

WDP2 Agenda Letters Opinion



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

The partnership with farmers that helps us all

“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

A South West environmental project is bringing a number of benefits, says **Hazel Kendall**, head of land management at Westcountry Rivers Trust

and informed adviser. 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).

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.