

Lands-caped crusaders

Right across the conservation sector we are beginning to talk about conserving wildlife in whole landscapes. Do we appreciate the intellectual Pandora's Box we're opening?

GAVIN SAUNDERS

A whole with holes

Sometimes it feels like the concept of landscape-scale working is more amazing to conservationists than it is to ordinary folk. *"Wow, wildlife needn't just be concentrated on little islands of nature reserves and wildlife sites, but actually could spread out across the whole landscape, if it was, like, all connected up!"* The idea seems like a revelation to those of us who have lived with maps of coloured-in wildlife site blobs on insipid white backgrounds for so many years. But most people perhaps see things from the other way round: they are aware of landscape – the vista of fields, trees, houses and roads around them – before they are aware of wildlife habitats, as such. They may not appreciate how fragmented that landscape is, in ecological terms, for a bee or a dormouse or a nesting bird, but it is a whole with holes, rather than a collection of blobs waiting to be joined up.

Even though the science of landscape ecology has a fairly long history, back at least to MacArthur and Wilson's work on island biogeography in the mid 1960s, its adoption in the mainstream conservation lexicon only really dates back a decade or so, and it still has the appealing glow of a new idea about it. Conservationists now revel in the grandiloquent notion of *Landscape*. We relish the wide-open vistas the word conjures up. We talk of landscape in the context of enlarged scale, increased connection, and dynamic flow – as compared to the limited scale, connection and flow which was framed by our restricted reserves and wildlife sites of old. But there's more to extending one's perspective to a landscape scale, than simply the enticing prospect of making things bigger. Beyond the shrubby boundaries of wildlife sites there are a lot of other things happening 'out there'. Not just dull green fields, hedges, watercourses, copses, and brownfield sites waiting to be coloured in with bright new habitat; but also parks, streets, gardens, homes, yards, factories and schools, inhabited by businesses, communities, politics, factions, interests, families and personalities.

Landscape – a confused concept

While landscape-scale is the tag conservationists have adopted in England for the moment, many fellow practitioners have used the word 'landscape' in a different way for many generations. We risk a slight confusion of intent with concurrent, subtly different uses of the word side by side – the aesthetic landscape, as something to describe, characterise and defend, and the ecological landscape, as a space in which natural processes are played out. Common sense might suggest the two would benefit from coming together, but in practice each has developed its own arsenal of terminology and jealously guarded jargon, and the relationship can be

awkward, even when brought together under the roof of a single agency. In that respect, the European Landscape Convention's definition of landscape helpfully bridges the divide: *"An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors"*.

Nature in context

Conservationists are fond of reminding everyone else that ecological processes underpin all of human society, but we're not so good at acknowledging that wider society itself. A movement which began life trying to preserve wild places from the ravages of humanity set its focus on those wild places, and chose to see the rest of society as 'other'. Though there was every good reason for doing so, this perspective set the tone for how we would relate to the rest of society for decades to come. It affected our language, our preferences and our comfort zone. It meant we felt we had to communicate with the rest of society either with an earnest, objective, scientific rigour, or with a slightly patronizing dumbed-down language of jolly oohs and ahhs about how amazing nature is, or with a regulatory officiousness about what is okay and what isn't okay for the owners of pieces of landscape to do with their own property.

Talk of 'landscape scale' could be evidence of the gradual re-emergence of nature conservation from the shell of self-righteous indignation we've hidden in for the last 50 years: a recognition that the things we cherish are connected to everything else, and that the connection can be positive as well as negative. But if that's the case, it's only a start. Though the efforts to understand the ecology of whole landscapes are highly commendable, there remains something curiously dry, effete and unreal about connectivity maps, permeability quotients and minimum dynamic areas. They are at one and the same time, both holistic and reductionist. They look at the whole, but they only seem to see part of it.

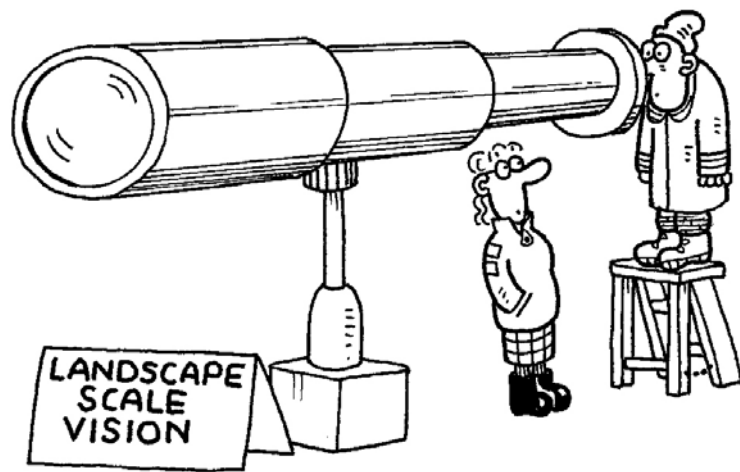
The inconvenient whole

Like eyes becoming accustomed to the dark, we might expect gradually to begin to see more detail, more features, more of the true landscape filled in. In essence we're trying to grope towards holism – recognising connections, interdependencies between habitats and wider society. But that holism can't – by definition – stop with the things we feel comfortable about. If it means anything it has to grasp that landscapes are interconnected webs in more senses than just the ecological ones.

Landscapes are products of history, reflections of economies, and accommodators of society, as well as collections of habitats and ecosystem processes. And they are viewed by 21st century people through a lens coloured and shaped by a messy legacy of Enlightenment and Romanticism baggage - warring notions from Apollo and Dionysus.

Landscape-scale conservation does not – cannot – mean doing the same things we've always tried to do, simply on a larger canvas. It means engaging with the messy reality of wider society, putting nature in context, making it more relevant and meaningful for different people, and learning to define what is 'good enough', rather than always wanting more and always being disappointed.

IT'S BIGGER THAN WE THOUGHT - BEST STICK TO BIRDS



NEIL BENNETT

This is not to suggest that conservation bodies should somehow try and encompass the whole shebang in their work. They have a niche to fulfil in a wider ecosystem, alongside business advisors, economists, engineers, planners, agronomists, foresters, landscape architects, hydrologists, teachers, community workers, public health practitioners and many others. But fulfilling one's niche effectively requires an understanding of the context in which you fit. Each and every one of those practitioners should understand the wider landscape setting in which they work – the benefits their work can offer to the whole, and the constraints and responsibilities they are bound by. Conservation, as a progressive, visionary discipline, should be able to set the example for that.

More, bigger, better...and real?

What is also curious about landscape-scale conservation thinking in England (in contrast, at least, to Scotland) is that it seems notably anaemic in having any sense of political (small p) context. In advocating an ecologically more connected landscape, landscape-scale initiatives seem to have little to say about land and our relationship to it. To achieve a truly sustainable, habitat-rich, climate-proofed landscape would require a wholly different approach by society to its landscape. It would affect our idea of place, of social justice as played out amongst those who work on, have access to, and benefit from the land. Are the cherished wildlife-rich future-scapes we describe in our glossy publications, places made by and for the people? Or are the people just supposed to obediently appreciate it once we've created it?

'More, bigger, better and joined', with the exception of the 'joined' bit, sounds to me more like a supermarket advertisement than a visionary call for future conservation. More, bigger areas of habitat, however lovely they might be, which

continue to be economically irrelevant, legally constrained and socially detached would not – even if they were feasible – be much better, in the full sense, than the fragmented bits we have now.

Landscape is a process, an experience, a journey – something which happens, rather than something that is. It is something which can never be pinned down as a defined end-point or manifestation of a vision, but is a constantly shifting, slippery expression of interaction and multiple being, of human perception and expression amongst a living world.

Even if that is only partly true, measuring nature conservation's success in terms of number of holdings visited, or amount of land into agreement, or area surveyed, won't cut the mustard for much longer. Even defining progress in terms of increased populations of key wildlife species is to see only part of a true, desirable future. What has really changed as a result of our work? What is functioning better? Is it economically viable? Who is working better with whom, and is there greater social equity as a result?

Perhaps we don't yet fully appreciate how deep the water is, now that we've dived into the concept of holistic, interconnected landscapes.

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From a wildlife perspective, Britain's landscapes consist of isolated fragments of semi-natural habitat surrounded by intensively managed land, as illustrated by this area of downland in the south of England.

Photo: Martin Warren

