

Summary of major points raised in interviews in August on what supports and what blocks wildlife conservation in the Shropshire Hills AONB. Jon Kean, October 2006.

Interviews were carried out with fourteen people, either members of the AONB Partnership or officers of partner organisations. A reasonable mix of interests was represented, including conservation, landowning, recreational and community. This report is based on their words and as far as possible does not contain any of my own views. In addition I have deliberately chosen not to comment or make any recommendations as my intention was to report not evaluate or recommend. I have at times kept this report brief and comments are not attributed to individuals.

Strangely, most factors seemed to both support and block wildlife conservation. There was nothing that was absolutely bad or good.

The factors I will report on are:-

1. Timing
2. Vision
3. Funding/reward
4. Land holding patterns
5. Designation, legislation and other government policies
6. Knowledge and understanding of and by others
7. Interconnectedness with the wider world

Timing

The vast majority of interviewees said there had never been such a consensus of a need to do something and to do it jointly. Although it was observed that the farming community and environmental community had been in opposing camps in the past, this had been largely driven by cheap food policies of consecutive governments both at home and worldwide. Everyone wanted a thriving countryside for farmers, residents, visitors and wildlife. Ethical consumerism is growing rapidly and those that care about the countryside are demonstrating their willingness to buy goods and services at a premium that support their aims. In increasing numbers the public are demanding quality food and expressing their criteria for quality which include “natural” and local. They also, in increasing numbers want a quality countryside experience and again are demonstrating a will to pay for it through subscriptions to membership bodies and paid for experiences such as hunting and walking. There was some pessimism about it being already too late, and that few people now had first hand memories of how abundant wildlife was pre-1950.

Vision

A stated objective for a thriving countryside was frequently accompanied with concern that there appeared to be no general overarching vision of what this might be and how it could be achieved. However most interviewees felt that their group or body had a vision. The wish for the former was either to validate their own vision or to negate that of others where they conflicted. However there was a new willingness for a number of visions in differing circumstances to exist side by side as long as there was a balance between exploiting nature and preserving nature. It was acknowledged that this was possible and that quarries were often cited as a good example as many old quarry sites were now the best nature reserves and peregrine falcons (a cliff nesting bird) are now resident in the area having never been recorded before 1990.

Funding/reward

There was unanimous agreement that new farm funding regimes will help wildlife as it moves away from a one size fits all approach to more tailoring to local needs through ESAs and then ELS and

HLS with organic options. Fortunately AONB designation meant that most areas of land would qualify for these funds, but they may be limited and competitive. All expressed concern that this would probably not halt the trend towards bigger farm holdings with smaller farmers leaving the land. This has been an ongoing trend since around 1750. The change from funding production to funding land management was not yet fully understood either for its likely impact on farm incomes and practice, or on wildlife conservation. It was both seen as a great opportunity and a threat. The land with the biggest conservation interest is expected to attract the biggest funding and leave other areas subject to market forces. All targeted funding such as Blue Remembered Hills would reinforce this process. The conservation bodies were best placed to access these additional funds. However concern was expressed that this might further exaggerate a 2 tier land system where 1 tier was designated, protected and funded to support wildlife and the other tier abandoned or subject to total exploitation.

Ironically, changes in funding were seen as partly responsible for conservation bodies having to keep stock. This in turn was contributing to a better understanding of farming concerns.

There was concern that the area depended on land management to attract tourist income, but the rewards did not go to the land managers but to the tourist businesses and their employees that serviced the land users. Pragmatically, it was pointed out that if the taxpayer is encouraged to care about the countryside they will be more willing to pay for it through taxes, membership subscriptions and premiums on perceived quality of food and experience

Land holding patterns.

The following land holding patterns were reported:-

- Gardens
- Small holdings – often owned by “affluent greys” and often the house plus a few acres of what was once a larger farm; the land having been acquired by another farmer
- Farms – solely dependent on farming and subsidy for income
- Estates – either making profits or not solely dependent on farming and subsidy for income
- Government/NGO owned land – often of too poor a quality for farming, but with big conservation interest.

The largest overall hectareage is the farms and they have been subject to government policies focused on cheap food for several decades. These policies have driven actions that have not been beneficial to wildlife. It was felt that little meaningful and long term could be done for wildlife without the willing participation of this group. The current means of marketing produce, ultimately through supermarkets was seen as very unhelpful both to wildlife and farm incomes. It was stated that more was done for wildlife in the past without a subsidy than was ever done with one, but there needed to be income above subsistence to allow for this type of re-investment. Larger estates were seen to be doing this – often to support hunting and fishing, but also as a good in its own right.

The other 3 groups were seen as very helpful to, and already engaged in wildlife conservation. It was particularly remarked that affluent greys brought funding and know how to the area, but were often focussed solely on wildlife conservation and could be customers of land care services such as hedge laying and planting, if these were available. Their knowledge of marketing and fund raising was an underused resource.

Designation, legislation and other government policies

Without a doubt designation and legislation were seen as essential factors in halting the tide against wildlife. However as knowledge of how species and habitats interact has grown and that many species move over a landscape throughout their breeding cycles, feeding and nesting in differing places and not returning to breed in the same place, the limitations of designating small reserves has been exposed. For example SSSIs were never intended to be regarded as Noah's Arks where wildlife could be conserved, but to be exemplars of good geology or habitat. Consequently efforts by wildlife conservationists have been over-focussed on specific species or geographical locations.

Government policies on funding of farming have been discussed above. Funding of wildlife conservation has increased over the years in response to voters' wishes, global threats and international agreements. Without a doubt this funding has helped, but it tends to be received as a series of short term, initiative led pots of money. This leads to uncertainty and discontinuity. It also leads to the perception that conservationists and farmers compete for money and leads to jealousy from both groups. This is totally unhelpful and contrary to the co-operative spirit that most people wish for and believe to be essential.

Knowledge and understanding of and by others

Most interviewees at some point stated that other groups did not understand their particular vision of the countryside. This probably explains the statements about there being no over-riding vision of the countryside. The public did not understand farming, but wanted access. The public did not understand nature conservation but wanted access. Conservationists did not understand farming but dictated government policy. Farmers did not understand wildlife and how their actions on their land may be fine locally but have a bad effect down the road or indeed several miles away.

Interconnectedness with the wider world

Pessimism and indeed feelings of helplessness were expressed about global warming/climate change, world markets, over population, uncontrolled tourism, supermarkets driving harmful farm practices, diffuse pollution, lack of organic food, future water shortages. It was felt that any vision, policy or management plan that did not address these issues would be incomplete. However this same feeling of pessimism was helping people understand each other better and driving a wish to work together. Many conservationists recognise that they cannot retreat into reserves and save wildlife without the farming community improving the general landscape. Farming bodies acknowledge that conservationist bodies can use this knowledge to influence government policy, members and the public at large to help farm incomes and wildlife. Farmers know they cannot retreat into their farms and wait for the cheque to arrive. They have to engage with their customers through quality product and quality land management.

All 7 of these factors inter relate - no one exists in isolation.

I would value any further ideas and comments on iam@jonkean.fslife.co.uk