

# Nature Conservation in Britain – turning the tide?

*This article follows up recent debate in ECOS over revitalising conservation. It argues that both science and emotion are now rightly recognised as key influences on conservation policies, but much more is required to engage people with nature, to achieve wider understanding of the natural world and support for wildlife.*

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The last edition of *ECOS* (36 [3/4]), focused on revitalisation of nature, captured well the conflicting views prevalent within the nature conservation movement. There are those that look back wistfully to an earlier time where a seemingly more caring and rounded view of the natural world existed. Others think that the reliance on science has gone too far and that the emotional connection between people and nature has been hijacked by a social and intellectual elite that like to use unintelligible terms like 'ecosystem approach' that leave the public bewildered and confused. Meanwhile, our children fail to understand the environment around them on account of schools no longer making time for wildlife studies. It all looks pretty bleak and it is hard not to agree with the sentiments at least.

### Reflections on some founding fathers of nature conservation

It seems little known that the first steps towards what would one day become the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act began as early as 1940. In this year, the phoney war came to an end, a disaster was averted at Dunkirk, the Blitz commenced and Germany stood poised to invade England. Britain and its empire was suffering repeated military reverses and the turning of the tide at first Alamein was nearly two years away. Despite all this, some people, who also had political influence to match their vision, were able to take what at the time must have seemed an extraordinary view of how a better future would look. I have always thought that this was our finest hour in more ways than one.

The charge that post-war conservation was hijacked by an intellectual elite fails to take account of the times. When the Nature Conservancy (NC) was formed, rationing was still in place and whilst there was full employment, much of the effort was focused on rebuilding bomb damaged cities and creating new homes. This was the time when Development Corporations were springing up around the country and into this came the NC. In the early days, the NC was vulnerable to hostile government departments such as Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food who felt that the fledgling organisation should have been within its control. The early work from 1949 was led by Captain Cyril Diver as the first chief executive of the NC but in 1952 he stepped down and the remarkable Max Nicholson was appointed his successor. Nicholson, along with Sir Arthur Tansley, the first chairman of NC



The late Norman Moore by his dragonfly pond.  
Photo: Alistair Crowle

and Professor W H Pearsall, the chairman of NC's science committee, were right to push the importance of science in establishing credibility with other organisations and government.

A few years before his recent death, I was able to spend a morning talking to the late Norman Moore about this period, when pesticides were starting to be seen to cause problems. He emphasized the point that despite dead birds literally dropping out of the sky, they had no data with which to argue their case that there was a problem. Norman Moore was one of the finest naturalists and conservationists this country has ever produced but it was very nearly not the case. In late September 1944, Norman found himself sitting in a glider on an airfield in southern England, with the rest of First Mountain Artillery Regiment. Their destination was Arnhem. As we know, the operation was halted but a few months later, Norman was badly wounded in action and spent the last few months as a prisoner of war where he nearly died from dysentery. I asked him how his wartime experiences shaped his post-war career. He looked at me and said "I felt as if I had been given a second chance".

Two years before the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Norman Moore established the eco-toxicology unit of the NC. Derek Ratcliffe had a desk within the unit and with Norman, published the first paper suggesting that it may have been pesticides that were having a negative impact upon reproduction in birds of prey.

It was more than 10 years from the early reports of large numbers of all types of birds being picked up dead on farmland before the evidence was marshalled that resulted in the withdrawal of the worst of the chemicals being used. It is worrying to think that we may be facing a similar situation with neonicotinoids. It is easy to imagine that things could have been better if a more imaginative approach to how we protected the environment had been adopted. The reality is that people at the time did the best they could.

### Passion and commitment is not enough

Passion and intrinsic value are important of course. Most of us became interested in nature conservation as a result of an emotional response to something we encountered, but this connection within ourselves is not enough to persuade others that our views should prevail. Reasonable people will recognise intrinsic value but the world is not full of reasonable people. Ways must be found to convince those who view the environment as merely an open space waiting to be developed that there is greater value in maintaining that open space – the ecosystem approach is one way of doing this although few would disagree that it is a cold and clunky term but then, not that long ago, people used to ask what this strange new phrase ‘biodiversity’ was all about. Today, there is general understanding from all walks as to the meaning of the word ‘biodiversity’ even if there is not a unified approach to protecting it.

The increasing evidence base that the environment plays an important role in maintaining health and assisting in the recovery from illness may yet turn out to be a turning point. If this is the case, it will be the rigorous approach of science that provides the grounds for an important story but it will be down to the storytellers supported by the scientists, to get the appropriate messages across so positive action in protecting the environment is the end result.

Hopefully, those reading this journal have some form of commitment to the natural world and many of us assume that most other people just lack for an opportunity to engage with natural world as we do. A few years ago, at a conference run by the Moors for the Future Project (<http://www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/>) a researcher reported back on his work carried out on schools around the Peak District. He reported that a significant number of children had the opportunity to go out into the countryside but actively chose not to. We know that huge numbers of people watch David Attenborough documentaries or even BBC’s Countryfile programme but go no further in terms of physically engaging with the environment in some way. It seems their interest is met just by watching wildlife programmes and I suspect, but cannot prove, that they are quite happy leaving it at that. Do these people merely require a trigger before acting? In amongst them will we find the masses that forced the Government to drop its plans to selling off the forestry estate? One way or another, it is important that we find out.

### Rewilding – a distraction or a new challenge?

Rewilding has grabbed much attention as a possible new direction in conservation. The rationale for rewilding is in large part the desire to see restoration of natural

processes, but many just think of this as being about increasing the number of trees in a given place. The English uplands, where I work, are often identified as being a good place for rewilding (within England at least) but what would be the consequences of this approach to the management of the land? If you want to keep the northern hay-meadows and flower-rich pastures and grasslands, then you will need to manage them. Large expanses of upland are blanket bog, which is a climax habitat. You would need to wait a very long time to see any significant change, if indeed a significant change under natural conditions would actually occur. It really would illustrate just how far we have lost our way if the rewilding advocates were to call for the planting of trees on this globally rare habitat. There would be considerable benefits from altering the current management of the uplands to deliver improvements in the form of raw water quality, reducing flooding events downstream, capturing carbon and restoring rare habitats and bird of prey populations but none of these require rewilding as such. The land can continue to be managed, it just needs the damaging aspects to stop. Rewilding, in England at least, may be better applied to lowland areas but here land is expensive and assuming that an area could be purchased that was ecologically coherent, would agreement between nature conservation organisations ever be reached on how to proceed?

### Engaging new generations

There seems little doubt to me that (re-)connecting with people and helping future generations have an interest in the environment are perhaps the greatest challenge that we face. My wife is a primary teacher and says that her children really enjoyed the Forest Schools, but in her 23 years of teaching they were only able to get two afternoons for one class. The only way to get schools to take the natural world seriously is for it to be put onto the curriculum, nationally assessed and compared with other schools in things such as league tables so that energy, time and funding are allocated (it should not have to be so formulaic of course). At secondary level, there needs to be an exam. Whether this is called ecology, wildlife or the natural world matters less than it being available and rigorous enough to be worthwhile doing. How could this be achieved? Is there a shared vision between all the conservation bodies, both statutory and non-governmental so that a unified message is given to Government? I suspect not.

Until an individual or organisation achieves a unified approach between all the conservation organisations, for an approach that can utilise science and emotion, then our legacy will be a pile of dusty atlases that tell a story of nature’s lost riches of the past and of our failure to leave the environment in a better place than we found it.

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