

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?

David Blake runs Wessex Wildlife Photography. He is also Project Development Officer at Cranborne Chase AONB. The views in this article are his own. wessexwildlife@gmail.com

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

beautiful (at least to our eyes) but are there not better ways of providing a future for nature in Britain, than looking to a past now gone?

Rewilding is one such approach – looking to create more ‘natural’ ecosystems, by bringing back large extinct mammals and birds. The scale needed for these systems to work is eye-watering, especially given how small and crowded these islands are: the only real options are in the uplands, which are themselves highly contested landscape. It’s difficult to see the shooters and shepherds giving up these hard-won hills without a seemingly fitting fight to the death.

Nature is nice, but does it pay?

Perhaps it is people who need rewilding, far more than land. Until people rediscover just how much benefit they derive from nature, wildlife will always struggle to be recognized. Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital frame nature in terms of economic gains, profit and loss, financial risk. Investors will only be interested in the aspects of nature that can be quantified, commodified, and monetized. Everything else will be thrown into a pot labeled ‘nice if...’ and ignored. So the carbon locked up in a forest, or the water that could cause downstream flooding, will shine brightly from the natural capital balance sheet, and the profit and loss account. The wonder a child sees in the flap of a butterfly’s wings will not even register.

The benefits of nature that really count for people are the things that create sensory, emotional and spiritual connections with the natural world. Few people are interested in wildlife because of facts or statistics. People are interested in and develop connection with nature through personal experience and through sharing stories.

Nature and the new normal

Most of us in nature conservation (but not landscape conservation) have tended to downplay the importance of stories and emotions, let alone spiritual connections with nature. We focus on ‘rare’ species, or ‘important’ habitat or ‘diverse’ places, or stress that tonne of peat sequesters so many tonnes of carbon dioxide. Is this displacement activity on our part? These labels of rarity or diversity, and these facts and figures mean little to most normal people. They probably make little difference to politicians either, who are mainly concerned about what normal people who vote for them care about and prioritise.

How do we get more people interested in nature? We need to focus our efforts on nature where people live. Is there much point in encouraging people to drive from their homes to a nature reserve, so they can empty their dog there? Great for the dog, but better to ensure that there is plenty of high quality nature in their local park, which they can see or experience every day. Better to work to get really good large areas of ‘wild’ land incorporated into new housing developments.

We need to work to incorporate nature into people’s everyday lives. And this is the crux: it’s not ‘rare’ nature that counts. It’s common nature which mostly gladdens the heart: street trees, green roofs, colourful flowers in planters on street pavements, turning boring amenity grassland parks into riots of colour.

Submit or celebrate?

We also need to change the terminology we use. It’s too late to stop the demise of the semi-natural, outside of a few museum piece reserves or patches of landscape. We should mourn its passing, create ceremonies to remember it, in the way we remember the fallen of wars on Remembrance day.

Despite these losses, we need to start talking positively about nature and what it means to people, celebrating the joy and wonder that nature provides us with, the inspiration it provides for art, music and writing. And we need to start talking seriously about the spiritual value of nature to people.

This is what we will be doing through People Need Nature (www.peopleneednature.org.uk), a new charity, which will be highlighting the value of nature to people for its spiritual value, for things like the inspiration it provides to writers, artists, musicians – indeed all of us. And it will promote the value of nature in the public realm, where nature is accessible for everyone. We will be working with individuals and communities across England and Wales on projects to celebrate wildlife, carrying out research and advocating the importance of nature to people for its sensory, emotional and spiritual values.

Miles King blogs at anewnatureblog.com. miles@we4kings.co.uk

Lapwing at Montague Farm, Pevensey.

Photo: Martin Hole

