

The Hidden War on Nature

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Theme: [Environment](#)

Western governments are blind to the campaign they should be waging, that of climate change, the degradation of the environment and the destruction of the natural world upon which all humanity depends.

We have been told for years about the catastrophic felling of the rain forests; the reduction of tiger, gorilla, whale or bluefin tuna populations; the extinction of countless species of small insects, reptiles, birds and plants; and the loss of biodiversity and habitats in far-off lands. But closer to home and far more subtle is the gentle, almost invisible eating away of the environment and its protections by governments, even while they prate about destruction elsewhere. It is happening in all those countries whose governments are in thrall and tied to big business and making money regardless of tomorrow. It is happening near you. And it is accompanied by a lot of cynical promises, pledges and 'public consultations' that the genuine public never seem to be involved in.

Politicians kowtow to voters' concerns by parading their 'green' credentials, but statements are cheap. So are new logos. Back in 2006 the Conservatives, recognising that many voters were tired of the lack of environmental action by the Labour government, produced [the new Tory logo](#), a scribbled tree. Meant to show off new green credentials, what it really suggests is that all things green can be rubbed out and redrawn to suit the Tory agenda. At the same time David Cameron [demonstrated](#) just how green he was by flying up to the Arctic Circle for a photo-shoot with huskies. Bearing in mind that the Tories are the party of the 'landed gentry' who own an awful lot of Britain (only [0.6 per cent](#) of the UK's population owns 50 per cent of our rural land), how green have they proved to be?

When Cameron became Prime Minister he said he was going to head the 'greenest government ever'. They showed their true colours when they announced the [sell-off](#) of publicly-owned forests to private buyers. Such was the outcry from people waking up to the realisation that 'their' woods meant a lot to them, that a U turn was taken and the policy finally scrapped. But it was clear that the only value our beloved countryside had for the Tories was monetary.

Having to manage a large national debt, they announced massive cuts in the budgets of various ministries. Fair enough – but look at [this](#): Defra (Department for Environment, Farming & Rural Affairs) was asked to cut its small annual budget of £2.9bn by 25%. Yet the £46.1bn budget of the Ministry of Defence was only cut by 8%, demonstrating all too clearly where the government's priorities lie. Within Defra is the Environment Agency. A major part of the EA's role is flood defence work. Last summer Britain suffered exceptionally wet weather with thousands of homes flooded – not helped by the fact that [flood defence schemes](#) had not been built because of the cuts.

In their drive for cuts they have axed, among other bodies, the Renewables Advisory Board,

Advisory Committee on Organic Standards, the Commons Commissioners, Expert Panel on Air Quality Standards and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. Natural England, whose remit is to conserve the natural environment, was threatened, as were Wildlife Trusts across the country. No change there then. Back in 1995 a former Conservative government cut the budget of Scottish Natural Heritage, apparently in retaliation for its support of the campaign against the proposed [super quarry](#) on the Isle of Harris.

The Tories do not like wildlife. The Chancellor, George Osborne, [accused](#) the habitats directive, aimed at safeguarding wildlife and biodiversity, of “placing ridiculous costs on British businesses”. After this country finally banned the hunting of animals (mainly foxes, deer and hares) by dogs in 2004, Tory MPs mutter about repealing the law so they can get back to killing for fun. And the Heythrop Hunt, which Cameron himself follows, was [convicted](#) last December of illegally hunting foxes.

All birds of prey, protected by law, are seen as [enemies of the rich](#) who own large estates and love shooting pheasant and grouse. Such a man is Owen Paterson, appointed by Cameron to be the Environment Secretary, an appointment that provoked [outrage](#) among environmentalists. His department, Defra, came up with a scheme to deal with the awful threat to young pheasants. As the RSPB’s conservation director Martin Harper said, “We are shocked by Defra’s plans to [destroy](#) buzzard nests and to take buzzards into captivity to protect a non-native game bird released in its millions”. Pheasants are bred almost entirely for the idle rich to shoot. And Defra admitted no studies had been done to find out whether buzzards really are a threat. Another public outcry and a retreat into ‘consultations and studies’.

For many of these people our ‘green and pleasant land’ is not there to be cherished and protected, but simply a place to enjoy yourself in, (the Labour party, urban-oriented as they are, also have little interest in the countryside other than as a place for entertainment). But even when farming, truly the one essential ‘industry’ as it provides our food, is considered, more killing is proposed. This time badgers, also protected by law, were the target. They were to be culled because they are carriers of bovine TB and some of our milk herds are infected. In vain did people point out that killing the badgers made the survivors move into other TB-free areas. In vain did people call for cattle or badgers to be vaccinated. In vain did the government’s chief scientist advise against it. The killing would go ahead. Luckily for the badgers, [Defra](#) got its figures, timing and finance wrong and the cull has been delayed. For now.

But the war against the environment is relentless. If we are down to just one breeding pair of hen harriers, we may also lose that iconic animal of the Highlands, the wildcat. One of our few remaining predators, the [wildcat](#) is about to become extinct in the wild. But the people who protect these endangered species are also [in danger](#) of becoming extinct. The National Wildlife Crime Unit, a strategic police unit, will probably lose its funding – hardly a great saving: 10 people and a budget of £136,000. I was told the other day that my county police force has already lost its wildlife officer. But these are the people who go after and successfully prosecute those who kill our birds of prey. Funny, that.

Despite pleas the government refused to prevent the import of ash trees until too late and the [ash dieback disease](#) is now established in our woodlands. It refuses to ban the use of [neonicotinoid](#) pesticides that studies say are damaging bees. As usual it wants even more

'proof'. Even where the voters are concerned, its green policies are worthless. The '[green deal](#)', providing subsidies to help people insulate Britain's cold and draughty homes was introduced in 2012. It could have made a major contribution in cutting our carbon emissions. But it then decided to restrict the deal to the very poor (who can't take up the offer because they don't own their own homes) with the result that only a tiny percentage of the homes will be insulated.

Last year the GM companies started to [promote GM crops](#) *again* on the premise *again* that many of the world's people were starving. They were backed up by an endless parade of government spokesmen including Owen Paterson insisting that GM food will sort our problems – no worries. Their campaign was spoilt early this year by a report stating that almost 50% of the world's food is [wasted](#). The hunger is a result of how we manage the world, not the earth's inability to feed us. But politicians in favour of genetically modified food do gloriously [get it wrong](#) at times in their eagerness to earn their biotech wages.

Of course, governments aren't alone in trying to present themselves as 'green'. In 2000 British Petroleum launched a [new logo](#) telling us how they were working towards a green sustainable future. They weren't the only energy company to take that line, but their corporate-speak doesn't mention that now. They're too busy rushing after Arctic drilling, tar sands or shale gas. They will have a champion in Paterson who is *really* enthusiastic about fracking.

Britain isn't alone in this – far from it. Wherever you live you will find politicians chipping away at our precious environment on behalf of big business and the rich. But if they won't protect the small things, there's no hope they will take action on the huge issue of climate change. They are now admitting that the likely global temperature rise will be between [4-6 degrees C](#) by the end of this century, but still pretending this is 'manageable'.

Life does not depend on money, on economic growth, national interests or politicians. It depends on the rocks and the soil, the water and the air, the miracle of seeds sprouting and animals giving birth.

Footnote: just occasionally nature succeeds in getting in the way of 'progress'. Great Crested Newts, another protected species, held up the proposed development of the St. Athan Military Academy in Wales. They've done it [again](#)!

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