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Farmland biodiversity, the CAP, and bio-energy.

The *Convention on Biological Diversity*, which was signed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, marked an important shift in the way we conserve wildlife. Instead of piecemeal protection, nations signed up to cataloguing their biodiversity and designing programmes to restore and conserve it. The convention embraced the sustainable use of natural resources – adopting many of the ideas proposed in the *World Conservation Strategy* (1984). In Britain, the convention led directly to the *Biodiversity Action Plan* which the Joint Nature Conservation Committee has co-ordinated with government agencies and voluntary bodies in a wide scale programme to conserve our fauna and flora.

Like most developed countries and especially those in the Old World our ecosystems are woven into our pattern of land-use. We have been growing crops, raising livestock and managing woodland at least since the Neolithic (6,000 years ago), and during this long stretch of time our fauna and flora adapted to farming and its development over succeeding centuries. This more or less ended in the mid 20th century when farming was modernised by the use of herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and artificial fertilizers. Wildlife was hit hard and by the further intensification promoted by subsidy under the Common Agricultural Policy.

Many people have got used to the idea that farmland conservation is mainly about protecting hedgerows, woods, ponds and streams, and that pasture and crops are separate. This is a misguided view – a lot of our wildlife depends on the crop and the pasture. Brown hares, harvest mice, partridges, skylarks, turtle doves, corn buntings, lapwings and stone curlews are just a few animals that depend on farming. There is also a whole list of flowers that were common in cereal crops in Edwardian times but are now either rare or virtually extinct. Corn cockle, cornflower, corn marigold, pheasant eye, weasel snout, and shepherd's needle all depend on annual cultivations, but have been lost from the countryside because of herbicides.

Since the early 1990s we have supported government efforts to restore this farmland biodiversity by introducing Pillar II agri-environment schemes, and by de-coupling subsidies

from production. The CAP reform of 2003 represented the latest, and environmentally, the best phase of this. It supports good stewardship, almost universal agri-environment measures, but not production. We now see farmers making decisions that will be much better for wildlife on their farms.

The latest government view (e.g. *A Vision for the Common Agricultural Policy*) and, it seems, current thinking within the Conservative shadow Defra team, is to do away entirely with Pillar I support, and instead to improve support under Pillar II.

We have three concerns with this new approach which we hope politicians will address:

1. We need to keep farmers farming. As we have pointed out much of our fauna and flora depends on crops and grass.
2. We need a replacement for set-aside. If Pillar I goes, so will set-aside. For all its faults, set-aside restored some of the patch-work to our countryside and, under various derogations, allowed the growing of wildlife crops which many farmers took-up.
3. We should not bring back production subsidies in any form. We fear that the drive for biofuel and biomass is already leading to the expectation that bio-energy crops will be supported with an increased number of grants and schemes. We are not experts on green energy but we think that large scale bio-energy farming could be costly to biodiversity - nationally and internationally.

Stephen Tapper
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