

Unite to Survive

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Opinion



01. Naturalists are good at recording losses but are less good at demanding that governments tackle the systemic causes. I sense this might be changing. Earth Day 22nd April 2023. Johnny Birks.

It's early May and I fear that Swifts and House Martins may be lost as breeding birds from my parish of West Malvern: both have dwindled to very few active nests in recent years due mainly to the widescale crash in their aerial insect food; I have seen none yet this year, though there have been reports from elsewhere in the county. These are personal examples of the wider biodiversity losses caused by our mismanagement of this planet, many with associated burdens of grief that we naturalists feel more than most because of our love of and engagement with wildlife. Whilst naturalists are good at recording such losses, we have been less good at demanding that governments tackle their systemic causes. But I sense this might be changing (01).

The BBC's recent five-part television series *Wild Isles*, presented by 96 year-old Sir David Attenborough, left me with an uncomfortable blend of fear, joy and frustration: my fear is that this could be the last time this national treasure informs and enchants us on our screens; the joy comes from his celebration of the wonderful wildlife with which we share these islands; and my frustration comes from the sparse and ever-so-gentle mentions of species decline and habitat loss that woefully underplays the scale of our biodiversity crisis; nor was any link made with its systemic roots – namely our collective inability to value nature properly when decisions are made about how we use our land and water. So, for me, this was a missed opportunity to alert the British public to the crisis and shock them into urgent action.

Of course there was a controversial sixth episode of *Wild Isles* commissioned by WWF, RSPB and the National Trust – also presented by Sir David - called *Saving our Wild Isles*, which did cover some of these issues. Controversy arose because the BBC chose to make it available only on iPlayer rather than broadcast it as part of the series, allegedly because certain interests did not want us to hear more than the gentle snippets about wildlife declines already broadcast. However, this explanation is rejected by the BBC and I am told by a reliable source that the corporation never intended the sixth episode to be broadcast as part of the series. Nevertheless, the mere suspicion of interference highlights a challenge in our struggle to halt the loss of wildlife and tackle climate breakdown: Powerful commercial and political interests - supported by much of our media - ruthlessly protect their business models, even if this means concealing the truth and knowingly persisting with the harmful ways of doing things that got us into this situation. Those vested interests use their wealth and influence to bend our government to their will; and nothing is likely to change until the government is compelled by people like us to stand up to them.

For some, such as entomologist Prof. Dave Goulson of the University of Sussex, even the controversial sixth episode of *Wild Isles* was not hard-hitting enough. Writing in *The Guardian* on 10th April 2023, he worries that – despite the depressing statistics so

gently delivered - the deliberately uplifting and hopeful tone of the film might create the false impression that the tide of wildlife loss has finally turned. That is a dangerous delusion we have to avoid. Of course, we must maintain hope that the downward trend can be halted and reversed; and it is crucial that we keep finding fulfilment in local projects to protect wildlife; but we must not con ourselves into believing that those efforts will achieve the dramatic U-turn that we need.

We are only human, so we all need that feelgood factor. The desire to feel we are doing something worthwhile leads us naturalists to involve ourselves in projects where we can see a positive, heart-warming outcome, such as installing bird and bat boxes, planting flowers for pollinators and improving the management of a local pond, meadow or woodland. These are all beneficial activities that help our local wildlife but, just as sticking plasters and painkillers cannot cure a serious disease, they won't stop the declines because they don't address the root causes. For example, Swift boxes may improve the birds' habitat, but installing them feels pointless if we don't also tackle the agrichemical-induced aerial insect decline. So, we absolutely should keep investing time and energy in our local projects; but let's also invest the same time and energy in pressing our government to act on the systemic drivers of wildlife loss. That means we have to become politically more engaged, which sounds scary until we realise that thousands of others are doing the same. More on this uniting approach later!

To help us understand the need for political engagement, Prof. Goulson reminds us in his *Guardian* article of recent examples of political and corporate decisions that – time and time again - clearly prioritise profit and 'business as usual' over actions to protect nature and climate: the repeated derogation to allow sugar beet farmers to use the highly toxic – and banned throughout the EU - neonicotinoid pesticides; the further extended delay (now set to 2030) until the horticultural use of peat is banned; the much-stalled, watered down and botched implementation of Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) (the support scheme for farmers that originally promised much for wildlife); the ongoing support for oil and gas exploration, the opening of a new coalmine, and the freeze on new onshore windfarms; and the scandalous dumping of raw sewage into our rivers and seas by private water companies keen to cut costs and, thereby, to maximise dividends to shareholders and salaries for executives.

This last foul assault on our waterways and their wildlife, exacerbated in some rivers by phosphate-rich runoff from intensive poultry units, has struck a chord with the general public following good media coverage featuring outraged celebrities like Paul Whitehouse and Feargal Sharkey. They have helped to expose the systemic 'profit over nature' root of the problem and, importantly, the pathetically inadequate government response: a desperate series

of toothless ‘water action plans’ (three in six months) and an Environment Agency still so starved of funds that it cannot properly fulfil its policing role. The shameful mismatch between government rhetoric - what they want us to believe they mean to do – and the policies, funding and actions required to deliver the results is replicated across most departments, where failures to meet targets on wildlife and climate abound; DEFRA is the worst of this bad bunch. The obvious way forward is to rescue our beleaguered government from the powerful grip of vested interests, thereby enabling it to produce policies and deliver actions on nature and climate that match its greenwash (when heading to London with Extinction Rebellion I enjoy telling friends and family that I am ‘going to help our government’). The blockage lies not among the civil servants – most of whom know what is required and are as keen as I am to see urgent progress – but with ministers and elected officials that react to the loudest political and commercial pressures whilst keeping a close eye on the next election. We have to match those pressures with our own greater pressure demanding change.

Like everyone in our imperfect democracy, in the face of ongoing wildlife declines and climate breakdown we naturalists have a simple choice: we either carry on as we are in the certain knowledge that things will deteriorate further; or we find the courage to do something different to bring about the urgent systemic changes that we need. To put it another way, we can remain part of the problem or we can become part of the solution. Easy to say but not so easy to achieve! And what do glib phrases such as ‘system change’ really mean?

At this dangerously late stage in the climate and nature emergency only rapid change in how we humans behave will suffice: as campaigning journalist George Monbiot puts it “To prevent the destruction of the habitable planet, every aspect of our economic lives has to change”. And that transformation will happen only via direct government intervention to replace the harmful systems that currently guide our lives. So ‘system change’ must be our focus, with three crucial steps, I suggest. First, we should demand that our reluctant government (and all governments around the world, though I feel ours should show global leadership because of our historical role in industrialisation) brings the fossil fuel era to a rapid end because, such is our global temperature trajectory, we are on course for climate impacts so catastrophic that they would render other beneficial actions worthless. Secondly, our government must establish new ways of decision-making so that profit no longer trumps nature; and thirdly, government must lead a genuine programme of greenwash-free nature recovery.

These are simple demands for the massive change we desperately need. They can be made most effectively by people coming together in huge numbers that cannot be ignored by governments. They are what led me to join Extinction Rebellion (XR) in 2019 when I realised that my long career in nature conservation had – with rare exceptions - failed to halt the loss of wildlife. So the next step, I suggest, is to join and actively support an organisation that you believe will put enough pressure in the right places to achieve the urgent systemic change we need. I found making that choice and deciding to step up was wonderfully empowering! I am comfortable with my choice but, as a risk-averse conformist, my active support for XR has sometimes taken me outside my comfort zone (though I have no regrets). You might agree with me that now is not the time to use our need for comfort to excuse inaction on the biggest existential challenge facing humanity and the natural world? And anyway it feels as if it has recently become a bit more comfortable for we naturalists to step up into activism!

I am writing this in the immediate aftermath of the biggest climate and nature protest ever held in the UK (02), when tens of thousands of people – some experienced activists and many anxious first-timers – travelled to London for a huge, peaceful four-day gathering known as The Big One to call on the UK government to act on the climate and biodiversity crisis. Worcestershire was well represented (and yes, there were some naturalists!), with at least three coach loads attending from the county. Organised by Extinction Rebellion, the

protest involved a broad and diverse ‘movement of movements’ comprising over 200 organisations from environmental groups like Greenpeace, Rewilding Britain and Friends of the Earth to social justice campaigners like Avaaz, Global Justice Now, War on Want, faith groups like CAFOD, Quakers and Iona Community, unions like PCS, as well as many climate-focused groups. Notably, some groups highlighted the plight of local rivers such as the Severn and Wye, where highly nutrient-rich discharges of human sewage and chicken manure are wreaking havoc with precious aquatic ecosystems.



02. The Big One, “the biggest climate and nature protest ever held in the UK”. Johnny Birks.

Whilst much effort went into organising ‘People’s Pickets’ outside government departments on 21st and 24th April, the focus for many of us over the weekend was the Biodiversity March on Earth Day held on 22nd April, when a joyous crowd of over 60,000 people – many dressed up in wildlife costumes - filled the streets of Westminster around our Parliament to demand urgent government action to reverse the loss of wildlife. The assembled crowds were inspired by rallying speeches from Chris Packham and many others. There is nothing quite so hope-giving and spirit-lifting as a good-natured gathering of people drawn together by a common cause. But there was more to it than that: this felt like a pivotal moment, even a looming social tipping point because of the sheer diversity of interests uniting and calling for government action. It feels apt that ‘Unite to Survive’ was one of the slogans of The Big One; and I came away filled with hope that we have discovered a new way of empowering ordinary people to press for change to protect our planet.

Extinction Rebellion received many plaudits after the event – not least from Chris Packham, who now feels no need to organise a new Walk for Wildlife because The Big One ticked all his boxes – for their organisation, their stewarding to ensure that everything was legal and safe, and their sheer hard work in drawing so many organisations together. But there were some notable absences. Despite many of their individual members and supporters being present and actively involved in The Big One, it was disappointing that big UK-based conservation groups such as RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and National Trust were not part of the movement. Why would they not want support such a powerful force for change?

The size of The Big One owes much to Extinction Rebellion’s recent change in tactics away from disruption. We have ‘lowered the bar’ for activism so that more people feel comfortable attending such events. But will this less disruptive approach yield results in terms of government action? That depends upon what we do next and how many of us do it. Big numbers are crucial to the effectiveness of any future gathering. So now is the perfect time for more naturalists to step up and get involved. Remember, our government won’t take the urgent action required if they feel they can ignore the pressure to change. Over to you. Please make your concerns impossible to ignore! <https://extinctionrebellion.uk>