 2013) and increased food demand?

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Recent conservation measures - a big step forward

Over the last 10 years we have seen a major growth in some really exciting landscape-scale nature conservation projects. Particular 'beacons of hope' for me have included:

- the HLF's Landscape Partnership Scheme¹
- the Wildlife Trusts Living Landscapes programme²
- major land purchases by the RSPB³ and others
- at least 12 major catchment-scale river restoration projects⁴
- growth in agri-environment programmes
- projects empowering local communities to take responsibility for conserving their landscapes (such as Neroche); and
- the Lawton report leading to 12 Nature Improvement Areas (NIA) and 22 Local Nature Partnership pilots funded by Defra.

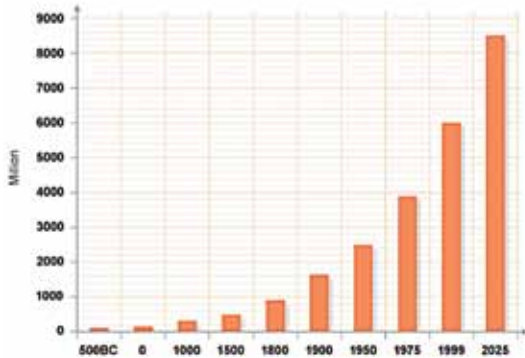
There seems to be a general recognition that habitat connectivity and major habitat improvement and expansion is now a crucial part of any long-term strategy to conserve wildlife, given past declines and present threats to biodiversity. So why be pessimistic?

World food demands

Unusually there is a palpable optimism in the lowland farming community at the moment. A glance through any of the major agricultural journals will reveal a high proportion of upbeat articles referring to investing in a new era of increased productivity. The world population graph (see below) lies at the heart of this debate.

A recent FAO⁵ report predicts that the world's population will reach 9.1bn (a staggering 34% higher than today) by 2050 with nearly all of this population increase occurring in developing countries. This population will be more urban (70% as opposed to the current 49%) and richer. In order to feed this growing

World population growth



population, the FAO predict that food production needs to increase by 70% with annual cereal production rising to 3bn tonnes (2.1bn today) and annual meat production rising to over 200m tonnes to reach 470m tonnes.

Back to Europe and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

While the recent allocation of £7.5m from Defra to fund 12 Nature Improvement Areas is to be

welcomed, it is rather dwarfed by the annual CAP budget for farm payments (Pillars 1 and 2) in the UK of over £4bn.⁶ Agri-environment programmes such as Higher Level Stewardship, Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Countryside Stewardship have been critical to the widespread development of landscape-scale conservation. They have been the glue that has enabled joined up landscape programmes on privately owned farmland for periods of 10 years and beyond. The table below shows the impressive percentage of agricultural land in higher level or targeted agri-environment schemes and entry level schemes in England, Scotland and Wales in 2010.⁷ The future for agri-environment budgets in the UK is however now under real threat.

Country	% Agricultural land in higher level/targeted programmes (eg HLS)	% Agricultural land in entry level programmes (eg ELS)
England	18%	63%
Wales	26%	19%
Scotland	10%	7%

CAP reform 2013

Once again we are about to see significant reforms to the CAP. With Europe’s economic growth in the doldrums, and fierce competition from emerging giants like China and India, there is a growing political view that the EU needs to pay less for farming (currently 47% of the total EU budget) and invest more in scientific research and technology. Within the CAP, there is also pressure to spend less on subsidies and more on agricultural research, to improve crop varieties and livestock, which could benefit developing countries.

In terms of final decision making on CAP reform 2013 it is still early days, although outline proposals were published over four months ago. A generic ‘greening’ payment is being suggested as a 30% top up payment. Given the world food demands situation, it is perhaps not surprising that the NFU and other farming bodies in Europe are concerned that this proposed compulsory greening could ‘impede increased farming competitiveness’.

So why worry about future CAP impacts?

While nothing is yet certain in CAP reform, it would seem fairly likely that the total amount of money available for agri-environment schemes will reduce significantly beyond 2013. This factor, combined with rising commodity prices for meat and cereals, makes a strong business case for farmers to maximise productivity on any agricultural land with potential for food production. How many nature conservation schemes in the wider countryside would survive against this market pressure? My pessimistic prediction is that only the most marginal of areas or designated sites on farmed land will remain in 10 year schemes with huge areas of, particularly lowland farms, returning to more intensive land management regimes. While the UK map of landscape-scale conservation initiatives currently looks impressive, by how much will this area shrink over the next 10 years?

Fallback positions for nature

The next stage in the CAP reform process will be the publication of the European Parliaments draft report with more detailed proposals. This is expected in mid-June 2012 and should perhaps be on the essential reading list of all conservation practitioners. In my opinion, decisions made following this document and the subsequent implementation of CAP reform in the UK post 2013 will be far more critical for nature conservationists to try to influence than worrying about delivering Local Nature Partnerships or attempting to value Eco-system Services! Are we giving this policy influencing the proportional resources it truly needs?

We also need to start thinking hard about a ‘Plan B’. Is the payment of agri-environment monies the only way to secure a much needed network of connected wildlife habitats across our farmed land? Sadly almost all of our landscape conservation schemes could not survive currently if the annual payment was removed, so creative thinking about incentives and viability in conservation is badly needed. Is there a case for state or third sector ownership of much more environmentally sensitive land, to help wildlife connectivity and delivery of key ideals in the Lawton Report? The conservation sector needs to give these matters some urgent and critical thought.

References

1. Annual budget increased from £10M to £17M in 2011.
2. Now over 100 Living Landscape initiatives in the UK.
3. Between 1997 and 2007 RSPB purchased over 11,300 acres (4,600 ha) of land
4. Source: Review of Catchment Scale River Restoration Projects – River Restoration Centre 2005
5. Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations ‘How to feed the World in 2050’
6. 2009 total budget for CAP – £58.9Bn – UK received 7%: source European Commission.
7. Data source – 2010 statistics for agri-environment JNCC

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