

A shot in the arm for conservation?

Conservation needs to celebrate how beautiful nature is and what it means to us. We need to do this both to revive ourselves, and to engage others. As individuals, we also need to make it a priority to go out and seek those reflective moments when our personal connection with nature is not veiled by the everyday business of conservation. Conservation needs inspired, creative people who will look forward to what could be. Conservation action needs bravery and integrity - we should stop churning out jargon and second-rate data and get out there to make a difference on the ground.

Acknowledgements

VINE (Values in Nature and the Environment)¹⁰ is a group of people working in or with an interest in nature conservation, who are brought together by their interest in the underlying values of nature conservation. VINE (a not-for-profit organisation) has no single voice and does not take 'positions' on issues - it has as many voices as members (some 250 at the last count). So this is not a VINE response to the key questions raised by BANC about revitalising nature; it is a discussion informed and influenced by the myriad voices of VINE. Individual members of VINE may not agree with some (or even all!) of the points raised, but the comments have all been informed or influenced by VINE's (mainly online) discussions.

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References and notes

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- 10 www.vineproject.org.uk

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Conservation wisdom

Looking back to look forward

People helping wildlife have worked the land for generations with commitment, passion and wisdom. State conservation action has been well intentioned but its formulaic processes have stifled initiative and endeavour. The best of the old needs to combine with what we trust in the new.

DAVID BLAKE

I live and work in an ancient landscape. I can feel its vintage qualities every day. Its Early Medieval links are written in place names and are tangible in the grasslands, woodlands and trees. In the first half of the Twentieth century, some of the early movers and shakers of what was to become the conservation movement lived in this area. They were an eclectic bunch: academics, soldiers, writers and landowners. They had been through a world war or two and learned the value of life. They had enthusiasm for and fascination about our wildlife, our heritage and our nation. Many of them were deeply conservative and mistrustful of change, challenging the policies and accepted wisdom of the day. Their passion for nature led to the formation of some of the progressive organisations we know today, including the Soil Association. Amongst their cause, they strove for an acceptance that a responsible government should look after our environment on our behalf.

State wildlife support - a process not a passion?

Following the founding legislation, government started to take a lead, and provide action for nature. Thus people were encouraged to leave it up to 'them'. An elite cadre was created of people and organisations entrusted with making policy, and who were uniquely qualified to turn it into action. On the whole, everyone else was happy to let them get on with it and it certainly worked well in many respects. In hindsight, two things went wrong. First, most nature reserves and protected areas for wildlife are owned by farmers and charities. Thus the designation of protected areas has limited influence. Certain activities are discouraged or regulated within them, so government limits the extent over which those restrictions to private enterprise apply. If we had gone the other way and made protected areas into zones of opportunity, where special tax reliefs or incentives applied, we would be in a different place now. Second, we came to rely on paying farmers to help wildlife through tax-payer funded schemes and regulation. The result is that, for many land owners, nature conservation is no longer the great passion that it once was. They are invested in the process and not the outcome.

Government money and regulation for nature conservation is packaged as a scheme, not a vocation; it's a deal to be brokered, not a personal responsibility. Every pro-nature decision on the farm needs financial justification through a payment scheme;



A perfect wild brown trout (taken on a Sawyer's PT nymph) in a Wessex chalk stream.

Photo: Wessex Wildlife Photography

so when the deal ends, so does the good work. We have created a situation where small 'non-departmental government bodies' run UK nature conservation. Mostly, this is done remotely by desk-bound officers who do not have the time or the freedom to get out on the ground. They just manage the process.

We have spent the best part of a century trying to get governments to accept limited responsibility for our wildlife with a light touch in delivery. We have ended up in a world that we created, but perhaps none of us wanted.

Degraded by unintended consequences

It's not just public and charitable bodies that have gone down a blind alley. There was a time when game animals were reared and released to supplement wild populations. Gamekeepers were employed to manage habitat. However, we have traded in our cherished game animals such as brown trout, salmon, grey partridge and wild duck for poor facsimiles. We pour thousands of tons of stock fish into our rivers and 40 million pheasants and 35 million red-legged partridges into our countryside every year. Feeding them costs £80m in wheat alone. Wild game habitats are degraded because they are no longer needed. Field edges where partridges once nested are 'sterile strips' that reduce weed incursion, our wonderful chalk streams are little more than dredged ditches teeming with super-sized rainbow trout. Our woodlands are increasingly devoid of wildlife interest because the deer have eaten it all and we have to grow trees inside fences or in tiny plastic tree-prisons. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Signs of hope

The direction of travel for nature conservation appears to be inexorably towards failure and collapse. But in the fine grain there is so much to inspire, celebrate and cheer for. If I just think about recent trends in 2015:

Otters: I have been photographing otters on the Hampshire Avon and watching them munch signal crayfish in a local pond. Otters! Right on my doorstep! I still get the same thrill that I got when I first saw one in the distance on Loch Arkaig.

Orchids: I sat on the chalk downs near my home, surrounded by what I think is one of the most diverse grassland swards in the country, in a waving sea of orchids, yellow rattle and herbs.

Peregrines: I see peregrines cutting circles around the spire of Salisbury Cathedral. This is still utterly marvelous to me.

Great bustards: In the spring, I was able to show one of my photography clients a great bustard powering across the dawn skies of Cranborne Chase.

Red kites: Every day on the way to work I see red kites swirling over the downs, pursued by ravens whose croak can be heard all over the Wiltshire Downs. Thirty years ago, we used to get excited about a buzzard's nest!

But are all these steps in the right direction just too small: too little, too late?

Red kite, searching for road-kill in the Nadder Valley, Wiltshire.

Photo: Wessex Wildlife Photography



Changing mindsets?

Today we need to restore as well as conserve and enhance. On Cranborne Chase we are trying to do what we can by bringing groups of farmers together to act in concert regardless of schemes and incentives.

We need to stop accepting the failed solutions offered by many nature conservation organisations and the governmental, charitable and private vested interests. We need to incentivise private landowners in ways that will embed nature conservation in the warp and weft of how they farm and manage the land for decades to come, not these temporary deals with the tax payer. The hunters should cry out for wild fishing, demand fair chase hunting of wild birds and mammals so that we can get back to managing habitat instead of feeding artificial populations of stocked game.

There is no shortage of money, that is a poor excuse. We spend untold millions on ineffective and inefficient protection of European Protected Species and nationally protected species when we could spend that money far more wisely. For instance, how much newt fencing do we actually need and would it not be better spent on securing landscape-scale wetland projects into the future? What more could we achieve for bats if we could take the money that is spent on formulaic surveys and spend it on managing foraging habitat?

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Nature Conservation: barking up the wrong tree?

Caring for nature is a message widely embraced by people and by businesses, yet much UK wildlife continues to decline. This article considers the contrast between the words and the action, and looks at some key choices for revitalising nature conservation.

MILES KING

There is a fundamental paradox at the heart of nature conservation activity in Britain. The 'movement' if indeed there is one distinct 'movement', has grown extraordinarily during the nearly 30 years of my involvement in nature conservation. Bodies such as RSPB, National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts collectively boast millions of members, all signing up to pay their monthly direct debits for nature (or is it free car parking?). TV wildlife documentaries garner millions of viewers gasping in awe at the vivid spectacles. Governments fall over themselves to be seen as the greenest. Companies enthusiastically sign up to deliver wildlife action plans or to place natural capital at the heart of all their decision-making.

Yet at the same time, over the same period, nature continues to decline and to disappear. In some cases the decline is accelerating in lock step with the increased support for it. Farmers proud to have lapwings nesting in their arable fields simply cannot believe the farmland bird statistics that show unambiguously the birds which were formerly too common to bother with, are now at risk of extinction. They see things improving compared with their parents' generation, blissfully unaware of Shifting Baseline Syndrome.

Tactical choices for helping wildlife

Legal protection for wildlife has been partially successful at 'holding the line'. Places rich in nature have been protected from development by the European Nature Directives, at least in part. And Sites of Special Scientific Interest have gradually received stronger and stronger protection through a series of wildlife protection laws. Outside of protected areas, formerly ubiquitous wildlife habitats such as lowland grasslands have gone entirely from some counties; and hang on in tiny, unviable fragments in others. The 25 year experiment in 'renting nature', known as the agri-environment schemes, has not worked out so well – delivering only illusory gains for nature, and seems unlikely to survive another round of CAP reform.

And what nature are we trying to conserve? Habitats were created by and dependent on agricultural and forestry systems that have long gone. We try and re-create facsimiles of these systems – but for what purpose? Yes: many are