

WMMN2

Western Morning News

Stop the blame game and start work for a better environment

THERE will, inevitably, be a gnashing of teeth and a wringing hands - followed by an angry apportioning of blame - at today's State of Nature report, showing a 13% decline in average abundance of wildlife since 1970.

Farmers will be in the firing line with that catch-all phrase "changing agricultural practices..." trotted out once again, to try to explain the loss of plant life, the mammal declines and the reduction in the number of birds, butterflies and other insects in the countryside.

Few will add the caveat that those changing practices have come about, not for the benefit of the farmer, but to help to feed, more cheaply, our growing population with its increasing demand for more, better and less expensive food.

And little will be said too, we suspect, about the measures many farmers have taken in more recent years, not always with the encouragement of government, to manage their land in a more environmental-friendly way.

Casual accusations about the grubbing up of hedges, the increase in pesticide and herbicide use and the reduction in tree cover on the farm will be made by those in the conservation movement more interested in finding scapegoats than solutions.

The truth is that in the last two decades at least, in many areas more hedges have been planted than removed, more trees have gone into the landscape than have come out and the volume of chemicals put onto the land has decreased rather than increased, while their application has been much more accurately

targeted at where they are needed.

Of course, in earlier decades, in the run up to, during and after the Second World War, farming practices drastically changed, with a consequent impact on the landscape and wildlife. Driven by the need to become as near self-sufficient as possible in food, untouched areas were ploughed up and planted, stocking densities increased and efficient, through more mechanisation, improved.

Those changes were, a majority would argue, necessary and they heralded a new era of productive agriculture for which many in Britain have cause to be grateful. As we exit the EU that could become even more important.

Now, however, priorities are changing and farmers and land owners have two roles - continuing to produce the food we need at the price we demand and managing the countryside to support wildlife. There have and continue to be notable successes, despite the overall gloom from reports like State of Nature.

Those shafts of sunlight in the darkness demonstrate that farmers are the solution rather than the problem. With the right post-Brexit regulatory framework and a public that better understands the costs and consequences of their own impact on wildlife and the landscape, we can turn things around.

Playing the blame game might make some of those in the green movement who are angry at what they see feel a little bit better. Understand, cooperation and action are better ways, however, to make a difference.



> A team at the Westcountry Rivers Trust focuses on land management

Partnership with farmers helps all

A South West environmental project brings wide benefits, says Hazel Kendall

AGRICULTURE not only gives riches to a nation, but the only riches she can call her own." So said Dr Samuel Johnson, English poet, literary critic and author of the Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1755.

Clearly, he held great value in the potential embedded in our land and what this brought to society as a whole.

UK agriculture has undergone massive upheaval and change since then. The consistency behind all these system changes over generations are the people; the social fabric of our rural communities, the individuals who commit their lives to farming. Father to son, mother to daughter, seasoned master to apprentice.

At the Westcountry Rivers Trust (WRT), one of our teams focuses on land management; working with farmers and landowners to provide advice ensuring best farming practice, improving efficiencies and economics, while protecting and enhancing the environment.

As a charity we are an objective and informed advisor. We have no regulator powers and can offer free and confidential professional advice aligned with project ambitions - generically, to improve and protect our natural resources for the benefit of all.

We still want improved water quality, but also if it brings about improvements in biodiversity, air quality, increased Carbon sequestration, reduced flood risk and greater levels of wellbeing, surely so much the better?

This has led to a change in the approach used to understand what society seeks from land management and how this can help bring about sustainable practices, and

income to enable it to happen. This shift is noticeable from agricultural and environmental policy, from emerging schemes or commodity markets, and feedback from consumers.

In the South West we have seen small, family-run mixed farms eroded to the point that it's often financially impossible for the next generation to set up in farming, or there is not the commitment needed.

Frequently WRT operate as an "ethical broker", effectively we are a charitable middle man in a business transaction - using our skills and experience to negotiate interventions on a farm for improvements that deliver benefits for the 'buyer' and society (which might not otherwise be paid for).

Tomorrow: Collective housing could beat loneliness and ease the homes crisis, says Ian L Handford

Sometimes a fresh pair of eyes can provide the objective view needed to spot opportunities, and this needs an honest and open conversation relying on trust. The relationships behind these initial meetings stand the test of time and deliver change; farmers, like most businesses, may be happy to discuss what's going right but less about what's going wrong.

Their support networks may also be lost; weekly livestock markets were often the sole chance to meet and chat with others, thus adding to social isolation when lost - especially in an ageing population or where there is no farm succession.

So sometimes it's also about friendship, welfare or emotional support and being there for a chat.

Some very good specialist support exists to fill this gap and to address issues of mental health; especially in rural areas and especially among men as evidence suggests their high risk - to which we can direct people who we feel in need.

To me, the resounding measure of success in building these relationships is to receive a phone call from someone you first worked with over five years ago who has a question and felt able to ask you for help.

Not only did they feel comfortable asking, but that the trust was there to handle it for the good of their business and not just our ambitions.

This for me is the bottom line on helping and supporting our farmers and land managers; if you want to know what and how they may be able to help you achieve joint ambitions, then ask them, don't assume you have the answers. Work with farmers as equal partners, they have a very diverse skill set and a canny sense of business.

This year is our 25th Anniversary at WRT. None of our land management projects would have been possible in that quarter century without the goodwill and support of our farmers, who have accommodated us, contributed endless time (and brought their own financial investment), resources and cups of tea at the kitchen table while we worked out a mutually beneficial plan. To enable society to continue to benefit from our natural resources and to keep those passionate people working on the land, we hope we will be around for the next 25 years at least to share this.

■ Hazel Kendall is head of land management at Westcountry Rivers Trust

We want to hear your views
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On this day

1535: Miles Coverdale's translation of the Bible was published.

1883: The Boys' Brigade was founded in Glasgow by Sir William Alexander Smith.

1895: Deadpan hero of the silent screen Buster Keaton was born in Kansas. His parents were acrobats in vaudeville, and by the time he was three, Buster was in on the act.

1911: Britain's first escalators were introduced, connecting the District and Piccadilly platforms at Earl's Court underground station in London.

1957: Russia launched Sputnik 1, the world's first satellite.

1958: The first transatlantic passenger jet service began operating.

1970: The American rock singer Janis Joplin died. She left 2,500 dollars in her will "so that my friends can get blasted

after I'm gone".

2010: Comedian and actor Sir Norman Wisdom died in a nursing home on the Isle of Man, aged 95.

Birthdays

Sir Terence Conran, designer, 88; **Susan Sarandon**, actress, 73; **Ann Widdecombe**, politician/TV presenter, 72; **Anneka Rice**, TV presenter, 61 (pictured); **Chris Lowe**, pop musician (Pet Shop Boys), 60; **Mark Powley**, actor, 56; **Alicia Silverstone**, actress, 43; **Stacey Solomon**, singer, 30.



Thought for the day

Proverbs 19:15 Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry.