

Chapter 2 An Historic Failure To Protect Nature

(Part 2 of an essay on nature and farming inspired by Land Healer, introduced in the blog Revolution in Taliban Alley; Chris Rose. chris@campaignstrategy.co.uk September 2022)

It's not the only reason but British farming's war with nature is by far the biggest factor in the ecological calamity that has steadily unfolded across the UK since the Second World War, and at greater pace since the 1970s. Hence the significance of the shift of which Fiennes may be a [bellwether](#). This chapter explores what happened and the reasons why surprisingly little campaigning took place. Those reasons need to inform what happens next, if nature is to actually be restored.

A Long War with Nature

'Agricultural intensification' means getting more production from the same area of land, through greater effort (also known as 'productivity'). Between the 1940s and 1980s UK wheat yields increased more than [four fold](#). Agricultural productivity [increased](#) by over 150% between 1973 and 2018. It was a great policy success but achieved by removing hedges, enlarging fields, greater use of machinery, specialisation, reduced rotations and much more artificial fertiliser, herbicides, fungicides and insecticides.

Concern about intensification had begun to grow in the 1950s and 60s, especially over hedgerow destruction and organochlorine insecticides such as DDT, and nerve-poison organophosphates. In 1962 when the British Trust for Ornithology ([BTO](#))'s began its Common Bird Census, it was in order 'to provide sound information on farmland bird populations in the face of rapid changes in agricultural practice'.

At that time what Fiennes calls 'Taliban Farming' was in its infancy but the intensification-at-all-costs mindset was already established. The government gave grants for hedgerow removal, subsidised fertiliser use, and collaborated with chemical company ICI to develop the herbicide MCPA. Collateral loss of nature was just the price of progress. In 1964 Sir William Slater, former Secretary of the Agricultural Research Council [wrote](#) in *New Scientist*:

'On the farmlands of these crowded islands, food production must come first. We cannot sacrifice the efficiency of our food production in order to avoid the loss of a few birds and mammals killed by chemicals'.

Loss of hedges and woods was the most obvious sign of a policy of farming expansion, and within woods the same 'productivist' mindset led the Forestry Commission to adopt a policy of converting even ancient woodland to conifer plantations, often grubbing them up and treating with herbicides before replanting with conifers. Historian Oliver Rackham later [called](#) 1950 – 1975 "the locust years". The 'locust effect' was much less obvious within farmland and it was only in the 1970s that systematic national wildlife surveys began, which is why measures of UK bird populations and other species often start with a 1970 baseline.

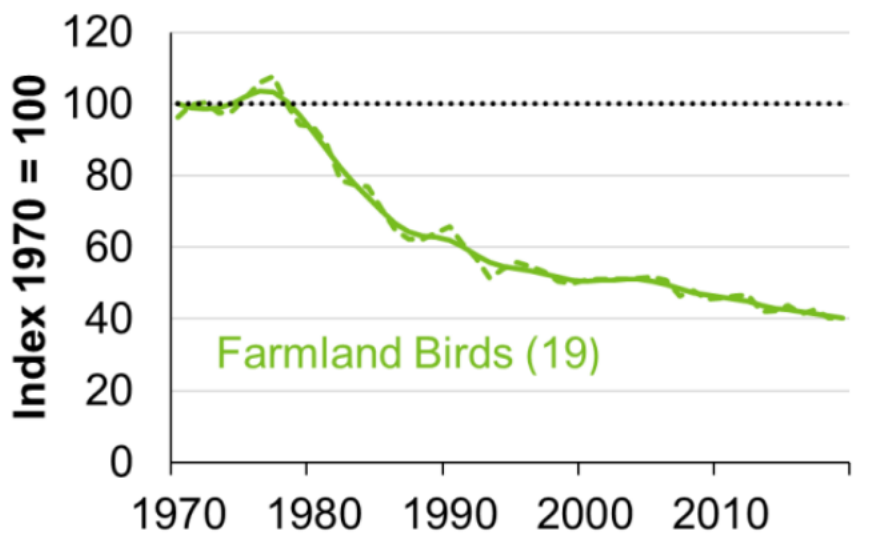
Three years into the 1970s the UK joined the EEC, forerunner of the EU. This turbo-boostered expansion of industrial farming as a matter of government policy, because maximising production meant the UK would also maximise its share of Common Agricultural Policy pay-outs.

Soon vast areas of traditional meadows and grazing marshes were being drained and converted to intensive arable, aided by new laws, and committees of officials and local farmers empowered and financed to organise it with public money. After a time (see below) the spatial expansion of industrial farming began to reach physical and regulatory limits but within the farmed area, intensification has continued until the present day.

Farmland Birds

The best barometer of nature on farmland is generally taken to be wild bird populations as measured by the Farmland Birds index, derived from BTO surveys of 19 breeding species, with data going back to 1970. The most recent figures released by the government department Defra [shows](#) that between 1970 and 2019, the Index fell by 59%. Most of the birds had gone, and even by 2013-18 it was still falling at about 6% a year.

Figure 1a: Populations of wild birds in England



The decline of wild birds as revealed by the Farmland Bird Index (from *Wild Bird Populations in England 1970 – 2019*, Defra)

Jake Fiennes works on arable farms, where this group of quintessentially farmland birds and the plants and insects they depend on, were first to experience the full force of the tide of chemical industrialisation which subsequently swept the whole farming sector. Many of these birds, such as Turtle Doves, Corn Buntings, Tree Sparrows and Grey Partridges, were

originally included in the 'Common Bird Census' because they were 'common'. Now they are so scarce that it's a 'red letter day' if bird watchers come across them.

How did this happen without triggering a major campaign to stop it? It's a story of default practices, naive optimism, political grooming and weakness.

Weakness Of The NGOs

Despite the first Wildlife Trust being set up in 1926, the National Trust in 1895 and the RSPB in 1889, and an explosion of public concern about the environment around 1970 (eg Earth Day 1970, establishment of Friends of the Earth (founded 1969), Greenpeace (founded 1971), European Conservation Year 1970, and UNEP (founded 1972)), Britain's established conservation groups were in not in a strong position to put the brakes on farm intensification in the 1970s. Compared to the National Farmers Union they were small, politically weak and had little influence on agricultural policy nationally or locally.

Even by 1975 there were fewer members of the Wildlife Trusts (100,000) and the RSPB (180,000) combined, [than](#) the ca. 350,000 people then [employed](#) in agriculture. The 1947 Agriculture Act not only guaranteed farmers a profit through subsidies but also [provided](#) for NFU to be consulted before deciding its policy, every year. The NFU and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) were so close that many critics saw MAFF as the political mouthpiece of the NFU, acting as its [client](#) in government.

Consensus rather than confrontation and a 'voluntary approach' was the lodestone of organisations like FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group) set up to involve farmers and conservationists in the 1960s. The land owning and farming lobbies were long versed in politics and conducted an effective programme of what would now be called 'positive engagement', or perhaps political grooming of the conservation organisations.

Farmers and landowners often chaired organisations like the National Trust and Wildlife Trusts or acted as Presidents. Sometimes these were from the small minority of 'eccentrics', committed conservation-minded farmers who resisted the trend to modernisation. More often they simply presented themselves as representing 'rural people' to 'townies' (an essentially [fictional](#) distinction), bridging the divide between groups like Wildlife Trusts and the National Farmers Union with a mantra of co-operation. The NFU was and is very well organised and still [encourages](#) members to join Boards of National Parks and AONBs (see [this blog](#) on NFU influence). This entryism was not reciprocated.

Conservationists were also painfully aware that farming had awfully good PR and connections. Farmers and landowners spoke of themselves as stewards or custodians caring for the countryside, and long-running programmes such as the BBC radio soap *The Archers* helped sustain the myth.



BBC publicity [shot from The Archers](#) in 1951. In 1950 it ran as a programme for farmers and was conceived with input from the Ministry of Agriculture as a way to increase farm productivity. It was relaunched to a general audience after twelve months. The BBC states: ‘... the idea for *The Archers* was hatched at a meeting with farmers in Birmingham ... The writers of [Dick Barton](#) were brought in to write the scripts, but there was also an insistence that real life rural affairs and the latest developments in farming were depicted in the programme. In one major event in the first year Dan Archer retired his working horses, Boxer and Blossom - reflecting the increased mechanisation of agriculture’. It soon became the main way people outside the industry shaped their views about farming.

When the environmental impact of farming began to hit the headlines in the 1980s the most radical critics were not mainstream conservation groups but marginal groups such as Friends of the Earth and individuals such as Richard Body, organic farmer and rightwing Conservative MP for Boston in the Lincolnshire Fens, and Marion Shoard of the CPRE, who had worked at the Agricultural Research Council.

Body laid into EU subsidies in his books *Agriculture: The Triumph and the Shame* and *Farming In The Clouds*. Shoard’s influential 1980 book *The Theft of the Countryside* advocated extending planning controls to agriculture, for example on hedgerow removal which was taking place at 4,500 miles a year.

If acted upon, Shoard’s ideas could have constrained the worst loss of countryside features important for nature. But Shoard was not supported by the major nature conservation groups. They were conflicted over criticising farming, and focused not on what they called ‘the wider countryside’ but protecting rare species and what they could of the most nature-rich remaining areas as nature reserves.

Site-based Conservation

A long-standing commitment to setting up and protecting particular ‘sites’ meant that conservation groups mostly focused on land outside the 70-80% that was farmed, or taking it into their own management. So it was news that SSSIs or ‘Sites of Special Scientific Interest’,

supposedly the ‘crown jewels’ of wildlife habitats were being rapidly destroyed that ignited a higher profile public debate. Charlie Pye-Smith and I wrote in [Crisis and Conservation](#):

‘When Dr David Goode and Angela King began to release the findings of an NCC survey on habitat loss in 1980, conservationists were shocked to find that not just 4 per cent of Britain’s 3,000 plus SSSIs were suffering serious damage or being completely destroyed each year, as had previously been suspected. The figure was actually nearer 12% ... in Dorset 32 per cent were damaged or destroyed in a single year ... By 1980 the delicate feather mosses and peat bogs of Lancashire had been reduced to less than 1 per cent of their 1856 extent ... 47 per cent of Wiltshire’s rolling chalk downland the richest of all habitats for flowers, was ploughed up, mostly to grow cereals, often with massive aid from the tax payer’... while a RSPB survey in 1982 ‘found 32% of the grazing marshland of the North Kent marshes had been converted to arable since 1969’.

Those NCC reports are also the source of the much repeated finding that England has lost 97% of its lowland hay meadows since World War 2.

The fate of SSSIs and ‘site battles’ to save existing areas of often ancient wildlife rich habitats dominated conservation politics in the 1980s, particularly because through the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act farmers and landowners became entitled to compensation for any profits foregone by not destroying land valuable for nature. This was special treatment denied to non-farming developers if their planning applications were rejected. Peter Marren [recorded](#) in his New Naturalist history *Nature Conservation Nature Conservation*:

‘conservation bodies that owned land, such as the National Trust and the county wildlife trusts, tended to be much more supportive of the Act than those that did not, such as Friends of the Earth and WWF-UK’.

At Halvergate Marshes in Norfolk, in 1984, a Friends of the Earth local group led by [Andrew Lees](#) undertook some of the very few Non-Violent Direct Actions against agricultural destruction of nature in this period. Protestors sat in the buckets of excavators to delay drainage of grazing marsh at three farms. At one of them the suitably named David Archer, had ploughed a giant ‘V-sign’ in a field to announce his intentions, while he demanded higher compensation not to drain and plough.



Andrew Lees 1949-94: *“At some point I had to stand up and be counted. Who speaks for the butterflies?”*

Production subsidies created a massive incentive to intensify. A farmer who switched from raising beef cattle on Halvergate grazing marsh to draining it to grow winter wheat on arable land could see his profit per hectare grow from about £100 to £800. The estimated taxpayer

subsidy to farmers in the area including the cost of flood protection from rivers was [put at](#) £4000/ha. (£14,200/ha in today's money).

Eventually, under political pressure to rein in subsidies for farmers, the government began to modify policy objectives, if not often practice, to include environment alongside production. Halvergate itself specifically resulted in the establishment of a new for-conservation subsidy, the 1985 Broads Grazing Marsh Compensation Scheme, later also coming under payments from an Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme and then the Environmental Stewardship Scheme.

“Don't You Want To Eat?”

Many in established conservation groups were fearful of taking on the powerful NFU and both the general public and media still viewed farming as a positive if over-subsidised activity. If it came to nature conservation versus farming, the latter tended to win.

I first encountered the difficulty of showing there could be bad farming in the sense that it damaged the environment, as a young FoE campaigner in the 1980s.

The screenshot shows a website with a navigation bar at the top containing links: Home, 12 basic guidelines, Advanced tips, Three Worlds Blog, How to win campaigns, Newsletter, Resources, and Chris Rose. On the left side, there is a vertical menu of links: Introduction, Reality check, Motivation not education, Analyse the forces, K.I.S.S., Right components..., Start where your audience is, Construct a critical path, Campaign v. the unacceptable, Make real things happen, Say what you mean, Find the conflict in events, Communicate in pictures, and Don't send messages. The main content area is titled '» 12 BASIC GUIDELINES: CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE UNACCEPTABLE'. It begins with the text: 'Your campaign may be 'about an issue' but to engage people it will need to have a much more specific 'battlefront'. Choosing that battlefront is a crucial task. A campaign strongly supported by a tiny part of the population may sustain a vigorous organisation. It may survive for decades - for as long as its supporters have the energy. But to succeed, most campaigns need to attract much broader support - and to do that, you often need to narrow the focus.' To the right of this text is a photograph of a landscape with a large plume of smoke rising from the ground, likely from a fire. Below the text, it continues: 'Normally the task is to find the pieces of an issue or concern which are unacceptable to a big enough group of people to get the effect you need. Find out what would motivate them to support your cause - plot your campaign pathway across that concern. In general it is better to campaign against a small part of a big problem, where that part is 99% unacceptable to the public, than to campaign against say half of the overall problem, where that is only unacceptable to 1% of the population. In the early 1980s I was Countryside Campaigner at Friends of the Earth. Our mandate was to run a wide-ranging campaign to protect habitats and wildlife from agricultural intensification. Hedges were being ripped up, ancient meadows ploughed, pesticides sprayed ever more intensively - but the prevailing assumption among press and public was still that building development was the real threat to countryside and farming was necessary and benign. Even a reporter from the environmentally 'sensitive' Guardian newspaper asked me "well don't you want to eat?" We had quite widespread support but our case was too diffuse and too complex. There was no obvious national sign of damage - each hedge or field was different. We needed something simply unacceptable to prick the bubble of farming's 'Dan Archer' image. I consulted the files and FoE's local groups network. It was either slurry (animal waste) or strawburning. I went for strawburning. We published a report on technical alternatives, called for a ban and set up a hotline and reports network. That summer was hot and windy. Strawburning caused even more tragedies and environmental disasters than normal, and this time the anger of farmer's wives whose paintwork was ruined, doctors whose hospitals were shut by smoke, people whose garden hedges were incinerated and even the police who had to pick up the pieces after smoke caused lethal road accidents, were all channelled into one simple media-friendly story. And whereas up to then FoE had gone for trimming and hedging of slightly stronger controls, this time we just said ban-it. Subsequently straw-burning was banned but just as important, it raised questions about the whole direction of agricultural intensification, and opened the way for other campaigns. Look at your issue. It will be full of shades of grey like an aerial photograph of a city. Zoom in on your chosen areas. Blow it up like a photo until there is just black and white - that is what to communicate. Go to that point to make your case, to make you change.'

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It led me to temporarily switch from trying to convince journalists it was a bad idea to plough up hay-medows of green-winged orchids to grow cereals (a *Guardian* writer asked me “well don't you want to eat?”), to running a campaign specifically about straw burning, which was

controversial even within agriculture. It's [example no.7](#) in my 'basic guidelines' for campaigns (above).

In political comms jargon, strawburning 'triangulated' the issue. Rather than just a one dimensional issue of conservation v. farmers, it became a three cornered issue with conservation, bad farming and good farming, at least temporarily. Some other agriculture-related campaigns have done this, for instance over GM food but in general conservation NGOs have not split farming into 'good' and 'bad' camps based on how they farm (see below).

"Something Is Done": Agri-Environment Schemes

Another big reason for the established conservation groups not to run significant campaigns about intensive farming was the hope-factor presented by taxpayer-funded AES or Agri-Environment Schemes. A controversial activity like campaigning would not be needed.

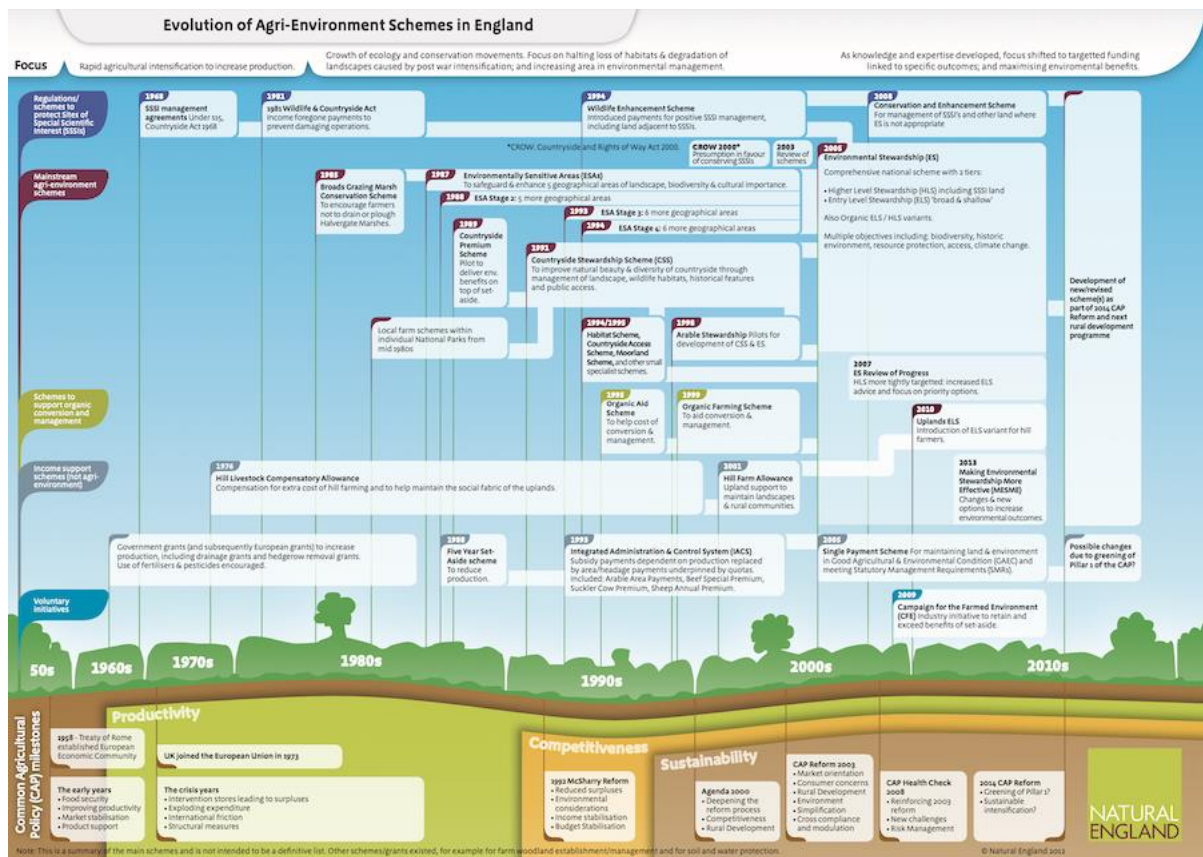
By 1992 global complaints about EU farm subsidies and European taxpayer resistance to paying for unwanted wine-lakes and butter-mountains led the EU to adopt the 'McSharry reforms' (implemented in 1994), and as part of this, EU 'Agri-Environment Schemes' were introduced.

The EU had also introduced 'set aside' in 1988, and McSharry, the EU's Agriculture Commissioner, made it compulsory for large arable farmers to set aside (not grow crops on) 15% of land, reduced to 10% in 1996 before the obligation was abolished in 2008.

The RSPB [later wrote](#):

If set-aside land had been managed specifically for wildlife, then it is highly likely that it would have halted the decline in farmland birds.

But it wasn't managed that way. Although Set-Aside was a large intervention, farmers were allowed to treat it as fallow, as part of a rotation and simply spray it with herbicides to kill off 'weeds'. As Marren [pointed out](#), large cereal farmers also could set aside 15% and be paid 'obscene amounts of money in compensation while nullifying the schemes intention by boosting production on the remaining 85%'. [NCC](#) regarded it as a 'missed opportunity'.



Natural England diagram of the evolution of AES in England (larger version of image [here](#)) made in 2012, prior to Brexit. 'Post Brexit' EU AES schemes are being phased out and replaced by UK-funded ELMS or Environmental Land Management Schemes but the two overlap and ELMS is still at an early stage.

Instead, the Broads AES schemes mentioned earlier formed part of an increasingly complex layer of sticking plaster policies to mitigate the effects of the main UK and EU agriculture policies, which positively encouraged intensification.

Although as it turned out AES were never large enough in financial terms, or rigorous enough to tip the national balance back to nature, they created a light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel effect: "something was being done" and from the 1990s the temperature of the nature and farming issue dropped markedly compared to the 1980s.

In the UK AES became the defacto government policy for environment on farmland. 'Making AES work' became the default 'wider countryside' advocacy aim for nature and countryside NGOs, sitting more comfortably than campaigns alongside their historic business of acquiring and managing land as nature reserves. [1]

The government's own 'environmental watchdogs' were also not in the mood to take issue with chemical-farming in the way their predecessors had done over DDT and dieldrin the 1960s. "Agency culture in the 1990s" [commented](#) Marren, "was deeply non-confrontational".

As to 'grass roots' radicals, in the 1990s the focus of direct action where nature was the victim, shifted from farming to roads, the most famous example being Twyford Down in Hampshire, where the M3 motorway was driven through a chalk downland dripping in orchids and other wildflowers. It was of course a SSSI.

Friends of the Earth reported 300 SSSIs were being damaged every year in the '90s but it was roads, vehicle emissions and climate change, not nature and farming, which were the main psychological drivers of protest. FoE was only peripherally involved with Twyford and at other major battles of the 'roads movement'.

It was much more involved at Offham Down near Lewes in Sussex, a direct action farming v nature clash in 1997. A farmer named Justin Harmer wanted to plough it up cowslips and all, to grow flax and benefit from an EU subsidy. FoE and Sussex Wildlife Trust publicised the case and started to roll back the turf to 'unplough' it (living nearby, we went along to help, and I remember how heavy it was). Secretary of State John Gummer ordered English Nature to ask him for a 'Stop Order', which he then granted, and 'Farmer Harmer', in Peter Marren's words ['good humouredly joined in'](#).

This happened in the run up to Tony Blair's landslide election victory. Visiting Sussex, Blair announced "this would not happen under a Labour Government". One eventual political consequence of that was the scrapping of the 'ransom money of profits foregone' on SSSIs and its replacement with funding associated with positive 'management notices' under the CROW (Countryside And Rights of Way Act, 2000).

NGOs Farms and AES

Agencies such as the NCC, started to work with farmers who received funding under the 1981 Act and under AES schemes to, as one put it, "grow birds". RSPB also started buying up farmland, in particular drained marshes, and restoring it back to wetland, as at Lakenheath Fen acquired in 1995.

NGOs also bought some farms to use them as demonstrations of what could be achieved for nature while continuing farming. Grange Farm was bought by the RSPB in 1999, and re-named Hope Farm (it's Farmland Bird Index has since [doubled](#)). The idea was to inspire and influence farmers to do likewise. To avoid alienating mainstream farmers, the RSPB quietly but doggedly resisted endorsing Organic Farming. One result was that it and other conservation groups which followed its example, effectively cut themselves off from a potential campaign wing within farming, and so could not utilise a visible retail consumer distinction between 'good and bad' farming to ratchet a shift in agricultural practice. (Organic farming is now far bigger in many other European countries, eg Austria [\[25%\]](#), than in the UK [\[2.8%\]](#). The % across the current EU is [9.1%](#)).

Holding farmland also meant the land-holding NGOs could themselves receive AES money, or their tenants could. From 2005 these land-holdings also qualified for EU-funded Single Farm Payments (replacing 11 production subsidies), set at a flat rate (originally £230 per hectare) for holding cultivatable land. The NGOs were not 'in it for the money' but the money probably helped cement their de facto practice of 'not rocking the boat' with the farming industry.

Involvement in the AES embedded mainstream conservation organisations such as the National Trust, Wildlife Trusts and RSPB into the government farm policy system, and although it gave them first hand experience and they carried out advocacy work and in the case of RSPB, field-research, to improve it, being inside the status quo managerialist approach was not conducive to a campaigning mindset for disruptive change. Along with specific funds for management of SSSIs, and in the C21st finance for 'landscape scale' restoration projects in line with the 2010 Lawton Report advocating 'bigger better more joined up' areas for nature, the work of mainstream conservation groups has been quite well supported by AES schemes.

What Happened Under AES

Unfortunately AES never lived up to the hopes of conservation groups. The bottom line is that AES failed to halt the decline in birds, wild plants and wildlife across the 70-80% of UK land under farming.

Not surprisingly, studies have shown that the more demanding and intensive AES schemes make a bigger difference to nature than the 'weaker' schemes (in England, in England 'Higher-Level Stewardship' or HLS , and Entry-Level Stewardship or ELS, respectively).

In 2003 David Kleijn from Wageningen University and king of conservation evidence Bill Sutherland of Cambridge University [reviewed research](#) on AES schemes with biodiversity objectives across Europe, and 'concluded that about half of the schemes lack positive effects'.

They were back with others [in 2015](#) reviewing 'a plethora of case studies and meta-analyses', of which 'most ... demonstrate general increases in farmland biodiversity in response to AES, with the size of the effect depending on the structure and management of the surrounding landscape' and, 'schemes aimed at areas out of production (such as field margins and hedgerows) are more effective at enhancing species richness than those aimed at productive areas (such as arable crops or grasslands)'. One of several 'outstanding questions' was 'how much their effectiveness is influenced by farmer training and advice'.

It's the HLS schemes which are most relevant and most similar to what Fiennes has been doing (in his case with quality technical support – the shortage of free or affordable training and advice is huge and something that NGOs and leaders such as Jake Fiennes could take up with government).

HLS expanded considerably in the three decades 1990 – 2020. The UK government JNCC (Joint Nature Conservation Committee) [states](#):

'In 1992, there were 0.3 million hectares of land in the UK in higher-level agreements or targeted schemes, and by 2020 this had risen to just over 3.6 million hectares'

So by 2020 HLS/ targeted schemes in England had grown twelve fold since 1992 but still only covered 21% or about one fifth of eligible farmland (the overall picture is [similar](#) across the

UK). A third of the decline in farmland birds took place between the introduction of AES in 1992 and 2018.

Put this another way. If a visitor to the English countryside had dropped from the sky to land on a random point of farmland in 1992, the chances of it being in a Higher Level AES scheme would have been about 1.7% or about 1 in 58. By 2020 it was 20.9% or about 1 in 5.

But for every ten of the Farmland Index birds that the random visitor might have expected to see in 1970, 4 had disappeared by 1992 and 6 had gone by 2018. What's more, as Defra [says](#), the 'specialist' birds dependent on farmland had disproportionately declined, by 74%. For every 100 Corn Buntings to be seen in 1970, only 11 remained in 2018. Of 100 Skylarks only 39 remained, for Lapwings 47, for Tree Sparrows just four and for Turtle Doves only two.

All these species were regarded as 'common' in 1970. Some, such as Turtle Doves are summer migrants which have been affected by climate change and mass-hunting outside the UK but that does not apply to all. Yellowhammers for example nearly all stay in the UK year-round, relying mostly on arable farmland. The [BTO ringing scheme shows](#) that while nearly 3,000 were ringed or found-ringed in Britain and Ireland, just five had travelled to or from continental Europe. Their demise is down to something happening on farms.

Most Farmland In AES Yet Most Birds Are Lost

Of course HLS and ELS did good in some places, just not enough good in enough places to stop the loss of nature, let alone reverse it.

Defra [research summaries](#) mention 'positive impacts' of HLS and targeted schemes on Skylark, Corn Bunting, Corncrake and Tree Sparrow, 'although to date the strength of those impacts has remained low at a national scale'. These are often referred to as 'notable' successes but they are only notable because they are unusual.

Others, such as the Cirl Bunting, have been rescued from the brink of extinction by the conservation equivalent of being put in Intensive Care by groups such as Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB. But that is like an army trying to fight a war only using Special Forces. To occupy and hold territory requires more regular, larger forces and the ecological equivalent of that has yet to be applied through AES plus protected areas and Rewilding, which is why the Jake Fiennes 'Restorative model' for arable farms could be a game-changer.

This abysmal outcome is looks all the more catastrophic if you include the less demanding ELS or Entry Level Scheme, as it covered a far greater area. In 2010 the Lawton Report [noted](#) that

'ELS has been hugely popular with land managers with almost 67% of eligible agricultural land now under agreement'

Which means that for many years, over two thirds of farmland was included in some sort of conservation payment scheme, and yet we lost most of the farmland birds we had in 1970. Similar losses occurred in wild plant and insect populations. [2]

In terms of adjusting economic incentives to get a different outcome, AES was always too feeble compared with the rest of CAP. Graham Harvey [observed](#) that in the mid 1990s the Ministry of Agriculture was allocating around £17m to the AES 'Countryside Stewardship Scheme' spread across some 5,000 holdings, whereas cereal farmers alone received £1billion, creating an 'irresistible' incentive to 'specialise and intensify their production'.

In 2009 Natural England published [Agri-environment schemes in England - A review of results and effectiveness](#). Around that time NE was under political pressure to show benefits for AES expenditure, and its review began with a glowing catalogue of headline achievements such as the reach of the schemes, the number of Biodiversity Action Plan habitats included, a 130% increase in Cirl Bunting pairs and '41% of hedgerows in England are actively managed under AES'.

It was only much further down that a diligent reader would have come across:

'ELS has not yet delivered the scale of intervention required to address the declines of widespread species of farmland birds: National populations of many common and widespread farmland species declined in the mid-1990s. These declines have continued for many species up to the present day' ...

... 'The area managed under arable options for farmland birds (138,000 ha with some overlap for wider biodiversity) is small [in fact 2.8%] in relation to the 4.9 mha of cultivated land in England' ...

... On average there is only one skylark nesting plot [one of the AES options] for every 275 ha of cultivated land'. [275ha is about the size of Hyde Park, St James's Park and Kensington Gardens combined, and a Skylark is about the size of a sparrow].

And perhaps most significant:

Spread over the total utilisable agricultural area (UAA) of England this [AES funding] represents £48 per ha/yr. Comparatively the Single Farm Payment (SFP) (after transfer of compulsory and voluntary [modulation](#)) in England is still equivalent to £156 per ha/yr.

Decoded that meant payments to farmers just to farm productively were still three times greater than those to farm in a nature friendly way. For every £1 spent on trying to help farmers increase nature, £3.25 was spent on supporting conventional farming which had the opposite effect.

As David Baldock of IEEP has pointed out to me, to be fair there has not been a really effective campaign against intensive farming in any European country (Switzerland being a partial exception) and as Sutherland et al say, AES schemes everywhere have proved expensive, and with a limited impact. Which to my mind speaks to the need to complement them with more and different measures (see Chapter 4).

In the 2010s, an expanding consortium of NGOs produced three *State of Nature* reports taking stock of nature in the UK (see details in the Annexe). These reflected slowly declining NGO optimism about AES (my emphasis):

2013: *Agri-environment schemes have helped to increase the population of rare species and local populations of more widespread species, and there is evidence that even simple measures, such as those available in the English Entry Level Scheme, benefit birds. However, we have not seen the much-hoped for recoveries of farmland wildlife – probably because not enough farmers have taken up the most effective agri-environment options, and available funding is limited.*

2016: *There is growing evidence that many farmland birds are benefitting from key environmental stewardship options, but others continue to decline, and it is not yet clear whether stewardship can be delivered on a sufficiently large scale to achieve wildlife recovery nationwide. Certainly, at present, the hoped for widespread recovery of farmland wildlife is yet to be seen.*

2019: *... Although agricultural intensification may have slowed since its late 20th century peak, and there have been notable successes in recovering some threatened species such as Cirl Bunting and Stone Curlew, aggregate farmland biodiversity indicators continue to decline despite government commitments to reversing the downward trend ... Research has identified many of the issues contributing to continuing population declines, but a key factor for some species is the lack of implementation of remedial action at a coordinated landscape scale sufficient to make a real difference.*

The *State of Nature* reports covered far more than just AES schemes. Together with other NGO and government agency reports from the 1990s to present, they detailed and tracked the decline in nature but usually served as advocacy material rather than a springboard for campaigning.

If the presence of AES helped keep mainstream conservation NGOs away from campaigning because it acted as a comfort blanket, pesticides were something outside their comfort zone altogether – complicated, difficult, owned by chemical giants – and for a long time, perceived as a falling rather than a rising issue (see Chapter 3).

notes

[1] What became the co-ordinating body of today's Wildlife Trusts was originally called The Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves, and was intended as a ginger-group to prompt the National Trust to have more nature reserves.

[2] Official statements about AES have often presented uptake, rather than outcomes, as an indicator of success. Post-Brexit the UK's ELMS or Environmental Land Management scheme is supposed to be more outcome oriented but has yet to get going properly.