

Restoring the balance

Managing wildlife in a busy landscape -
a discussion paper



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Game & Wildlife
CONSERVATION TRUST

Managing wildlife in a busy landscape

The nation's approach to conservation isn't working well enough.

For over a generation the approach has been based on *protection* and *prescription*. Legislation is *protective* and conservation programmes are *prescriptive*. A species in worrying decline is typically given legal protection – even though the real threat may come from something legislation cannot address. Conservation programmes, such as Environmental Stewardship, pay landowners and farmers for following habitat management prescriptions, but these can fail if they are poorly applied or not backed by other measures.

Overall, protection and prescription have largely failed to arrest a continuing decline in biodiversity; Government targets such as Public Service Agreements and Biodiversity Action Plan objectives

will fall short. For instance the Farmland Bird Index, part of PSA agreement 28, is now at its lowest ever level, dropping 48% since 1970.

Updating the nation's approach to conservation could transform

“...concentrates on conserving populations, rather than protecting individual animals.”

the prospects for many declining species. Legislation should allow a more flexible and responsive conservation regime that concentrates on conserving populations, rather than protecting individual animals. Special protection, where it is needed, might vary regionally and could change with time or be conditional

(Front cover) River Avon water meadows in the former Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme designed to help waders. Perfect habitat; few waders.

(Below) A Conservation Headland after harvest, designed for farmland birds.



on circumstances. Environmental Stewardship, as well as supporting habitats through prescriptions, should also reward real improvements in biodiversity that can be measured locally.

Better legislation to allow more effective conservation

Under current legislation, wildlife protection can be a clumsy tool which sometimes misses the point. For example, special protection of red squirrels and water voles failed to stop their disappearance because the true cause of their loss has been the spread of American grey squirrels and mink. A better approach would have been effective control strategies against mink and grey squirrels in the first place – something the nation did when it eradicated the South American coypu in the 1980s. In some cases special protection seems to have outlived its original purpose. For example, the migratory dark-bellied brent goose was protected because of low numbers in the 1970s, but since then its population has risen from just over 7,000 birds to over 120,000. Even though the exploitation of this migratory species is subject to an international agreement, other less abundant geese are actually less protected than brent geese.

A new wildlife conservation law would:

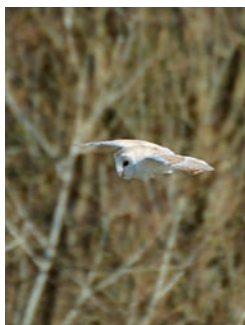
1. Change the legislation so that it allows for greater flexibility to manage species. The current law is based on complex specific restrictions and permissions (licences). A new law would require Natural England to develop conservation programmes that would both enhance biodiversity and prevent damage to property and natural resources.
2. Clarify the objectives of Natural England and require it to



balance land-use with wildlife conservation. Currently some of the more difficult wildlife management problems are handled by Defra. This would mean Natural England tackled national wildlife problems that affect land-uses like farming, forestry, fisheries and game. At the moment the *Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006)* requires Natural England to conserve wildlife 'thereby contributing to sustainable development'. This inevitably leads it to regard land-use as something that needs to be restricted or moderated to reduce the impact on wildlife. Natural England needs to cherish renewable land-use and it should develop wildlife management strategies that support this. In our view Natural England will need to employ land-use experts to devise and guide these strategies.

Rewarding conservation success

We should pay for what works. Farmers and landowners should be given clear additional incentives to increase the wildlife on their land. The comprehensive Environmental Stewardship scheme is



Devising a payment-by-result top-up scheme will depend on selecting good indicator species such as black grouse, harvest mouse and barn owl.

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very good, but the basis of it is to pay farmers to look after habitat. It is assumed that the conservation of a species depends on the provision of its habitat. This is not always the case. Animals usually need a mosaic of habitats and their life-cycles can be compromised by other factors such as pesticides or predation. Successful conservation addresses these other factors too.

The best way to do this would be to pay farmers and landowners additionally for successful results. This will encourage them to pick the right options within environmental schemes, put them in the right place and undertake other measures to support

them. Devising a payment-by-result top-up scheme will depend on selecting good indicator species that can be readily identified and recorded, and where their conservation would also enhance the prospects for a range of other animals and plants that are ecologically associated with them. Examples might be: barn owl, black grouse, harvest mouse and lapwing.

Conclusion

The decline of Britain's wildlife continues partly because the current system fails to find practical solutions to specific wildlife problems and does not reward conservation success. Reforming both elements would improve the prospects for much of our countryside wildlife.



The decline of many waders, like lapwing, continues because the current system concentrates on rewarding prescriptions rather than outcomes.

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust is an independent wildlife conservation charity which carries out scientific research into Britain's game and wildlife. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats and we lobby for agricultural and conservation policies based on science. We employ 14 post-doctoral scientists and 50 other research staff with expertise in areas such as birds, insects, mammals, farming and statistics. We undertake our own research as well as projects funded by contract and grant-aid from Government and private bodies. We are also responsible for a number of Government Biodiversity Action Plan species and are lead partner for grey partridge and joint lead partner for brown hare and black grouse.



“The Government is unlikely to meet its 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss. Although good progress has been made in some respects, a new target and new approach will be needed to address the dramatic biodiversity loss that is occurring in England.”

House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2007-08)
Halting Biodiversity loss. Thirteenth Report of Session 2007-08

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