

Revitalising conservation - the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Nature conservation aims are not ambitious enough, nature reserves are too small, and the wider countryside is too inhospitable for wildlife to thrive. This article promotes land purchase, rewilding, and closer links with farming bodies as part of the answer to revitalising conservation in Britain.

SIMON AYRES

The biggest threat to the natural world is the loss of habitats and the extinction of species. And the biggest threat to humanity is the loss of the 'ecosystems services' provided by these habitats and species. I am not referring simply to the services of basic survival like food and water. Without the beauty of nature and the company of other species, we lose what is integral to being human, the spiritual connection and inspiration of nature. These losses are the ongoing and direct results of the activities of modern human society.

The Good

The people working for the conservation bodies are well qualified and highly professional. They are experts in their fields of biology, education, marketing, and the like. This applies to the staff in the charities and in government. People tend to be highly motivated in their work, and the sector has no trouble recruiting quality staff.

With all this expertise, the conservation charities are highly effective at delivering on their aims. This translates into a large network of nature reserves with good public access, education programmes, and projects to engage with landowners in the wider countryside.

The Bad

On the other hand, UK governments have been quite ineffective at delivering on their aims, in particular with regards to halting the loss of biodiversity. In connection with this, the success of the charities in achieving their aims has not translated into an overall positive story for wildlife in Britain. The conclusion must be that the aims are not ambitious enough: nature reserves are too small, and that the wider countryside is too inhospitable for wildlife to thrive.

Landowner engagement projects, such as the Wildlife Trusts' Living Landscapes, have limited impact. I have worked on this type of project, and my experience is

possibly informative. There were a few committed landowners who were doing the best they could for wildlife: my input probably didn't change what they were doing. There was another group who used me as a free service for submitting agri-environment schemes. The majority of landowners were not interested in engaging with our project, despite regular mailouts to every farm. In short, the money I was paid to drive around the countryside discussing land management issues with farmers and landowners might have been better spent on buying land of wildlife value and potential.

Initiatives that focus on a particular species often boil down to prescriptive management on a few key sites. This possibly preserves the species from extinction, but does nothing to restore the abundance and resilience of our wildlife.

I also wonder about the vast sums spent on infrastructure for nature reserves. About £2m was recently spent on infrastructure on a small reserve near here, much of it funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. This might well create a wonderful visitor experience (or does it cut us off from nature, making the experience more like watching telly?) but does it help the wildlife? Not directly, no. And if that money is instead spent on buying land, the gains for nature could be significant and direct. It is tempting to suggest that visitor attractions of this kind are more closely allied to business planning than helping wildlife. More visitors means more members means more financial security. Is this the most beneficial use of limited environmental funding?

The wider countryside is inhospitable to wildlife, and this is the problem that needs tackling if we are to see the 'loss of biodiversity halted'¹ or any recovery from the current low baseline. This is where the conservation movement have been so ineffective. From the euphemistic 'changes in agricultural practice' to describe the destructive practices of modern farming, to the unwillingness of government to legislate against or police these practices, the conservation movement has been feeble in its attempts to do its job.

While the mechanical destruction of habitats is a major problem, the use of pesticides across the landscape could be the most destructive practice: crop spraying, livestock parasite treatments, sheep dip, and treatment of forestry nursery plants all combine to ensure that almost every part of the landscape, whether lowland or upland, plants or manure, soil or water, is poisonous to invertebrates. The loss of invertebrate life is phenomenal.² I only have to think of my own observations over a few decades. Up to the early 80s, every September there would be thousands of crane flies outside the windows attracted by the lights in houses. This year I saw two or three.

This loss of insect life is tragic in itself, but these are at the bottom of the food chain – inevitably there are knock-on effects up through the ecosystem. For example, the steady decline in curlew numbers could be related to the fact that their main food, invertebrates, are being killed off by pesticides such as sheep dip. On top of these influences, some farmers and gamekeepers make a habit of deliberately killing birds and mammals on the land they manage.

The Ugly

This brings us to the Ugly – what the conservation movement needs. What we need are bigger nature reserves, where wildlife can thrive away from the influences in the productive landscape. Rewilding now has a strong representation with the new charity Rewilding Britain, and one of its aims is to support the establishment of large areas for wildlife. Information on some of the large-scale projects taking shape can be seen on Rewilding Britain's website.³ For those of us who are used to heavily managed and heavily grazed nature reserves, areas of wildland might look messy, even ugly perhaps. But this type of landscape is very beneficial to wildlife, and personally I see great beauty in its chaos and shifting structures.

We have plenty of land for this. We currently waste about half of the food produced, and this figure applies to UK and globally: if we stop the wastage, whether in the fields, the distribution centres, the shops or in the home, we could reserve more of the land area for the wild without reducing food supplies. Even 5% would be a good start, amounting to 1.2 million hectares. If poor countries like Costa Rica (25%) and Peru (15%) can reserve significant proportions of their land area, the UK is certainly capable of giving more land to wildlife.

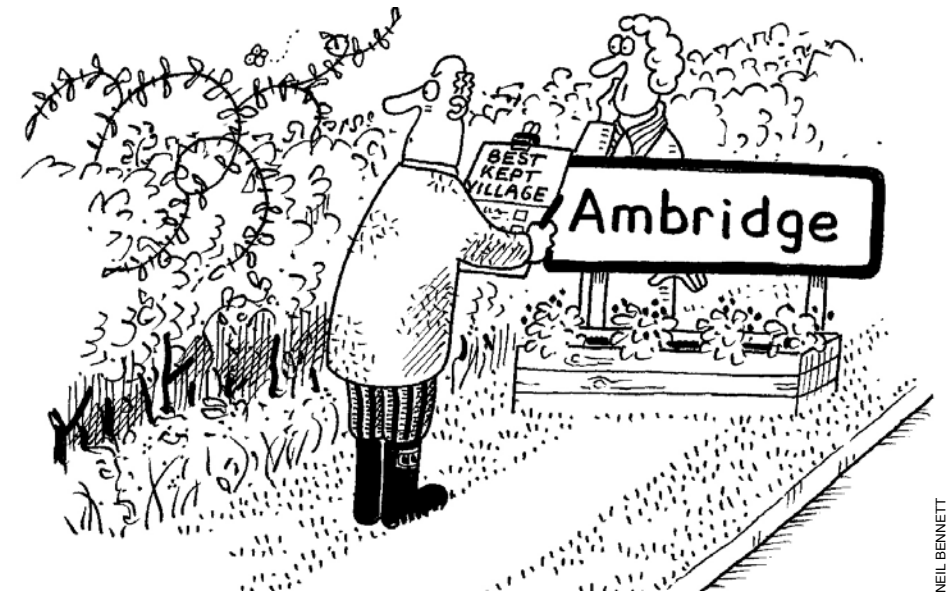
There also has to be some real action on resolving the problem with the rest of the landscape, applicable to commercial farming and forestry. This must be through legislation and subsidy conditions, in order to have an effect over the whole landscape. Two policies I would like to see are reducing pesticide use and establishing buffer strips along watercourses.

Research is needed to identify the worst pesticides and find replacements, and also to develop methods applicable to commercial farming and forestry that can replace chemical treatments against pests. The idea of buffer strips is to protect fresh water from pollution and soil run-off, and at the same time provide wildlife corridors throughout the landscape. Width of buffers could be related to the size of the watercourse, with large rivers having 50 meter buffers on each bank for example, and small streams perhaps 10 meters.

Government currently lacks the political will to protect and restore wildlife. Worse, government is susceptible to the lobbying power of the farm unions, whose vision for farming is restricted to the short-sighted goals of higher subsidies and less regulation. In comparison, the organisations that care about the wellbeing of the countryside have been ineffective.

The consortium of charities that commissioned the *State of Nature* report has only begun the task with the publication. The next stage must be to deal with the problems identified in the report. There is a case here for campaigning bodies such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and 38 Degrees joining forces with the nature charities. A strong voice is essential, to influence and represent public opinion and hold politicians to account.

In an effort to avoid an ugly battle, it is important to have dialogue with the farm unions to persuade them of the importance of this issue for the viability and good



name of farming as much as for wildlife. If a negotiated joint position could be reached with the farming industry, the necessary government action would be assured. The environment has to be the overarching consideration in all policy decisions in recognition of reality, instead of being a side issue, low down on the list of priorities. A good start will be to follow the example of Bolivia and have the rights of nature enshrined in law.

References and notes

1. 'Halting the loss of biodiversity' is a target that appears in several international agreements and government policies, e.g. the EU Biodiversity Strategy adopted in 2011 includes "an ambitious new strategy to halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the EU by 2020" <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/comm2006/2020.htm>
2. For news report on a global study see www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0714/240714_invertebrate-numbers
3. www.rewildingbritain.org.uk

Simon Ayres is a forestry consultant, chair of Wales Wild Land Foundation, and is on the steering group of Rewilding Britain. simonhayres@gmail.com