

Unnatural England: The Destruction of Flora and Fauna

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Great Britain is a small island, no more that 600 miles on its longest north/south axis from John O’Groats in Scotland to Lands End in Cornwall. Yet it has the most diverse geology, layer after layer of it laid down over the millennia. In other countries one might travel for 200 miles or even much more before the scenery changes in any way. Here 20 miles will do it, and the most obvious sign is what the old houses are built of. In Dorset where I live the cottages were built in chalk clunch or a mixture of flint and brick. 15 miles to the north and over the border in Somerset, the traditional building material is Hamstone. Travel another 15-20 miles and the houses are built in Blue Lias.

It follows that there is a huge variety of soils with their accompanying flora and fauna, an abundant and joyful cornucopia of life. Or there was. Last month the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) published a report, [State of Nature](#). 25 British organisations, dedicated to the study, conservation and preservation of all forms of life found here, pooled their information and expertise to produce this report on how nature is faring in this busy world of men. It makes grim reading. 60% of species, from the smallest insect or humble lichen to the large mammals and birds of prey, are in decline, some seriously so. 60%. And I feel impoverished.

But while people who care about these things work hard to protect and conserve, little help is forthcoming from those who govern us. Occasionally they get things right. In March Natural England, described by the Independent as “the Government’s wildlife watchdog”, took action to protect one of the most important breeding sites for nightingales by designating Lodge Hill in Kent as an SSSI. Oh dear. Medway Council wanted to build up to [5000 homes](#) here and were furious that a mere bird should take precedence over money (the scheme was reported to be worth hundreds of millions of pounds).

Our nightingale population has declined by more than 90% in the last 40 years, and they need all the help they can get. They are migratory birds and, like salmon that come back to the river where they were spawned, always return to the same breeding sites. The planners suggested that another site was provided. Do they seriously believe that nightingales can read planning notices saying “Please re-locate to....”? No. Nightingales cannot be judged in terms of money, planning applications and human interests. And sometimes we need them more than new houses.

One of the few truly magical things that came out of World War II was the 1942 [recording](#) of a nightingale singing its heart out in a Surrey wood while Wellington and Lancaster bombers flew overhead on a bombing raid to Germany. Even today, 70 years later, it has the power

to lift one's heart. I lived in Surrey many years ago and I used to complain of being kept awake by nightingales singing outside my window in the middle of the night. Now my chances of ever again hearing, let alone complaining about something so beautiful are fast disappearing.

It seems that money and business will always, where the powerful are concerned, come before all the other forms of life that make living in this island so spiritually rich. Take badgers. While I am made whole by the nightly visit to my garden from the nearby sett of a badger digging for beetles, with my cats watching from their perches in the cherry tree, the government thinks they should be shot. For we have entered June and the badger cull is now in operation, politicians believing the only way to address the problem of our milk herds being infected with bovine TB is to kill badgers.

We all accept that badgers carry bovine TB, but have you ever wondered where the badgers got their *bovine* TB from? Could it be something to do with our animal husbandry, that wildlife should become infected? Because it is not only badgers. Deer, foxes, rats and other animals are also carriers. Is there a call for all these to be culled as well? No. We thought we had [halted](#) the cull last year, such was the public outcry, but the government only retreated as far as "more consultation and research". And their research is neither exact nor reliable.

The [conditions](#) for the pilot culls, in areas of Gloucestershire and Somerset, state that a certain number of badgers must be killed for the culls to be considered complete, that number being what the government *thinks* amounts to 70% of the badger population. Put another way, all badgers within 70% of the cull area have to be killed. The last national badger survey was in 1997 so the current figures being used for the pilot culls cannot be [trusted](#). Natural England, the body in charge of issuing the licences for these culls, doesn't really know what the badger population is. Their estimates are closer to "guesstimates". There is a very real danger that badger populations could be completely wiped out.

The figures don't add up, but then government figures rarely do. "Facts" are presented in nice neat graphs and tables, all very clear and undebatable. They depend on the figures looking boring enough for people not to take the trouble of doing some simple sums. And in this case it seems to have worked because I have found no record to date of anyone pointing out Natural England's manipulation of the figures. So - please read the next few sentences with care:

The cull in West Somerset has to kill a minimum of 2081 badgers, up to a maximum of 2162. However, Defra's own population figure for this area is an estimated minimum of 1972 badgers. In other words, the guns have to kill more than the estimated minimum. The estimated maximum population is 2973 badgers, *and it is on this figure that the minimum cull required is based*. The maximum cull figure would actually require a population of 3,090 badgers. They pull the same trick with the Gloucestershire figures.

Further, the cull cannot be considered completed unless they kill the full 70% of the estimated maximum badger population. Should they massacre all the badgers in the pilot area and still not meet the conditions, then they can start all over again at a reserved site in Dorset. And they call this scientific. It is not. It is outrageously dishonest.

The government will not look at vaccinating our dairy herds, even though the US, Australia and New Zealand are happy to do so. The reasoning is that, when testing for TB, the test

cannot show the difference between a cow that has TB and one that has been vaccinated. But farm records of the milk herds are now so complete (and remember they are tested because of the danger of the public being infected by the *milk*) that TB vaccinations for any cow will be on the cow's records, along with when they were put to the bull or artificially inseminated, by which bull, last calved, with details of the calves, and how much milk they produce each day along with the fat content, plus any illness/injury and veterinary treatment. Had we started years ago to vaccinate all the calves then by now all the cattle in the UK would be vaccinated against TB.

I recently received an email from my MP Oliver Letwin, citing the impossibility of vaccinating against bovine TB as the most "scientific" reason for culling badgers. He doesn't keep up with the news. Two weeks earlier the Daily Mail [announced](#) that "*Researchers from the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency in Weybridge, Surrey, have found a test that is able to distinguish infected cows and cows that have been immunised.*" Surely it would be better to invest taxpayers' money in this than paying for a highly unpopular cull of badgers? But no – it is always easier to blame something else, and better still to shoot it.

And the men with the guns (none of whom have any experience of shooting free-running badgers) are, apparently, going to test for the 'humaneness' of their targeting by judging the [amount of noise](#) the badger makes when shot. Apart from the noisy and uproarious games young badgers indulge in, badgers are a quiet shy species. In my experience an animal, any animal, will make an involuntary noise when first hurt. After that, especially if the wound is bad, they retreat into silence, except for dogs that whimper. It is how they protect themselves from the predator. So all these expert marksmen are going to stand around listening to the silence and telling each other "That's alright then!" No, it isn't.

It isn't only badgers. People have worked hard to re-establish our birds of prey and, man having killed off almost all of our other predators and many of our scavengers, they are needed. They are part of the network of life, a necessary part of the whole. When the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act passed into law all wild birds, including buzzards, became protected species. Before then I rarely saw a buzzard and I remember the joy I felt, riding out on an early winter morning in the 80's, when I saw for the first time a family of buzzards flying together.

Living in rural Dorset, in a valley with chalk and flint hills on either side, there is nothing more thrills my heart than going out into the garden and hearing the mewing of buzzards sailing the sky above me. If I lived in the Scottish Highlands I'd be watching Golden Eagles. But I don't and buzzards do me fine. Or they did. Since the setting up of a new pheasant shoot on neighbouring farmland, the buzzards have mysteriously disappeared. But what's law when other interests, for which real money, *must* come first?

The guns triumph. Why is it that man's only answer to a perceived problem is to kill something? With, of course, the help of government bodies such as Defra and Natural England. The latter's website describes its role thus: "Put simply, our aim is to create a better natural environment that covers all of our urban, country and coastal landscapes, along with all of the animals, plants and other organisms that live with us." Unless of course it interferes with the interests of the better-off, the non-skiving and non-scrounging rich (as opposed to the skivers and scroungers that, according to our ultra-rich government, make up the bulk of the poor people needing benefits in order to feed their children).

I write as someone whose hair was ruffled some years ago by the wind of shot passing over

my head – from an over-excited city gun popping off at everything that moved. The fact that I was on land owned by someone else, the other side of the valley from the estate where the shoot was taking place made no difference to the man behind the gun. He had paid good money to have fun trying to kill things, and by God, he was going to have it!

By the same token our Environment Minister Owen Paterson, whose land boasts a pheasant shoot, thinks he should make money from such people. So last year he had a bright idea. He [proposed](#) that pheasant shoots should be allowed to cage buzzards, destroy their nests and any eggs, in order to protect the pheasants that were being reared for the shoots. Forget that buzzards are a protected species. Forget that pheasants are an alien imported species. And, most of all, forget the environment. For people like Mr Paterson the environment is no more than a pretty backdrop to the thrill of killing – and making money.

People were outraged – again. It was pointed out that little or no official research had been done on whether buzzards were a genuine threat to pheasants (the RSPB says that possibly just 1% to 2% of pheasant chicks are taken by birds of prey, hardly a significant amount when around 36-40 million pheasants are released every year, solely for shooting). Peterson's plan was withdrawn for, as the government always says when it has egg on its face, "further consultation" and we all breathed a sigh of relief. But...

Enter the wildlife watchdog, Natural England. In May, following an Environment Information Request by the RSPB, it was disclosed that Natural England had *secretly* [granted licences](#) to cage and/or kill buzzards and destroy their nests and eggs. The RSPB had thought that it and other conservation bodies were in a process of consultation with Defra on this issue. Apparently not. And so much for action based on credible research, not that the government's record on that is good. The European Commission recently took them to task for opposing the ban on neonicotinoid pesticides by presenting a [flawed](#) research paper that had not appeared in any scientific journal nor been peer reviewed; it had simply been published online.

Does Natural England not understand the meaning of its title? What is "natural" about supporting the annual breeding of millions of pheasants for sport (as opposed to a total of around 6,700 breeding pairs of nightingales)? What is "natural" about licensing the killing of protected British birds of prey in order to protect a tiny percentage of pheasants whose destiny is to be shot? Or run over, the road kill figures being rather large. What is "natural" about putting the interests of owners of shoots before the interests of the land you are there to protect? And what is "natural" about destroying nests and eggs for the sake of a day's sport for a privileged few?

But then, of course, it is "natural" for the rich and powerful and those who think of killing as a sport to have their way, even if it means bullying a public body, paid for by us little folk, into giving them the licence to despoil our wildlife. That's what living in Unnnatural England is all about – a land fast being stripped of its joy.

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