Blog

The Cinderella COP And The Extinction Theme Park
http://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=2773

Chris Rose 10 January 2022
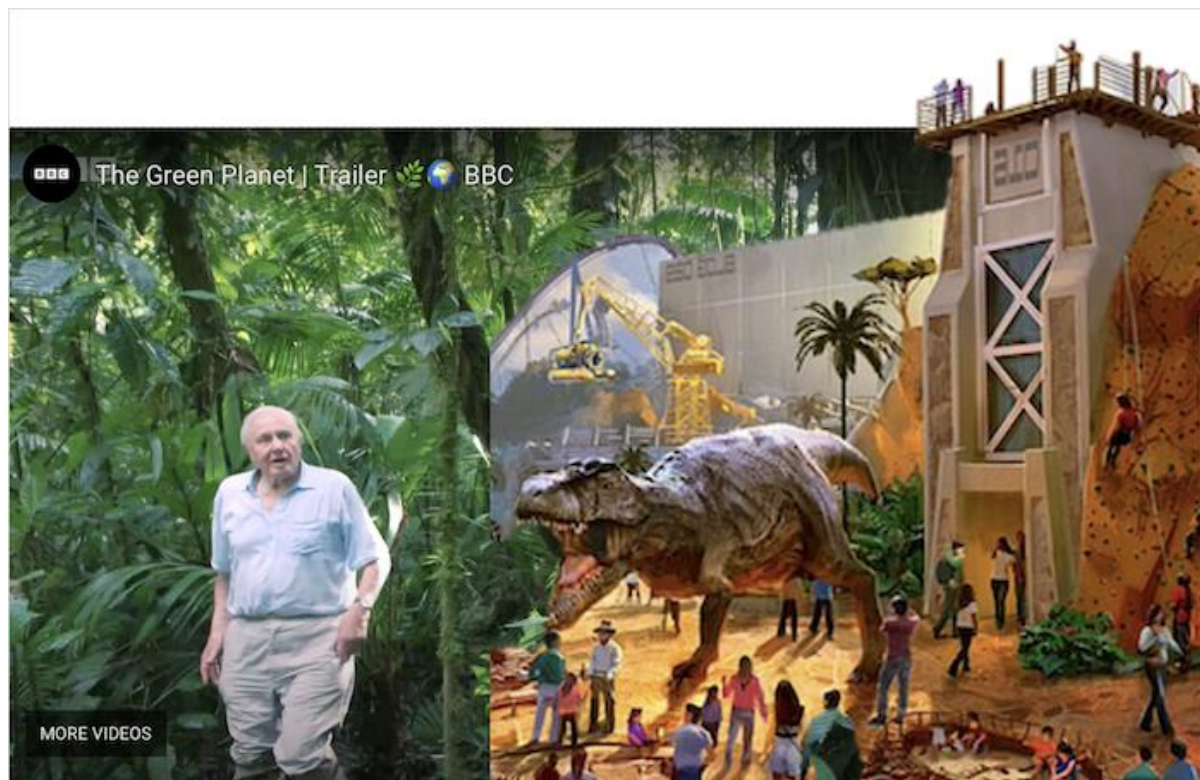
People all over the world love nature, plants and animals. Online and on TV, Natural History films are a hugely popular and profitable genre as they attract family audiences. The BBC has just started public marketing of it's new Attenborough mega-series Green Planet. Yet the extinction of 'biodiversity' has struggled to be taken seriously as a political issue. In this blog I explore what it might take for campaigns to make a difference to this year's global biodiversity conference, the history and challenges of this 'Cinderella' political issue, and the bizarre case of Swanscombe Peninsula, which may become a test case in the UK: a biodiverse site threatened by a theme park with dinosaurs.

Introduction

Will 2022 be the year when governments take the Nature Emergency as seriously as the Climate Emergency? Hopes are focussed on the 15th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD15), due to take place in Kunming China, from 17 – 30 May. Few commentators are optimistic about it.

istock

Ever since the 1992 Earth Summit, governments have promised effective action to stem the loss of biodiversity and then failed. Conservationists have long complained that 'biodiversity' is an under-resourced Cinderella issue. Communicators complain that it's not understood: 'biodiversity' is policy-speak not everyday language for nature. Academics identify a plethora of difficulties explaining it but overall, nature still drains away. Scientists fear millions of species will soon be lost.

What Needs To Happen

Perhaps I am stating the obvious but it seems to me that it needs at least three things for nature even to gain the political and social traction that 'climate' has through international action:

- Getting governments organised. Effective international political and scientific organisation and structure connecting to national economic, land use and natural resource policy
- Enabling politicians to understand it. Translation of targets derived from science into shorthands and metrics which non-scientific domestic politicians and decision-makers can understand and communicate at least between themselves (equivalent to climate's 'net zero' and 1.5C 'safe limit' and 'unburnable carbon')
- ·Enabling people to put pressure on politicians to act on commitments. Connection of the top-down agenda for action with bottom-up public support and pressure to protect surviving nature and enhance it, meaning that it must be visible, tangible and tractable where people live, work, rest and play, with outcomes testable through personal experience. This is where campaigns can make the biggest difference.

Late in coming it is, and inadequate it may be but there are signs that an inter governmental infrastructure is now being put in place, partly emulating and drawing energy from that in place for climate. Corporates, NGOs, scientists and politicians have come together in new initiatives and alliances (see Cinderella COP below). The second problem is soluble but it's unlikely to be sorted by May, although it might just emerge from the CBD process through luck. There's not much time for the third one but it's the most realistic opportunity to take for campaigners wanting to improve on the default outcome for biodiversity's COP15.

COP15 already has a full agenda. It's reported that:

'The 21-point draft includes targets on eliminating plastic pollution, reducing pesticide use by two-thirds and halving the rate of invasive species introductions, aimed at cutting the rate of extinctions and protecting life-sustaining ecosystems'.

It's also said that 'nature based solutions' – the obvious cross-over with climate – are in the draft, although president Jair Bolsanaro of Brazil opposes them and they 'may well be cut in the run up'. And both the UN and a 'high ambition' alliance are pushing ideas such as protecting of 30% of the planet for nature by 2030 and stopping the loss of biodiversity by 2030 (see Cinderella COP below).
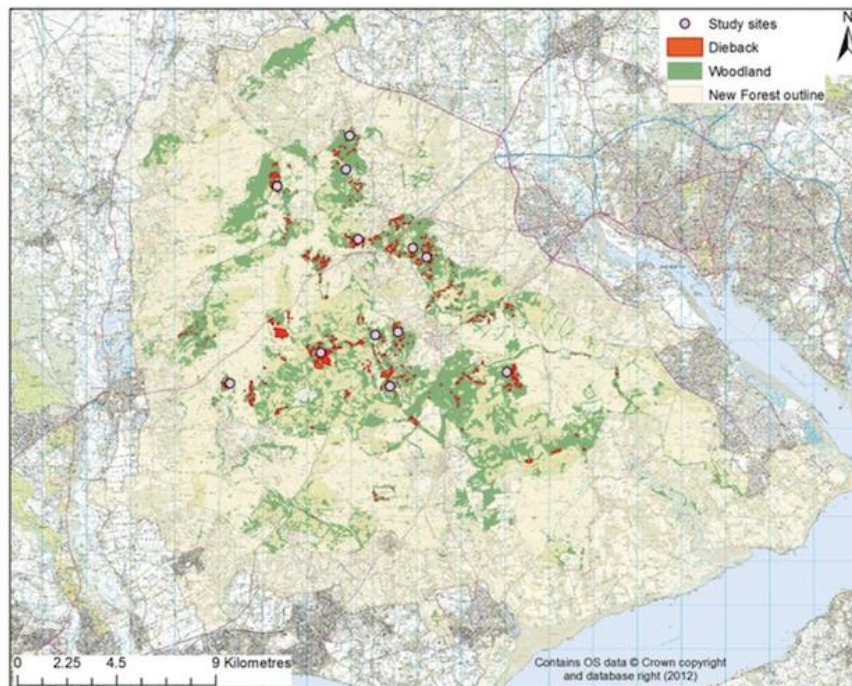
The nine planetary boundaries

Estimates of how the different control variables for seven planetary boundaries have changed from 1950 to present. The green shaded polygon represents the safe operating space. Source: Steffen et al. 2015

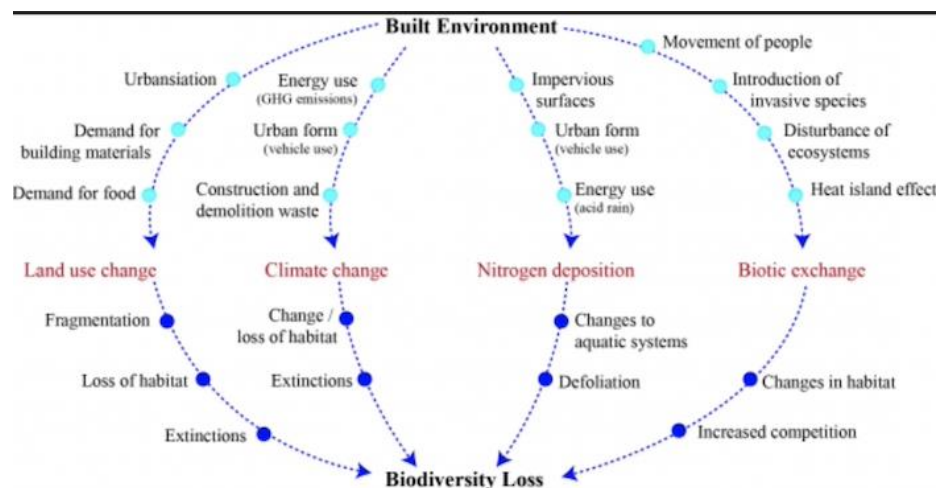*Planetary Boundaries are being exceeded*

Figure 1

Distribution of broadleaved woodland (green), occurrence of dieback (red) and location of each of the 12 study areas (pink dots) in the New Forest, in southern England. Map was made using ArcMap 10.1 (http://desktop.arcgis.com/en/arcmap/).

Full size image ›

Dieback of the New Forest ecosystem in the UK, from Nature

Built environment drivers of biodiversity loss

Finding Campaign Targets

There's not much to be gained by campaigners trying to push new ideas onto the agenda for CBD15.

In my view, the underlying problem for biodiversity is that politicians still assume it can be saved without having to fundamentally disrupt the way we do things. And if they do think it needs fundamental far-reaching change, it's not politically possible, just yet. This is a penny that has dropped further and faster on climate than biodiversity.

So whether or not for the conference proves a turning point will depend on whether national politicians attending it already believe they must change their *domestic* economic, development and planning systems, pollution controls and use of land and the sea. That in turn will depend on manifestation of public demand and support.

If that doesn't happen CBD15 may just be a small audience spectator sport for environmentalists on zoom, with a zoo of paper tiger commitments let loose in Kunming.

The political temptation is always to agree to vague targets or those with an implementation date well into the future. At the top level 'biodiversity' itself is vague, generic and placeless, allowing one dimensional single metric metaphors such as 'moving the dial'. It's easy for politicians to attend an international conference and agree we must change the trajectory on biodiversity without it translating into instrumental change on the ground, in how things work in my country, at home. That's been the history.

from @yallah instagram

It's much harder for governments to stop something they've already started or are accustomed to, than to agree to do something new. So if they do, that really means something. If I was looking for a campaign target to make a difference for CBD15, that's what I'd look for: *something to stop, something already happening or planned but which is incompatible with the Convention ambition that the relevant country would like to align with.*

The strongest signal for politicians to receive from a campaign is not seeing opinion polls or being lobbied by experts but the experience of having to do different: whether they themselves decide that or they are forced into it. Seeing an unmistakable change-signal from significant others who cannot be ignored (eg expenditure of corporations or large instrumental changes in public choices and behaviours) can come a close second.

In other words whether it involves a battle or not, I suggest looking for a reversal or abandonment of an existing practice or project, rather than just promoting a target for future change.

Such objectives can be tough to achieve but it doesn't have to be huge and running across the spectrum of problems and solutions associated with biodiversity. It could be quite discrete but emblematic nonetheless. In practical campaign terms between now and May, such a stop- or save-target has several advantages:

- Availability - if the thing already exists, the campaign does not to spend a long time defining and constructing public awareness of it
- Comprehension – if it's real, physical and familiar then the public is more likely to understand it and can respond to a conflict over it by seeing who's involved without having to be educated about finer points of biodiversity and policy
- Speed - if your demand is binary enough, there is time between now and May to engage public as well as elite audiences
- Test of intent – in the run up to COP15 it should be a cogent litmus-test of true political intent and working assumptions

And less obviously it might be

- Crossing a Rubicon, a defining moment of decision which departs from past assumptions

If you try, and you win, then great. If you try and you lose, too bad but at least you have run the test, and you have created evidence for next time, with a lot of witnesses. Without such moments, a process like the CBD COP15 may go un-noticed by most of the public, or understood only through episodic exchanges of soundbites between biodiversity advocates and politicians rehearsing the usual arguments.

The ideal contest is an event which signals the public support and the essence of the issue, and which is extended enough for a conversation to develop, for days or weeks. Campaigns which achieve this are candidates to trigger a what theorists term a 'dialectical moment', a time when two conflicting 'truths' are resolved as society rethinks in real time and a new truth emerges. (See Final Thoughts below, on biodiversity and nature as a blank free space).

In terms of timing, for a campaign to now make an impact on politicians who go on to make an impact on COP15 it needs to get 'inside the loop' and have its effect faster than the default timescales for preparation, participation, decision making and implementation through the Convention process.

All that's still fairly generic as the opportunities will vary radically from one country to another so I'll share an example I know about in the UK.   It's a bit idiosyncratic and it's in the 'when in a hole, first stop digging' category. In other words stop making the problem worse, in this case by not building on an important nature site near London.

Back in 2013 the UK government put a proposal for a huge entertainment park on a 'fast-track' for development approval. It still doesn't have planning consent but if built it would

destroy one of the most biodiverse places in the country, at Swanscombe Peninsula in North Kent. Strangely, even the BBC is involved, and on the wrong side. It's a bizarre microcosm of what happens in the UK, a highly nature-depleted over-developed country, when biodiversity comes up against conventional development thinking.

Swanscombe's Extinction Theme Park

Local campaigners Donna Zimmer, hairdresser and naturalist (left), Laura Edie, special needs teaching assistant and Councillor (centre), and Karen Lynch, right, of Save Swanscombe Peninsula

If it was a save-nature movie plot, the conservation battle over Swanscombe Peninsula might be rejected as too far-fetched. A community campaign led by a hairdresser and a teaching assistant, up against a plan to build a vast 'global standard' £3.5 billion theme park, the 'London Resort', promoted by London Resort Company Holdings Ltd (LRCH).

From the Save Swanscombe Peninsula campaign Facebook page

By UK standards Swanscombe is an outstanding hotspot of biodiversity. It has many rare plants and in an area about one and a half times the size of Regents Park, a greater number of breeding birds than any major nature reserve in south east England. It's home to nightingales, water voles, cuckoos, otters and ravens. Foremost among its remarkable 1700 invertebrate species, is the extravagantly named Distinguished Jumping Spider, surviving only here and on the opposite bank of the Thames.

The main habitats of Swanscombe Peninsula - from Natural England

A 'Nature Reserve' For Extinct Animals

London Resort PR artists impression of the 'Prehistoric Nature Reserve' to be built on Swanscombe Peninsula

Potential nemesis of the Distinguished Jumping Spider comes in the form of larger-than-life 'PY' Pierre-Yves Gerbeau, an ex-ice hockey player and something of a travelling salesman for outlandish attraction developments, who made his name with Disneyland Paris and as 'rescuer' of the controversial London Millennium Dome. Gerbeau is CEO of LRCH. With his trademark bravado, his latest big idea for the London Resort, alongside six rollercoasters, is a 'Prehistoric Nature Reserve' featuring fake dinosaurs.

P Y Gerbeau and the Distinguished Jumping Spider (spider photo - Buglife)

Principal champion of the Distinguished Jumping Spider and the other invertebrate species found on the site, is a small national UK charity called Buglife*. Established in 2000, its name echoes the 1998 Disney Pixar movie 'Bug's Life', which has inspired generations of children to

'like bugs', and in which ants fight for their home against a predatory swarm of gangster-style grasshoppers. Buglife has a petition against the development.

"If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos" E O Wilson

"Too Much Democracy"

PY's boss at LRCH is Chairman Steven Norris, a former MP and Conservative Minister, now a property developer who has twice gone public with his neo-con style view that there is "far too much democracy" in the UK as it gets in the way of development. He's also said in a Property Week Magazine video in 2018 that universal suffrage is a "daft idea".

https://youtu.be/N2vtYnrpCNo - video

Steven Norris - "far too much democracy" at 6 secs, NSIPs "very very welcome" at 1min 4 secs

Kuwaiti Money

Money behind LRCH comes from oil-rich Kuwait through Dr. Abdulla Al Humaidi, former oil executive, politician and Chairman of Kuwaiti European Holding (KEH). LRCH is ultimately controlled by companies based in Kuwait. London Resort is 'overseen' by KEH. Dr Al Humaidi bought the local fooball club, Ebbsfleet in 2013.

The cast of characters extends to blue-chip media companies, all on the wrong side of the biodiversity fence as 'IP partners', having signed Development Agreements with LRCH to supply their Intellectual Property for themes and content of rides and attractions. These include Paramount Pictures, ITV Studios, and most extraordinary of all, BBC Studios which signed up in 2014.
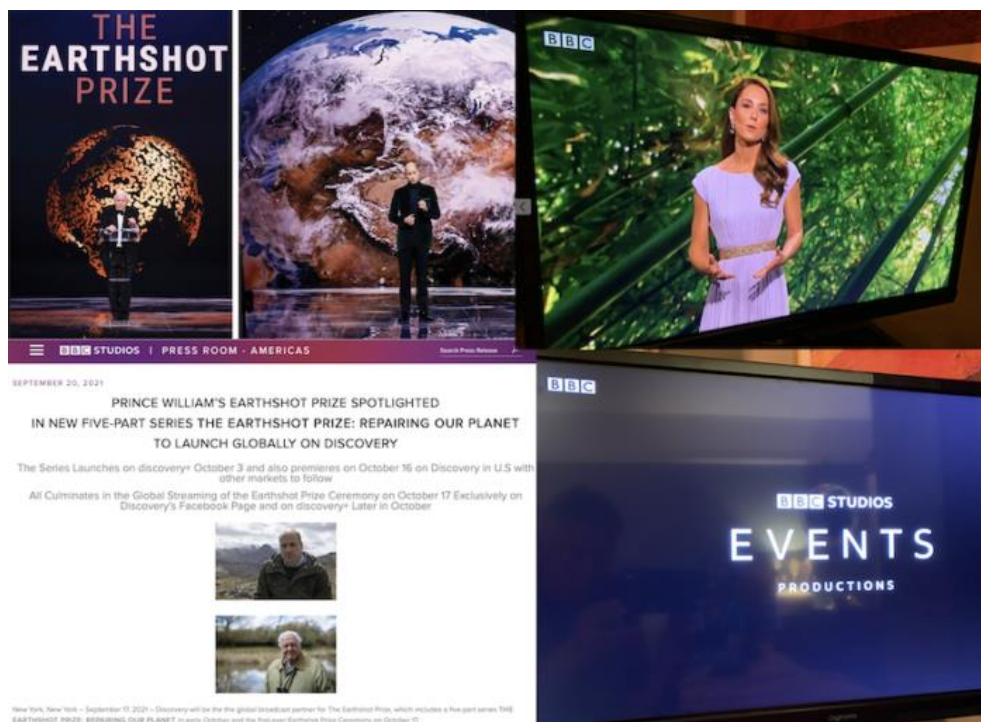
David Attenborough And The BBC

© John Sparks

The BBC of course is a palace of natural history content and the long-standing HQ of Sir David Attenborough, often referred to as 'a god' by BBC insiders, one of the most popular people in Britain, famous for wildlife spectaculars such as *Planet Earth* and *Blue Planet*, and in recent decades an environmental campaigner backing causes such as The Wildlife Trusts and Prince William's 'Earth Shot Prize', featured in a BBC Studios production, *Repairing the Planet*. So far the BBC has rejected calls from campaigners to withdraw from the theme park project. (Sign Save Swanscombe Peninsula's petition to the BBC here). Attenborough has also made several films about dinosaurs but LRCH and BBC publicity suggested the BBC content for the theme park was most likely to be from Dr Who.

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Doctor Who and Top Gear rides could feature at £2bn theme park

10 December 2014

| BBC Worldwide said planned attractions would celebrate the "special place the BBC has in British culture"

Rides based on popular BBC shows such as Top Gear and Doctor Who could

How BBC reported the deal with London Resort in 2014

Earthshot Prize featuring David and Attenborough in 2021 - a BBC Studios production

Both the BBC and ITV have featured in an investor marketing promotion for the London Resort

Since 2011 both the BBC and ITV have made much of their commitments to sustainability, although in both cases it focuses mainly on cutting their climate-changing footprints and waste, through adherence to the 'Albert' sustainable production system set up by the BBC and now also adopted by Netflix, ITV, Sky and Channel Four. Symptomatic of a wider challenge for biodiversity campaigns, Albert says nothing about biodiversity and the BBC has no policy on biodiversity and nature conservation.

Dame Judi Dench endorsing ITV's sustainability mission

Business for Nature and Holcim Lafarge

To cap it all, crucial land required for the LRCH project to build its nature reserve for extinct species, car parks, hotels and the rest of the theme park is 50% owned by the world's largest cement company Holcim (through Swanscombe Development LLP, a partnership with Anglo-American). This is because although originally chalk grasslands and grazing marsh, much of the area was mined to feed a cement works, with land acquired by Lafarge, which then merged with Holcim. Enough flora and fauna survived to recolonize the whole site when the industry shut down, fortuitously also insulated from the chemical onslaught of industrial farming, which explains its biodiversity riches. In recent decades Holcim has set out to be a more sustainable company and in 2021 its CEO Jan Jenisch was one of 20 business leaders [Business for Nature] who wrote an Open Letter to Heads of State on the importance of biodiversity.

Government Fast-Track

Finally, the London Resort theme park project (then Paramount Park) was granted special status in 2014 by then then Conservative Planning Minister Eric Pickles, as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project or NSIP. This by-passes normal democratically controlled local planning process and puts decisions directly in the hands of central government planning inspectors and Ministers to fast-track projects.

Eric Pickles (right) commons.wikimedia.org

Why a theme park, a straightforward commercial development, should qualify as 'nationally significant infrastructure', a special treatment normally reserved for major infrastructure like power stations, ports, or large road or rail projects, has puzzled many informed observers. Pickles justification was 'economic'. If it goes ahead the scheme will destroy several local industrial estates home to 140 small businesses, many of which oppose the theme park, employing over 1500 people. The businesses believe Pickles was ignorant of their

existence, and was only told by planning consultants Savills that the area was a 'mainly post-industrial brownfield land and largely derelict'.

Members of the Peninsula Management Group are concerned about what will happen to their livelihoods if London Paramount goes ahead

Small business affected by the theme park proposal - [*From Kent Online*](#)

A Test Case For UK Government Responsibility

This puts the fate of Swanscombe Peninsula directly in the hands Boris Johnson's government. After many delays caused by LRCH's failure to meet deadlines, the NSIP hearings may start in March and run throughout the time the UK government is taking part in the CBD's COP15. The UK likes to portray itself as an environmental leader at such events and together with France and Costa Rica has been promoting the concept of stopping loss of biodiversity by 2030 (see Cinderella COP, below).

PM commits to protect 30% of UK land in boost for biodiversity

Over 4,000 sq km of new land in England will be designated and protected.

Boris Johnson has adopted the same target as a national objective, saying: "biodiversity loss is happening today, it is happening at a frightening rate".

These awkward circumstances are made more acute because following calls from Buglife, the CPRE, RSPB and Kent Wildlife Trust, and over 70 scientists and conservation experts, Swanscombe Peninsula was confirmed as a nationally important Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in November 2021 by Natural England, the government's own conservation agency. In normal circumstances that should prevent any damaging development, and the heart of the SSSI would be concreted over if the Theme Park were constructed but an NSIP is not normal circumstances. Consequently Swanscombe is a test case of the UK government's commitment to biodiversity.

LRCH claims that the theme park can compensate for lost biodiversity with its 'off-site ecological compensation strategy' but conservation groups dismiss this as impossible given the scale of the direct footprint (about 100 Hectares) and knock-on indirect effects. Natural England have stated "compensation cannot adequately address the harm that would result to the SSSI from the development proposal, as the feasibility of doing this is considered low and very unlikely to offer an equivalent assemblage and richness of species."

A new detailed impression of what the London Resort theme park will look like

[For more information – background papers on Swanscombe – one on the value of the site, the other on LRCH and the BBC]

The Cinderella COP – Some Campaign Issues

Climate change emerged as a global political issue in the late 1980s and it became progressively more obvious that protecting biodiversity needed a similar scientific and political commitment-making system to the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, est 1988) and the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change est 1992). Imperfect though these are, they helped stimulate and frame political action. Although the CBD or Convention on Biological Diversity was first launched at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, it has struggled to translate the global overview of acute need into systematic action at national and regional level.

Grand Targets, Weak Delivery

A 30 December article in *The Guardian* by Patrick Greenfield was headlined 'Can 2022 be a super year for nature?' "Super Year" is the hopeful term that was coined by UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen for 2020, before both the CBD COP15 and COP26 on climate got delayed by Covid. It follows decades of failure. Greenfield summarised the state of play like this:

'Scientists say the sixth mass extinction of life on Earth is under way and accelerating … a million plant and animal species could disappear, according to a UN report … 82% and natural ecosystems have lost about half their area … destruction of the world's forests [has] increased

sharply [and] *the world's governments have missed every single target they have set for themselves on averting the destruction of the natural world'.*

Those failures include a 2002 commitment on the tenth anniversary of the CBD originally signed at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, to 'significantly slow' biodiversity loss by 2010. That was incorporated in the Millennium Development Goals but missed and in turn was followed by the 20 biodiversity 'Aichi Goals' of 2011 agreed in Japan. None were fully met, including target 5, to 'at least halve' the loss of natural habitats by 2020.

The detail shows more protected areas, at least on paper, more cases of individual species brought 'back from the brink' of extinction, and more successes of many kinds due to a huge amount of effort, just not enough to outweigh the impacts such as from industrial agriculture, pollution and land use change.

Higher Ambition

Now the ambition is now to reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 and set aside 30-50% of the planet for nature. In his 2016 book 'Half-Earth: The Planet's Fight for Life' the eminent biologist E O Wilson** proposed making half the earth's surface into sanctuaries as the only way to be sure of stemming the loss of biodiversity. In 2019, spurred by the failure of the

Aichi targets, conservationists adopted a more direct approach and put forward much the same target for land to be set aside for nature.

In April 2019 [20 leading scientists](#) including Tom Lovejoy**, called for a global Deal for Nature with '30% of Earth to be formally protected and an additional 20% designated as climate stabilization areas'. Their proposal was framed as a complement to the Paris (climate) Agreement.

[Pledge for nature](#)

In September 2020 leaders of the European Union and 70 countries (now 93)made the [commitment](#) in a '[Leaders' Pledge for Nature](#)'. The initiative was backed by NGOs, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), Belize, Bhutan, Colombia, Costa Rica, the EU, Finland, Kenya, Seychelles, and the UK. It came just before a UN [Summit on Biodiversity](#) held at the General Assembly in New York with (due to Covid) leaders sending pre-recorded videos .
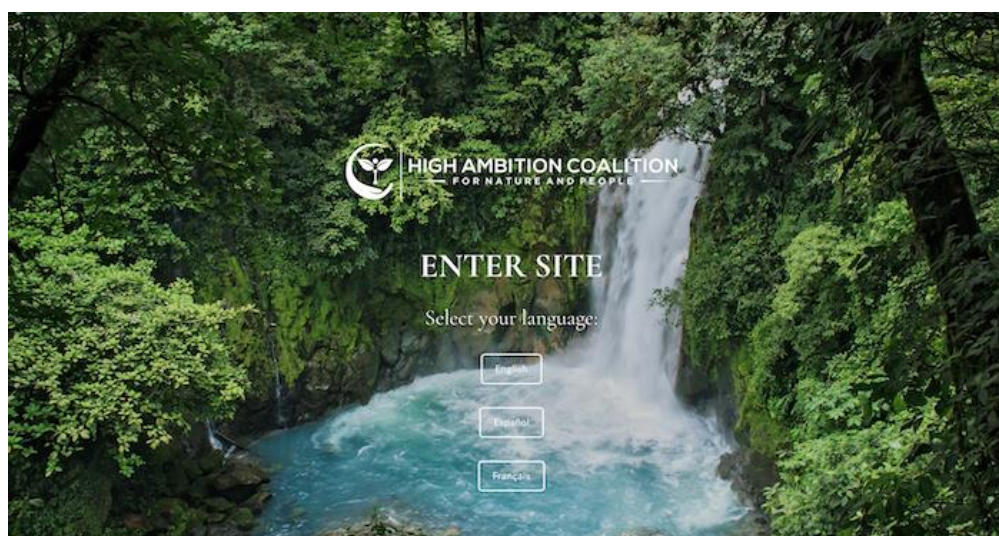
[High Ambition for Nature and People](#)

In Paris on January 11 2021, '30 x 30' got international political backing with the launch of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People at the One Planet Summit. This committed nations to protecting 'at least' 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030. Led by Costa Rica, France and the UK, it now includes 70 countries.   This is undoubtedly progress in starting to organise a progressive network among governments but it is not enough to create delivery. Soon after his inauguration US President Joe Biden announced 'America the Beautiful' his 30 x 30. In the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced his 30 x 30 in September 2020, with all the right sentiments:

"We can't afford dither and delay because biodiversity loss is happening today, it is happening at a frightening rate … If left unchecked, the consequences will be catastrophic for us all … Extinction is forever - so our action must be immediate"

But search online for '30 by 30' and you quickly find a forest of criticisms calling such commitments into doubt, from objections that Biden's plan might not help the environmental struggles of indigenous peoples to campaigners pointing out that Johnson had included England's National Parks as 'protected' areas covering 26% of the country, whereas the RSPB's Lost Decade report found as little as 5% of the UK was actually well managed for nature. The extent to which such more ambitious targets actually produce bigger and better results will depend on how much politicians believe the public want it.

Corporate Action

There is growing engagement of corporations with biodiversity but, as with the BBC, it is generally much lower level or an earlier stage than that on climate. Against that, companies have a track record of being able to move much faster than most governments when they want to.

A 2018 study found one third of the sustainability reports of the top 100 (largest) Fortune 500 companies had some sort of commitment to biodiversity. However the researchers, from Oxford and Kent University, also noted:

Of the top Fortune 100 companies, 86 have publicly available sustainability reports … almost half (49) … mentioned biodiversity … and 31 made clear biodiversity commitments and an additional 12 made clear fishing or forestry commitments. However, only five of these companies made biodiversity commitments that could be considered specific, measurable and time-bound. This is unlike the much greater adoption of science-based climate commitments made by companies committing to reduce carbon emissions in line with the Paris Agreement within the next decade (https://sciencebasedtargets.org/), emphasising that biodiversity loss remains a less pressing issue to the private sector compared to climate change.

One of the authors later wrote:

'when we took a closer look at which companies were making commitments that were specific, measurable & time bound, we found that only 5 of the Fortune 100 did so (Walmart, Hewlett Packard, AXA, Nestlé and Carrefour). For example, Walmart's commitment: "To conserve one acre of wildlife habitat for every acre of land occupied by Walmart U.S. through 2015". Beyond Walmart's commitment, none of the remaining Fortune

100 had adopted quantifiable biodiversity commitments (e.g., no net loss or better), unlike the [small but rising number of businesses](#) outside of the Fortune 100'

We plan to achieve our aspiration by working with suppliers to advance product sourcing and certifications that drive positive impacts for nature. By aligning these actions to landscape/seascape needs and local stakeholder goals, we aim to help create positive environmental, social, and economic impacts.

Walmart's current [conservation commitment](#)

A 2020 German [study](#) also suggested that biodiversity is still a Cinderella topic compared to climate. It examined corporate engagement of 618 firms in halting loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services. It found

'a favourable attitude, driven by perceived business relevance and benefit prospects, fosters engagement. Perceived difficulties, such as lacking finances and knowledge, hinder the engagement. Customers, employees and the general public are presently the only stakeholder groups that drive corporate conservation engagement. Nevertheless, the expectation levels of virtually all stakeholders were found to be quite low and as such inadequate for the ecological crisis we face'.

The observation that 'Customers, employees and the general public are presently the only stakeholder groups that drive corporate conservation engagement' is not surprising given that few governments have yet legislated to require actions comparable to those stipulated in climate-related regulation, such as car manufacturers [facing heavy fines](#) of up to €30,000 per vehicle if their model range does not meet EU targets on reduced carbon emissions.

Translating that to biodiversity would be more complex but the experience of other issues suggests that it's only a carrot and stick approach which really stimulates comprehensive change. The latest post-Brexit [UK scheme](#) for increasing biodiversity on farmland seems to be all carrot and involves paying farm businesses to do so. According to The Wildlife Trusts, it also relies on them to self-evaluate.

The EU has deliberately reached out to engage businesses as part of its constituency building exercise for its [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#) , part of its [European Green Deal](#). A Business Summit was held in November 2021.

[Act for Nature](#) is a French biodiversity initiative aimed at global actors including businesses, NGOs, academic institutions and public bodies. 57 companies have made commitments which Act for Nature considers SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound). It is associated with [Business for Nature](#) which has over 1000 corporate members with revenues totally over $4.7 trillion, including Holcim, and has called on governments to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030.
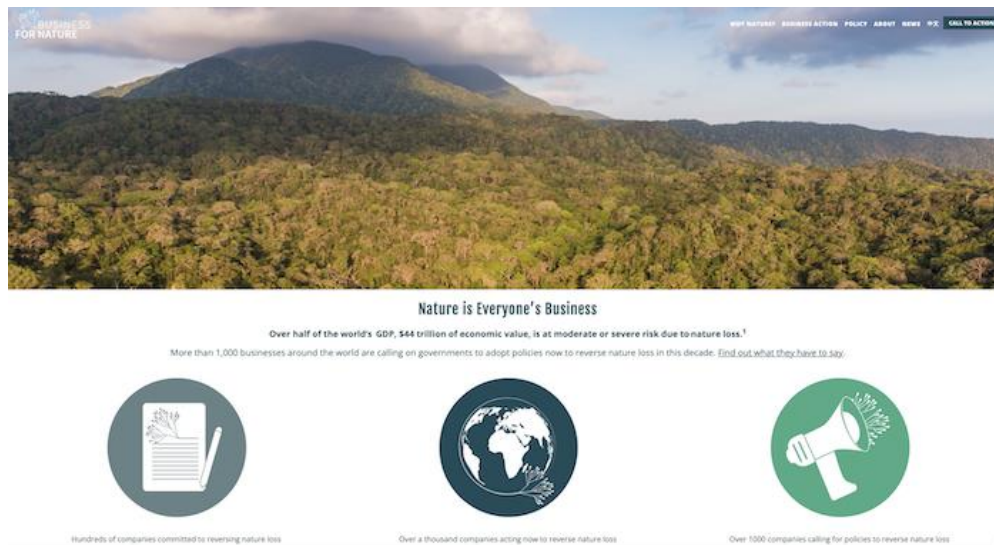

[Business For Nature](#)

In 2021 nine philanthropic organizations , including Jeff Bezos's Earth Fund and Bloomberg Philanthropies [pledged to give $5 billion](#) by 2030 to help reach the 30×30 goal of protecting 30 % of biodiversity.

A Risk For Campaigns

Earlier in this blog I suggested that we needed governments to get organised, to enable politicians to understand biodiversity (for instance it's said that none of the 650 UK MPs have a degree in biology, and 'biodiversity' is really nature for biologists), and 'Enabling people to put pressure on politicians to act on commitments'.

The first two of those are mainly in what I've called the Track 2 World ([see this blog](#)), of policy communities and professional elites, in this case including diplomats and NGO advocates, international scientific networks and executives in corporate ESG (Environment Social and Governance) or CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) roles.
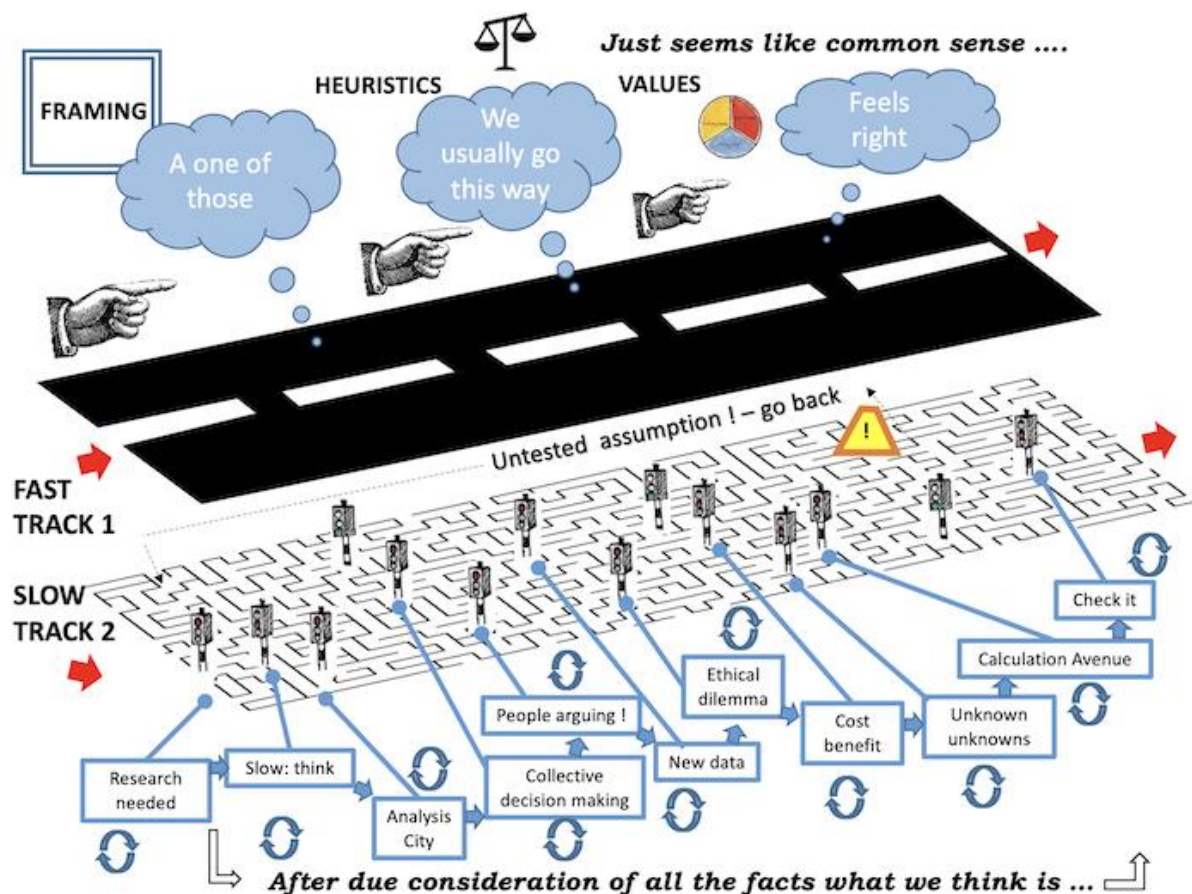
Track 1 and 2: advocacy can work on the slow analytical track 2, public campaigns must work on Track 1

NGOs can have an important role in catalysing these things but there is always a risk of adopting concepts and language which work fine in the 'policy community' but do not cross-over into everyday life, which is the context for public campaigns. Or as communications researchers say, they are not 'portable' and don't function in Track 1 terms where communication is not conscious and analytical (Track 2) but intuitive and dominated by unconscious processes such as framing, heuristics and values.

Given time and education, people _can_ learn the meaning of concepts such as Biodiversity Net Gain or even more arcane ideas, and the biodiversity and climate issues are littered with their acronyms but in everyday life there usually is no time or opportunity for education or training to decode glossaries, certainly not during live campaigns.

So if NGOs approach the CBD on the assumption that they can rouse political support for key demands beyond their most dedicated core base, their efforts are unlikely to succeed. That's a risk which NGOs can mostly control themselves.

Of course, it is possible for simple repetition to create understanding without analytical education, most often based purely on association. For example a thing understood to be _connected to_ nature or climate without necessarily having to understand exactly how.

Although not very useful, this happened in the UK with COP26 (held in Glasgow) and climate. 'COP' got repeated so often in the media and social media that I've even seen politicians wanting to criticise climate measures referring to them as 'COP' without mentioning climate.

A more useful example is the Carbon Footprint. In the 2000s I was surprised to find that volunteer crew of the local RNLI (lifeboat service) who had shown no prior interest in 'climate' beyond gentle scepticism, were enthusiastically trying to fall into line with a request from headquarters to save energy and cut emissions. When I asked why, the answer was just "carbon footprint".

Happisburgh (pron. Haze-burr) footprints in Norfolk UK from 900,000 years ago. A footprint is an intuitively understandable metaphor – an imprint we leave.
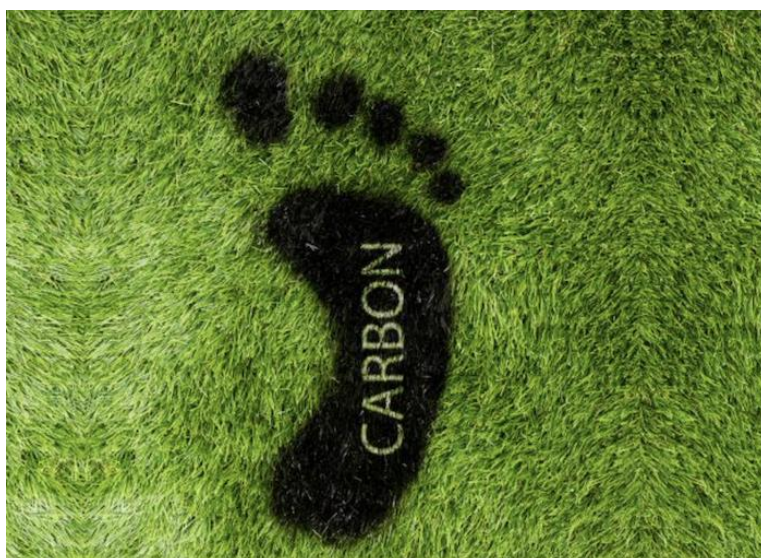
Some campaigners don't like the carbon footprint because it was originated by Ogilvy and Mather for an advertising campaign which associated BP with climate action (and copied the format of the personal rather than corporate responsibility used in many advertising campaigns including the 1970 'litter' packaging campaign, discussed in a previous blog, A

Beautiful If Evil Strategy). However it was preceded by the concept of an Ecological Footprint, which campaigners rather did like, and the same basic idea of source specific responsibility has been turned to good use in assessing the footprint of countries (eg the Living Planet Index/ reports by WWF et al) and by campaigners such as Greenpeace (which has its own carbon footprint calculator) to target corporations.

It seems likely that such carbon-responsibility campaigning helped drive corporates to sign up to initiatives such as the SBTi or Science Based Targets Initiative (begun 2015) and the Carbon Disclosure Project (which also includes forests and started in 2000), and these in turn may even have influenced other initiatives such as the TCFD (Task Force on Climate Related Financial Disclosure, 2015) which has also influenced regulation.

Scalability

A strength of the footprint concept is that it relates responsibility to an entity, right down to the individual. If policy measures adopted by governments or even international initiatives have expression at the regional, local, organisational and individual level, the gulf between elite analytical discourses and personal street corner conversations and actions disappears.

One of favourite examples of a visible, tangible, personal action that was begun to address a national nature problem, is the American Duck Stamp.   The Duck Stamp Act was passed by Congress in 1934. It requires 'each waterfowl hunter to purchase a stamp, thereby generating revenue for wetland acquisition. The Act has resulted in 4.5 million acres of waterfowl habitat protection'.

I'm not a duck shooter but I can't help thinking that the basic idea could be turned to advantage in the modern nature emergency context.

Is Biodiversity Understood?

It isn't safe to assume that the public as opposed to professionals in the sector, know what 'biodiversity' actually means. Back in 2009 I analysed a huge opinion poll used by the European Commission to plan its Action Plan 'Halting The loss Of Biodiversity By 2010 – And Beyond'.

At the time it was claimed that the poll showed 65% of the EU public understood the term and could explain what "loss of biodiversity" meant "in their own words" but in reality the question format had already provided (prompted) them with the answer. A small but more penetrating 2007 survey from the UK had tested unprompted understanding of the term. That found only 9% got the 'right' answer.

The UK study also gave people four possible meanings of biodiversity and asked which was correct. These were 'waste that breaks down naturally', 'the variety of living things', 'rubbish that can be burnt for fuel' and, 'the use of trees to off-set carbon emissions'. Of these the most popular was "waste that breaks down naturally" at 33% (37% amongst women).

Bio-d … Bio-degradable. From vecteezy.com

This suggested people were guessing, and using cues like "bio" and "d-something", "biodegradable" as an easy gut option, with the most likely everyday source of reference being adverts for "biodegradable" products such as washing up liquid. 31% 'got the right answer' but as pure guesswork would have given a 1 in 4 chance of selecting each option, or 25%, I'd say 9% was a more realistic figure for true understanding than 65%.

Maybe now people are genuinely better informed but I would not bank on it. In 2020 Robb Ogilvie published a LinkedIn article 'The greatest problem in communicating the biodiversity crisis is the word biodiversity' [a quote from journalist @_richardblack]. After scouring international research Ogilvie concluded that:

'Biodiversity conservation is in trouble … hobbled by a 'wonky' name, 85+ definitions, an inconsistent media more interested in climate change, a public -30% of whom have never heard of the word, a concept that has too many 'moving parts' for a 30 second sound bite and aspirational mainstreaming that has to fight its way into institutional thinking and into the lifestyle choices of individual members of the public'.

Personally I'd have similar misgivings about assuming the public understand terms like 'nature positive', which is now popular in the biodiversity community along with 'nature positive 2030', and is used to garner support for numerous initiatives, has it's own international alliance at www.naturepositive.org and will no doubt feature around CBD15 (I withdraw my misgivings if it's been rigorously tested for public use in qualitative research).

Given that most of the relevant policy world has been using the word biodiversity for decades I'd also question the utility of inventing new but similarly not understood terms.

This stuff is all very interesting to some but is it a problem?

Yes but only if advocacy specialists are asked to do public communications and they try to use Track 2 jargon to engage the public operating on Track 1 rules. What works in advocacy to politicians with advisers and officials to analyse things, or who may even know their stuff, does not often work in public campaigning.

Use Terms People Already Understand

The simplest and cheapest workaround, indeed something of a golden rule in campaigns, is to use concepts and language the public *already* understand (and given that all the foregoing is about English language terms, for many, those will anyway have to vary). In English these might be things like nature, the 'balance of nature', leaving space for nature, keeping nature intact, responding to the nature emergency, and so on.

In a similar way, use species that people *already* know and understand, and human supporters, brands and associations people already know and like, to make the case for a place or practice that helps biodiversity. In the case of Swanscombe, in the UK, creatures water voles, nightingales and otters have (in the UK) a wider appeal than spiders, although in news values terms the Distinguished Jumping Spider has the virtue of being almost totally dependent on that one site.

Water Vole by P G Trimming (Creative Commons) – aka 'Ratty'- much loved in the UK from Wind in the Willows, a children's book

Language is a problem but not *the* problem for getting politicians to start to take the nature emergency as seriously as the climate emergency.

Two Shifting Baselines

Attempts to protect biodiversity suffer from two shifting baselines: political and perceptual.

The political one is the can-kicking-down-the-road, in which political targets are set in the future, and become an agenda for deferred action rather than stimulating immediate real action. This is compounded if new baselines are adopted after we fail to meet targets on old baselines. Hence my suggestions about interventions to stop existing practices.

The perceptual one is more insidious. It's resetting expectations in line with experience, in this case meaning we no longer expect to see plants or wildlife that disappeared from where we live before our memories started, or we set an expectation of abundance of nature lower than previous generations, or simply get used to not seeing things around any more. In his book *The Moth Snowstorm*, journalist Michael McCarthy called the gradual loss of abundance "the great thinning'.
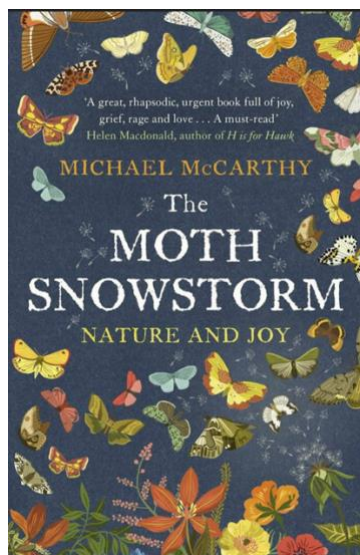
The Moth Snowstorm takes its name from the once-common now largely lost experience of drivers in the UK seeing a 'snowstorm of moths' in car headlights at night.

Both of these have been much discussed in the nature and biodiversity community, and the latter was one of the inspirations for the rewilding movement. Having emerged 'left field' from outside the biodiversity policy mainstream, rewilding and its language has side-stepped many of the issues entangling biodiversity communication efforts. By accident or design it hasn't tried to take on fundamental social, political and economic questions (the polar opposite in some ways of 'Sustainable Development') but has taken ground by direct action, often enabled by the support of wealthy property owners.

In so doing rewilders have come up with explanations or causal stories with an everyday intuitive Track 1 logic such as "rewilding – large-scale restoration of nature to the point where it can take care of itself – will help reverse this collapse in biodiversity". The key ideas here are that left to it's own devices and given its own space 'nature' will take on responsibility,

and that there is an inbuilt success mechanism which will swing into action once there's enough extra nature. Both are intuitively attractive ideas.

But there is another lesson that biodiversity campaigners might draw from the current success of rewilding which is that it may well be easier and more effective to generate public engagement to support the practical *actions* needed to save and restore biodiversity, than to escalate political pressure within the machinery and constraints of the CBD itself, worthwhile though that is.

I would argue that the same has been true of climate change. Progress, including through enhanced political will, started to escalate once renewable energy began to look successful and capable. That had the effect of marginalising the efforts of 'climate sceptics' funded by fossil fuel interests. They haven't entirely gone away but having lost in the energy market they also have lost their ability to use the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as a theatre in which to stymie progress by conjuring a 'scientific debate'.

So more campaigns to support practical action for biodiversity could make more political space for biodiversity, in other words make it easier for politicians to be bold, without having to be brave.

Wolves are now spreading back across Europe, not entirely due to rewilding. Photo (in A Barvarian National Park) by [Aconcagua](#) Creative Commons. 'Rewilding was [originally envisioned](#) as a continental-scale effort in North America with protection of large wilderness cores, suitable habitat corridors for wildlife movement, and recovery of large carnivores' - https://rewilding.org According to Wikipedia, first use of the term 'rewilding' came from Earth First in a 1990 Newsweek article, 'Trying to take back the planet'.

Getting Time On Our Side

Complex environmental issues which can only be fully perceived through science – technological and industrial risks as [Ulrich Beck called them](#) – are difficult to get a handle on directly, not least as they are usually populated by scientists pushing the boundaries of knowledge and constantly producing new uncertainties. Climate change and biodiversity are

both like this and it makes it hard for decision-makers to tell not just what should be done but how much and how quickly.

Systems modelling is one tool which has helped convert forests of evidence into scenarios and projections that enable politicians to make policy choices. Climate examples include work by the Stockholm Environmental Institute in the early 1990s which related greenhouse gas heating of the atmosphere to the ability of ecosystems to adapt naturally (ie survive intact) which is where the 1.5.C target 'limit' originated, and the subsequent IPCC reports. Around the same time others related the warming gases in the atmosphere to carbon released from fossil fuels, and the amount of such fuels in the ground, which is where concepts such as the carbon logic, unburnable carbon, and carbon 'wedges' (referring to graphs) came from.

These gave an idea of how much global heating could be tolerated, and how much carbon could be burnt and more recent work has tried to show how much time might be left to act on these, offering decision makers a rationale for when they must act.

In 2019 Peter Schellenhuber, director of the Potsdam institute and an adviser to the EU and German government, combined the decision-logic of air traffic controllers on urgency, and insurers on risk, with climate modelling on tipping points, to produce an equation reproduced in a Nature paper with Timothy Lenton and others, aimed at politicians piloting their nations.

EMERGENCY: DO THE MATHS

We define emergency (E) as the product of risk and urgency. Risk (R) is defined by insurers as probability (p) multiplied by damage (D). Urgency (U) is defined in emergency situations as reaction time to an alert (τ) divided by the intervention time left to avoid a bad outcome (T). Thus:

$$E = R \times U = p \times D \times \tau / T$$

The situation is an emergency if both risk and urgency are high. If reaction time is longer than the intervention time left ($\tau / T > 1$), we have lost control.

The Schellenhuber emergency equation

It reads 'we define emergency as the product of risk and urgency … Risk is defined by insurers as probability multiplied by damage …urgency is defined in emergency situations as reaction time to an alert divided by the intervention time left to avoid a bad outcome … the situation is an emergency if both risk and urgency are high. If reaction time is longer than the intervention time left, we have lost control'.

The authors were talking about the global climate system although many of the modelled tipping points are living ecosystems such as the Amazon rainforest. Perhaps such analyses will be presented as part of CBD15 but campaigners could do much more at a local and

national level to relate nature understandable without resort of scientific models, to risk and damage and particularly to time and urgency.

For example communications analysts have pointed out that in western societies, 'time' is metaphorically treated as a substance having value, for instance we talk about having 'wasted' or 'saved' time, or 'running out of time'. Yet protecting ancient nature is often not afforded the same importance as protecting human-made artefacts such as ancient buildings. It has been shown in the UK, for instance, that once damaged or destroyed, ancient grasslands do not fully recover their species and integrity even after more than 100 years. The oldest yew tree in the UK, at Fortingall in Scotland, may be 5,000 years old. Fungal networks and seagrass beds in other countries have been found to be even older.

Final Thoughts

"It's not bringing in the new ideas that's so hard; it's getting rid of the old ones"

John Maynard Keynes

In many campaigns there's the foreground story and the background story. The real significance, if it has one, usually lies in the background. In the case of Swanscombe and battles like it, whether campaigners win or lose, the true significance is about how politicians view nature, and how they allow the systems they control such as planning, to treat it.

Steven Norris's frustrations about 'democracy' getting in the way of conventional development and his [breezy approval](#)of NSIPs for large developments as "very very welcome" were expressed with the deep confidence that nature and open space are basically blanks on the map, better filled with new infrastructure.

Norris is not particularly unusual, his assumptions are just typical of conventional past thinking. This ecosystem-or-nature-as-free space assumption underpins the no-limits politics which led to the nature and climate emergencies. It has to go and be replaced with something more akin to a circular economy operating more organically, like a properly functioning ecosystem. And, as Rebecca Willis said in *Too Hot To Handle,* her brilliant little book on finding democratic solutions to climate change (such as Citizen's Assemblies), "the problem is not *too much* democracy, it is *too little*".

In its own way, the BBC also needs to stop seeing nature as something free that it can turn (and that is the role of BBC Studios) into money-making content, without responsibility. Five years ago I ended a critical blog '[Please David Attenborough: For Nature's Sake, No Planet Earth III](#)' with:

'The BBC 'pays no rent' for nature: it has a debt to repay, and could yet really help 'save the planet'.

The BBC has improved since then but to come good on that responsibility it at least has to switch sides over Swanscombe Peninsula.

As part of its [PR launch](#) for Green Planet, the BBC 'took over' Green Park tube station in London

notes

* I did some work for Buglife on Swanscombe in 2021 but the views in this blog are mine

**Wilson was often compared to Charles Darwin for his insights, and along with ecologist Tom Lovejoy, was credited with inventing the term 'biodiversity'. Wilson died on 26 December 2021, Lovejoy on Christmas Day 2021.