

Brexit blues for greens?

After decades of seeing the EU as a bit of an ally in trying to get a reluctant UK government to live up to reasonable environmental standards, it might seem a stretch to try to suck opportunity out of the Brexit vote. This article looks at signs of hope for nature in Britain's future outside the European Union.

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So we're leaving the EU, what now?

Environmental regulation is so tied up in its EU background that it could leave us with a complete dogs-breakfast while we try to sort it out. A temporary (maybe permanent) weakening could leave plenty of opportunity for the powers of darkness to sweep-away the 'constraints' they've been complaining about for years and build whatever development is on their mind at the moment. Even if environmental regulation doesn't actually change I suspect a simple switch of mood could still result in slippage of protection.

And then there's agri-environment payments. Generations of us have tried to get land-based incentives pushed more towards delivering environmental gain. It may not seem much, but many of our greatest wildlife assets would not be there now if it wasn't for the support to wildlife-friendly farming and conservation management. You may claim we have a vested interest, but most wildlife conservation organisations are only able to maintain the nature conservation assets we have because of agri-environment payments. I remember the time before these were available - the best we could do was just monitor the decline of wildlife even on our own nature reserves.

It may be hard to wipe away the Brexit blues but in nature conservation we should be used to extracting opportunity from dire situations. The political background to any situation rarely favours the environment so maybe things aren't all that different to normal.

A mandate for environmental improvement?

Call me a 'rose-tinted optimist' but the fact that polls after the referendum showed that people, on both sides of the EU fence, are in favour of environmental protection that is as good as or better than what was achieved in the EU does give me hope. If democracy means anything (a genuine question?), then politicians should realise that they have a mandate or requirement to improve regulation not weaken it.

Whilst agri-environment payments may have helped in practical nature conservation, this was swimming against a huge CAP tide. Maybe our modest efforts in holding the ground with agri-environment money would not have been so important if the CAP had worked better in the first place. Paying farmers just to farm was a scandal, in the end not even doing farming any favours – the majority of farmers voted to leave the EU. Nature conservation was effectively just surviving on the marginal

payments of a flawed approach. Maybe the opportunity now is not for just a slightly modified CAP – but a fundamental change of direction.

From farm trails to ecosystem trails?

The only justification for receiving public money is to provide public benefit. Whilst a secure food producing industry is a public benefit, the support given to this under the old CAP was out of proportion to the public benefit it provided. Against other priorities, such as the beleaguered NHS, a food security argument starts to sound hugely over-stated. However, investment in public benefit from land-based industries covers a much wider range of activities than just supporting an industry that should be far more capable of supporting itself.

Investment in nature and the benefits provided by nature provides a far stronger justification for public support. Investment in natural capital and payment for the ecosystem services provided could be the practical ways of implementing a public benefits approach. Public payment should be focused on where the market fails and our economic system lets us down. Whether natural flood management, pollination, carbon sequestration or a multiplicity of other unseen services – if we don't get financial support to them then we won't receive them at the scale that society requires.

How you measure, and therefore pay for these benefits might be a problem. So measure what you know works. An area with high biodiversity (that's *biodiversity* in its proper sense – richness of species, habitats and natural processes) is an area most



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likely to be delivering a wide range of ecosystem services. So measure, and pay for biodiversity – it's a proxy measure for functional ecosystems.

Environmental economy

Some see any mention of natural capital as a black art – putting a price on nature and giving in to the money men. The opposite is the case – this would be 'naturalising the economy' not 'monetising nature'. It's our economic system that needs to change to incorporate the value of nature – not the environment that needs to change to fit with economics. The opposite of investing in natural capital is not investing in natural capital. If the economic compass is not re-set then we will continue paying for damage rather than benefit.

On the other hand some farmers might worry about reducing income from food production. But farmers have a far stronger argument for support when providing public benefit than they do for simply supporting them as an industry. This should open up more opportunity, not less. And maybe free them up so they can look at more options rather than the current prescriptive approach. 'Subsidy' will always be limited, but high returns on investment sounds like a deal to attract more funds, not a cost to be reduced. Some natural river catchment management approaches deliver 60 to 1 returns.

Enhancing and defending nature

We live in a cultural landscape and much public funding will be focused on how to manage land in ways that deliver most public benefit. So management, whether farming, forestry or conservation, may still dominate the landscape. But not everywhere. Rewilding, the increased use of natural processes and putting back the nature we've been removing for centuries could be an equal or better way of producing environmental benefit in many circumstances. If rewilding produces public benefit, and there is ample evidence that it does, then why shouldn't it receive public investment?

Brexit gives us the opportunity and the requirement to come up with far better solutions to the way we manage land. With 60% of our species reducing, 30% of our ecosystem services in decline, and many more existing in a degraded state, we need to restore and enhance the natural world, not just defend it. With aberrant incentives paying for environmental damage, with farmers being some of the most over-worked, underpaid, undervalued people around – no one can claim that minor tweaks are all that are needed as we consider new schemes for farming and wildlife.

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