

Conservation on its last legs – the prospect for rejuvenation

As a provocative on 'refreshing conservation' this article argues for a change of paradigm – to let die what no longer is vital in the world of nature conservation, and look to the seeds of new life.

PETER TAYLOR

Deathly secrets

Is UK nature conservation effectively a dead parrot? Of course it is still alive on the ground in our beleaguered land and marine nature reserves and agri-environment schemes. But we have to face the facts of life: organisms and organisations have a useful life-span and Nature herself organises the end of such things. They grow old, decay and die. In our less wild cultural and conceptual landscapes, we don't like to face death. Conservation is no different. There is much talk of rejuvenation, but I don't think fresh approaches in nature conservation will be easy. There are too many old forces inherent in the structure and too many employees dependent upon the industry that Conservation has become.

However, I would argue that 'rejuvenation' in the sense of something new and positive, is already happening – but not necessarily under the name of Conservation. Rewilding, for example, has grown from a fairly narrow focus upon restoring ecosystem dynamics, to a broader inclusion of wilder farming and forestry, educational and health-oriented projects, river restoration, wildlife corridors in cities and programmes for the deeper psychology of relationship to the land, wildness and nature. And many other strands of activity also embrace these wider links between nature and wellbeing. BANC has been in the forefront of this paradigm shift – organising regional networks and seminars, taking a cross-sectoral approach, and publishing the discourse, and all this despite a shrinking membership base and no outside funding. This is more than re-branding. It represents a more holistic and creative movement, solidly based in community, and with a holistic outlook on nature.

Creative agendas are out there

Thus, despite being weighed down by professional obligation, there are many signs of innovation amongst some groups. For example, with the John Muir Trust taking a more positive look at ecological restoration of the landscapes it has purchased and protected; the National Trust and Forestry Commission have embraced wilder themes such as naturalistic grazing in Ennerdale and Wicken Fen; the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts, along with the National Trust, are taking a lead with landscape-scale



NEIL BENNETT

management projects; the Woodland Trust is also experimenting with woodland grazing regimes in Scotland. Many of the above have collaborated with the Soil Association on a progressive 2014 report *Square Meal* relating food to health, agriculture and wildlife.¹ But generally, the larger organisations are only able to tinker, to slightly adjust their practices and modestly embrace a new sensibility – nobody is taking risks and dreaming of a strong grass-roots revolution in how we engage more holistically with nature.

It should be clear that tinkering is not enough. The general climate is one of losing resources and political influence at a time when new forces of degradation are arising, such as industrial structures for renewable energy in the countryside; and some old enemies seemingly resurgent, such as intensification of farming, the sale of public forests, housing pressures, port and other infrastructure developments. In such an adverse climate, the tendency is to stick to what you know best: to protect past gains, but with a pilot scheme or two to test the waters. There is some value in this caution. The forces ranged against conservation would exploit any lessening of focus on the protection of what has been gained over the past 50 years, but we do have to look closely at the dynamics of a failure to make the required impact on government policy and consumer behaviour.

Political commentators suggest there are no votes from prioritising environmental issues. Yet, there is evidence that the environment and wildlife are dear to the British psyche. The large memberships of the National Trust, the RSPB and the campaigning NGOs are testament to that engagement. So why is it that five million voters and a £500m per annum sector make no waves on the political scene?

The structural failures

The first prerequisite for effective change is to recognise the depth of failure. In the Conservation sector, loosely defined to include all wildlife organisations and landscape protection bodies, after 10 years of pilots in which different organisations have combined to produce landscape-scale projects, with the

National Trust, Forestry Commission and Water Companies to the fore, the main wildlife organisations are only now coming together to consider joint projects. But the difficulties encountered are both structural and conceptual. For example the remit of the RSPB, with an annual budget of £130m, is naturally focussed upon birds and bird reserves, the Wildlife Trusts on relatively small but numerous nature reserves, the National Trust on cultural landscapes as well as wilder land, and the FC only just manages to maintain its multi-purpose remit. There would be great power in all of these organisations working more closely together, combining resources, embracing new concepts that would engage a broader public and operating on a landscape scale that included other sectors – such as health, food and education. For that, there needs to be a more holistic ideology that goes beyond the conservation paradigm. Once united, a more coherent force would make its presence felt in the political world.

At county level, Local Nature Partnerships may be part of the way forward, but in their early years they have struggled to make waves, although examples such as Devon have embraced the health agenda well. Overall amongst the LNPs, a lack of resources may be holding them back, and they have had to play second fiddle to business and economic voices gingering the same range of public bodies.

Back at the national scale, there is a model for this kind of cooperative endeavour – it is in the Climate Coalition, where the wildlife bodies, most notably the RSPB and WWF, have taken a lead role, and now work together with aid organisations such as Oxfam. It is with great irony that I mention the Climate Coalition, given my own stance on the poor science of climate change, but it is a useful example of how an organised campaign with a simple message can get through to the political world. This 'green' lobby has actually unlocked *billions* of government subsidy for the environmental cause. The irony for me is that no member of the Coalition has the remotest sense of the impact on wildlife, community and indigenous peoples, that achieving their campaign goals will trigger, and indeed, already has triggered. I give one example, that of the Blue Heart of Europe Campaign concerning Balkan wild rivers and the rash of hydro-projects they face, including major proposals in National Parks. In 'normal' circumstances, none of these projects would gain finance, but there are vast funds available in European banks to fund private operators who are paid over the odds for carbon-free electricity (see Figure 1 map). As with industrial wind turbines, returns on capital of 12% are guaranteed for 25 years.

Whatever new coalitions are forged, thought must be given to the pitfalls of the media, simple messages, and the way campaign goals are evaluated. It is irresponsible to lobby for a goal and then walk away leaving banks, the private sector and beleaguered governments such as in Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro, to sort out policy on the ground.

The dark side of campaigning organisations shows itself when, having unleashed such destructive forces, they then gain more membership traction by *opposing* the consequences of their actions – as in the ongoing fight by the RSPB to protect Hebridean landscape and its eagles from extensive wind turbine proposals. I believe



Figure 1 'Green' hydro-development in wild regions of the Balkans <http://www.balkanrivers.net/en/content/about-us>

the strongest safeguard is to focus upon real community and change at grass-roots level first, and let this change speak to the political world. This is where the goals need to be set – on reducing consumptive demand at home.

Political prospects

A stronger local base does not mean less influence on government. A well-developed communications and lobbying network that was closely in-touch with proposed government legislation, as well as technical change and strategic thinking, could marshal its members for internet lobbying, letters to MPs and major demonstrations. Rather than big organisations like the National Trust or RSPB having their own lobbying units, I would prefer a developed communication system with their members where each member then acts individually.

Necessary as it is, this system is still *reactive*, rather than creative. Thus, there needs to be an effective movement *from* the creative grass-roots outward. Trees for Life in Scotland is a wonderful example of what can be achieved by practical and cooperative endeavour (with the National Trust and Forestry Commission) coupled to excellent media material. This example is specific to wildlife and wild land, but the methods can be applied to practical examples closer to the centres of populations which lead much of the political agenda.

We need some new strategic and creative thinking that is more directly relevant to the political and economic agenda. For example, imagine that instead of new cities, we restructure the 'green' belt – in place of wild-lifeless fields of rape, corrugated barns, pylons and projected giant aerospace turbines, each city would have a 'hinterland' of landscaped eco-dwellings, passive solar, turf roofed, log-cabin

construction, with short-rotation coppice, new woodlands, ponds, wilder river margins, buried pylons, localised organic food production, good public transport links coupled to community vehicle rentals...where people can choose to leave the centres of cities for a less stressful, less consumerist life on lower incomes. There are over one million unemployed, several million poverty-stricken pensioners, hundreds of thousands of disaffected young people who if they could afford it, would live for their art or music or writing or computer graphics – but in low-cost communities, which could readily exist on the edge of the city.

To generate support for such a major change there would need to be pilot projects and good communication – that is, visualisation, in order not to engender mindless protectionism.

Instead of this – here is what the current Coalition for policy action will bring to the table – another ten thousand giant aerospace turbines, two hundred wood-chip power stations, five tidal pools with all the quarried rock it takes, and biofuels from Borneo, Kenya, Colombia and all the world's other biodiversity hotspots.^{2,3}

Climate resilience – time for a policy grounded in reality

As I predicted in my book *Chill* there has been a major 'pause' in global warming. Contrary to some media reports, the heat is not hiding in the oceans – it is being dissipated both there and in the upper atmosphere. I further predict that within five years, the flat-line will be a slight decline in temperatures. At that stage, the pause or hiatus in temperatures will be a similar extent to the period of warming experienced from the 1970s to the late 1990s. This may be enough to more fully question the main climate models which dictate so much of the current focus on the topic. What then happens to the reputation of those who have claimed so much certainty in the science, especially many science institutions? And then to the bodies in the Climate Coalition that espoused this cause so strongly? There is a real danger that a right-leaning body politic will ride triumphant over the corpse of environmentalism, and never listen to any more 'scare stories' from the green-corner.

Peer-reviewed papers in solar science are warning of the potential for a new Maunder Minimum where the sun's energy declines and northern hemisphere temperatures drop significantly – as happened between 1400-1700 AD. The MetOffice is studying this behind the scenes. These realities of uncertainty require an *adaptive* response. If the conservation sector can get so heavily involved with broader policy issues such as energy supply, consumer demand and even climate science – then it is not beyond its remit to get involved with a real model for our future – one that integrates all the objectives of what used to be called sustainability.

We need to develop policy beyond a hopeless and vastly expensive mitigation via emission reduction. The concept of *adaptation* to inevitable change, whether warming or cooling, is one that the Climate Coalition could embrace, whilst reviewing the science properly, instead of promulgating what is a supply option, not a demand-reduction scenario (which never would make a media message). Barrages, biofuels and wind turbines affect landscape and undeveloped wild landscape that

is not renewable. Community, once destroyed, is also not renewable – especially not indigenous community now affected by massive hydro development as well as biofuel plantations. The focus needs to shift from the global to the local, where the issues are real and the players are accountable.

Current 'renewables' stand at about 4% of national energy demand. The EU has a 30% target by 2030 (and the UK a target of 80% by 2050). What would be the impact on wildlife and landscape of such a huge increase? We don't know because nobody wants to. This is a wilful blindness. It is a consequence of simple-minded single-message lobbyists leading the agenda. Nobody wants to challenge the development model, especially not the conservative conservation sector that has persuaded itself the model is alright, it just needs better regulation.

Restructuring

For most political parties, the priority is to sustain this development model, not to move toward a truly sustainable lifestyle. The ideology of plundering ecosystems to get wealth, and then repair them with the profits, is still current across the globe – most especially, of course, in China. All that is now happening is that 'renewable' energy technologies are being harnessed to the old development model – the world is following our example, cutting down the remaining forests, industrialising agriculture, moving people to cities, eradicating most of the large herbivores and all of their predators, powered not by fossil fuels but wind and palm oil. And all we have to offer is an econometric 'ecosystems services' accounting system for Natural Capital. That is not going to do it.

If *all* of the environment and wildlife groups came together with a major initiative that addressed the broader concerns of the centres of population – in particular, housing and the cost of living, healthy locally sourced food, and less mentally stressful work – this would act as a creative critique of the development model.

We must argue *for* Nature...*human* nature as well as animal and plant nature, where the true human being inherits a soul-enhancing and tranquil landscape, rich in wildlife; where most food is organic; water is recycled; consumption is reduced and with it energy demand. And we need new models of development around the world that safeguard these values. We need recognisable social programmes to reconnect people with Nature. The pilots already exist – we need to study them, communicate and lobby for them.

References

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Peter Taylor is at peter.snowfalcon108@gmail.com