

Which Wildlife? What People?

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Wildlife

When discussing ways and means of encouraging wildlife in any site it is not always clear just what species we are talking about. "Wildlife" means many things to many people. For me it includes all plants and animals established in the wild, i.e. capable of surviving and reproducing without human intervention. To many, images of the Serengeti are conjured up and in consequence expectations are left unfulfilled when visiting a National Nature Reserve for the first time.

In Britain we often qualify the term "wildlife", whatever we understand by it, by distinguishing "native wildlife" from "alien wildlife". I would contend that this particular distinction in Britain is not only indefensible to an ecologist but also lies at the root of an unhelpful nature conservation mythology which encourages activity without any thought about why that activity is taking place.

The flora and fauna of Britain is changing all the time. Since the last glaciation species have moved in with and without human help; have established themselves or have failed to do so; have seen populations fluctuate according to prevailing conditions, some of which are a direct consequence of human activity; and sometimes species are lost from the biota of these islands. Where in this continuum of change do we say that a species has qualified to become a native? Should the residential qualification be different in the cases of a fruit fly which has a dozen generations in a year and a forest tree an individual of which may live for several hundred years? Looking at the absurdity of all this as an ecologist one is bound to ask, does a false distinction like this matter – and if so why?

The cold, detached viewpoint of the ecologist is more difficult to maintain as the manager of a nature reserve, watching a tide of *Rhododendron ponticum* sweep through a woodland. The last few centuries have seen the speed of transport and the scale of transfer of materials from one part of the world to another increase massively. Deliberate movement of species by people has also increased. The net result of this has been to link together to some extent the land masses which the mechanisms of plate tectonics have separated and to encourage a uniformity in the global flora and fauna not equalled since before the Tertiary (Trep1 1990). This is particularly evident in cities where, in Europe, as much as 45% of the flora and, perhaps, 10% of the invertebrate fauna has established since 1500 – and most of these species over the last 150 years (Kowarik 1990). Nature conservation has to come to terms not only with loss of wild areas to commercial operations and development and habitat damage by pollution but also with the alterations to the species composition of biocenoses. Some of these are drastic – although most are not.

I think that we need to look quite critically at our motivation for example in insisting on planting "native" species and on the practicalities and consequences both of this and of operations to eradicate or control other species. The urban environment in particular presents problems for traditional approaches. The abiotic differences between a city centre and the countryside make it impossible, or extremely difficult, to establish and maintain in the city some of the species we would normally encourage in rural surroundings. Conversely, some species which we would not associate with rural habitats flourish. These are part of the new natural flora of urban areas (Gilbert 1989) and should be treated as such. There is no sense in struggling to replicate poor imitations of rural habitats here. They do not belong. They are not natural in these surroundings.

So, what is the motivation behind a “natives only” policy? First, species long-established in Britain are likely to support a larger number of other species than more recent arrivals (Kennedy and Southwood 1987). This is broadly true, although there are clear exceptions. However, it may not be the number of species which is significant but the biomass supported. Sycamore for instance supports a larger biomass of invertebrates than oak or alder do (Mason and Macdonald 1982) and to a bird it matters less that the insect it has eaten is common or rare than that it has eaten the thing at all.

Secondly, species long-established in Britain are more likely to have cultural associations than more recently established ones. It takes centuries for layers of folklore to accrete. Yew groves, oak trees, hawthorn trees and others have a special place generated by their mystical significance many years ago. This is a facet of nature conservation which has not bulked large, although it is now becoming more important. However, it is not only our wildlife which changes over time but the human communities too. In cities especially, the racial and cultural mixtures erode this argument to some extent.

Thirdly, a notional intrinsic value is given to them as components of familiar ancient habitat types. The continuum of change notion undermines this. Today we attempt to freeze the frame in the 1930s-40s, but this hardly reflects the flora and fauna of pre-Industrial Revolution Britain, let alone Mediaeval Britain. The implication of a direct link with antiquity does not in practice carry great weight.

Fourthly, that recently established species oust long established ones (Elton, 1958). Clearly this is not true in the majority of cases. Equally clearly some species have spread at the expense of others. We need here to be clear about two things in particular. That the reason for the ease with which some species have spread is due to damage and degradation due to human impact on the environment. This while explaining does little to console! The second point is that it is not just recently established species which can be invasive. Bracken, for example, is doing a pretty good job in this respect.

Fifthly, naked xenophobia. A glance at the literature illustrates this. Trepl (1990) quotes Braun-Blanquet, no less, to make the point “... the spreading of foreign, unwanted intruders [...] (has) taken on a threatening form [...] violent attack of foreign (species) [...] become a terrible scourge over the land [...] be fought with all available means ...”. This reads more like a far-Right political pamphlet than serious science.

There are, no doubt, other reasons to be advanced, but the point has I hope been made. The thinking behind what we do is often imprecise and unsubstantiated. This may, necessarily, be the case but if so we should not disguise the fact – even (? especially) from ourselves.

There is a very practical issue hidden here too. We speak of community involvement. To achieve this requires the interest, sympathy and active support of the community for what we are doing. It does not help to achieve this in our multi-cultural society if promotional material contains such phrases as “only native species planted”, “aliens should be eradicated”, and “invasive foreigners”, or if practical projects calendars flag up a weekend’s “rhodie-bashing” with all its echoes of Paki-bashing. As the sign above so many pub bars says “Before opening the mouth make sure that the brain is in gear”.

People

I have had it said to me “It would be OK managing this part if it wasn’t for the people”. It was said in jest – but for anyone managing land to which the public has access it will strike a chord. Yet it is, of

course, for the benefit of the general public that parks exist. This we can agree – however reluctantly – but how indeed do we define “the general public”? It is at one time both “everybody in general” and “no-one in particular”. It would seem a little difficult to fine-tune policies and programmes for such an amorphous being.

Can we narrow the field by addressing the users of the park? Even this is not so simple as it sounds. For example one of the most avid and regular users of the park may be the house-bound person the other side of the road who stares out of the window day-long but who never sets foot in the park.

Others may be people feeding the birds in their garden who draw on species which could not exist in the area in the absence of the park. Of those who go into the park a multitude of perceptions and uses need to be addressed and busy managers may be tempted either to go on doing things because that is the way things have always been done or to be too simplistic in studying the uses to which the park is put and the perceptions and needs of users.

To illustrate by example:

- A group of young people playing football in the lunch-break is noisy and visible and this use will be noted. Half an hour's use by a dozen or so people may overshadow much longer use by much greater numbers of people sunning themselves on benches.
- The questionnaire survey will record the family group and get the views of the adults. How many seriously investigate the perceptions and needs of children – who are often main users. Of the few which attempt to do so, how many use methods which make sense to the children or employ surveyors capable of interpreting the meaning of the response?
- Someone who gives as their reason for visiting the park “walking the dog” may even believe that this is the reason. The real reason may well be for social contact with other people which would be more difficult, or misinterpreted, without the dog as the key to it all.

To arrive at any reasonable understanding of the users, their perceptions and their needs is a difficult job, but until it is achieved how can beneficial management be defined?

When natural areas and wildlife in urban parks are brought into the equation things can become even more complicated. [Harrison et al 1987, Burgess et al 1988]. If changes in management are involved, no-one likes change. It threatens security. If these changes introduce relatively un-managed nature this is seen as neglect. Neglect by the proper authorities again induces feelings of insecurity. They no longer love Us. It also introduces the threatening anarchy of nature.

To some, unfettered nature is a sanctuary; to some it is a threat. However, perhaps a majority are ambivalent. Negative attitudes vary with age, sex and ethnic background, and these variations can be reinforced through differences in tradition or experience. In understanding public attitudes this variety and ambivalence needs to be appreciated. In addressing needs the negative attitudes which people may hold must be respected and the positive attitudes reinforced. This needs sympathy blended with good practice. A proper investigation here may well reveal the causes underlying people not using the park as well as reasons why they do.

Studies looking at the correlation between the perception of public need held by managers and the needs expressed by the users themselves found that a gulf often exists between them [Millward and Mostyn 1989]. This prompts the subversive thought that perhaps park managers are in fact managing

parks for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of users and potential users. This is not to imply either a conscious exclusion of users from consideration or desire on the part of the manager to serve his or her own needs.

Looming large in any park manager's thoughts are costs. These, as much as the needs of users, govern what is done. In one part of north-west England where the community certainly needs help, encouragement and an improved environment to parks covering 7.5 ha between them saw the labour input reduced from 1508 person days in 1974 to 650 person days in 1986. At the same time a total of 70 landscape features – flower beds, blind gardens, paddling pools, tennis courts etc. – were lost. This gradual attrition can hardly be bettered as a plan to demoralise and alienate an already demoralised and alienated community.

However, although everything in the garden (or park) is not lovely and a great deal more needs to be done there are some positive signs. I understand that serious studies of users' perceptions and needs are in train in some places; carefully thought-out and carefully explained changes to more natural, low-cost landscapes are going forward; green audits of park management are being done; users are being invited to comment and help in various ways. There is a trend towards more natural parks in urban areas – the current popularity of statutory Local Nature Reserves among urban local authorities and urban residents gives evidence of this.

The combination of Wildlife, People and Parks has a rosy future ahead of it. I do, however, beg that we think very clearly about what we mean by "wildlife" and by "people" and do not apply uncritically the shibboleths of rural nature conservation or urban systems or try to address complex human perceptions of nature through personal gut-feelings of what is needed. A primary requirement for community involvement is to see how the facilities of the park and the skills and knowledge of those involved in its management, interpretation and use can help the community achieve its goals. It must be this way round – not to see how the community can help achieve the park manager's goals.

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