

## Chapter 4    Where To Go Now?

*(Part 4 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](mailto:chris@campaignstrategy.co.uk) September 2022)*



*A fat hedge on Great Farm, Norfolk*

### **A Challenge, An Opportunity And A Gift**

If farming seems to be sorting itself out, it might be tempting for the established groups to 'leave farming to the farmers' and to retreat back to focus more on protected areas, territory where they have been most accepted, effective and comfortable. In my view that would be a mistake, and for three reasons, NGOs ought to get more, not less involved.

First, while farmers are undoubtedly the best messengers for other farmers, and the spread of procedural how-to knowledge across the 3Rs by Fiennes and others is going on without pushing it through politics or policy, there will probably come a point where even the powerful motivators of self-interest (better results), fashion (it's on a roll) and satisfaction (it's popular) will need help.

The 3Rs have moved from the experimental to the early adopter phase but not every farmer and landowner will make the change fully or effectively, and many of the changes are reversible. The upside of the current loose aggregations of practitioners is rapid contagion of ideas. A downside risk is greenwash and free-riding, which is almost a certainty if there's money to be made, for example from being labelled 'regenerative', whether from AES or other public money, or as a consumer selling-point.

To win an end game, policy will indeed need to be adjusted to support the good and outlaw the bad. Policy change needs politics, and that ultimately needs public support, which in turn requires social networks and the media. Here the established NGOs have a huge and underused potential. Almost all their millions of supporters are voters, all of them are food consumers, and many have investments.

Second, although the UK is a small market for agrochemicals globally, if the Fiennes/ regen/ restorative model and equivalents spread, they pose a market threat to the chemicals industry which has grown fat on agriculture maximising 'productivity', with maximum inputs of their products.

Talk privately with senior people in agrochemical majors and some will tell you they see Europe as already a 'lost' market due to consumer resistance to GM, neonicotinoids and chemical farming in general. The big and growing markets include North America, Latin America and Asia, followed by Africa. A revolutionary switch away from chemical maximisation poses them with an existential threat similar to that posed to the fossil fuel industry by renewable energy. That's not something they will all ignore or happily adapt to.

Third, whereas mainstream nature and countryside groups have failed to bend the trajectory of agricultural practice over several generations, and they have been very effective in communicating the general *idea* that nature is disappearing from the countryside, even if most cannot tell if it's happening in front of them. Nature NGO supporters will *expect* them to be part of a solution.

Plus over the last decade much of the running on UK land management and agriculture's impact on nature has been made not by the conservation establishment but by small new groups and individuals who have not tried to go *through* farming to change it but mount public interest challenges on specifics. For example the campaigns led by [George Monbiot](#), [Feargall Sharkey](#), [Angela Jones](#) and others on rivers and water pollution, actualisation of rewilding (eg [Ben Goldsmith](#)), landownership issues (eg [Guy Shrubsole](#)), and Monbiot on [food and agriculture](#).

The rivers campaigns have been especially active across the West of England where concentration of industrialised dairying has driven its own ecological wipe-out. Of course there are people within groups like the RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts, CPRE, the National Trust and Welsh and Scottish equivalents who are aware of this. Some such as the Radnorshire Wildlife Trust now have close links with regenerative farmers working [to tackle](#) pollution on the River Wye.

In a 2020 post [TB, Badgers and Cattle in The UK: A Campaign Ripe For A Re-boot](#) I proposed that environmental NGOs should treat Bovine TB in badgers [as an issue of farm intensification](#) (as animal welfare groups have), boost the campaigns on river pollution caused by intensive dairy, and press for the most problematic BTB areas to be rewilded out of livestock farming.

So far caution has prevailed and campaign capabilities are limited. A strategic shift to mount the sort of campaigns that could help the 3Rs lead to wholesale reform of UK farming, probably looks a huge challenge (for my suggestions, see the end of this paper).

Fortunately, by coining the term ‘Taliban Farming’, Jake Fiennes has gifted campaign designers a piece of communications alchemy. Simply giving a practice a name of it’s own enables social pressures to work on it in ways which are impossible if we have to write a paragraph to explain it. It’s a great campaign opportunity.

### Taliban Alchemy

Once something has a name we can approve or disapprove of it. It can establish a social fact (taken to be real and true), or a social norm (something made real as a social expectation and kept in place by disapproval of norm-breaking) or even a school of study. I gave this example in [What Makes People Tick](#):

*‘... the meaning of behaviours changes over time. When few people could afford to fly, for example, flying had a cachet now well and truly lost. Any attributes of air travel were sought after – airlines issued small shoulder bags to travellers so they could show they were part of the ‘jet set’. When some passengers complained of feeling tired after a long flight, the term jetlag started to be used. Then it became fashionable. People started reporting ‘jetlag’ after flying from Newcastle to London!’*

In other words, the existence of the name, crystallises something as a mental thing or social fact, facilitating [framing](#). Who now could argue that jet-lag does not exist, and who thinks it is a good thing? Nobody except perhaps some melatonin manufactures.



*Flight bags enabled people to show they were part of the “jet set” in the 1960s, when air travel was still in [transition from luxury to utility](#). At that point ‘jetlag’ was fashionable. No longer but the term has entered the lexicon.*

Once jet-lag became a thing you, could use it as a metaphor to frame something else, “eg this thing (X) would give you jet-lag”, or “it’s the jet-lag of all [category]’s”, and by the rules (‘elements’) of the frame you’d confer a whole bunch of attributes on that X, even though you are just using ‘jet-lag’ as a metaphor. In the case of jet-lag the elements are generally bad and inconvenient. Of course Jake Fiennes use of the word ‘Taliban’ does that in the UK because the Taliban are associated with ruthlessness, even if they are not literally farming in East Anglia.

If it’s used, the simplifying **dichotomy** introduced by Fiennes should make the farming-nature issue much more tractable in political and media circles. Politicians and journalists typically have a vast mental library of received-wisdom truths regarding things they know almost nothing about but they do know just enough to enable them to sound articulate and informed. For instance, by knowing the conventionally accepted problem and solution. So in this case “Taliban Farming” is bad and “Restorative Farming” is good, without having to get into details.

Of course it does help to be able to identify a *few* features of each if you are to effectively engage with the public but in [Track 1](#) intuitive public communications as opposed to [Track 2](#) analytical, technical, specialist communications, just a few will do. Classically, three are enough. So one indicator of Restorative Farming might be that it has fat as opposed to the stumpy shredded hedges indicative of Taliban Farming. Another might be wide field margins with flowers (good, Restorative) as opposed crops grown right into the hedge (Taliban, bad). Might a third be the presence or absence of soil from fields on public roads?

Once understanding right and wrong is simplified in this way it becomes possible to construct campaigns in problem and solution terms with moral weight. That’s a campaigning [101](#).

It also becomes possible to **triangulate** the issue, in this case by identifying two different groups of farmers. Perhaps initially those at the two poles of farming practice – from Taliban to Restorative, from ‘bad’ to ‘good’ - and if those get codified, two distinct groups. That would in itself be a game changer. Some in the conservation groups know this but they’ve not managed to do it.

### **Praise The Good But Don’t Ignore The Bad**

Parents are often told to ‘praise the good and ignore the bad’ but that only works if the predicate is correct, namely that the ‘bad’ behaviour is a form of attention-seeking. It doesn’t work if the ‘bad’ behaviour has nothing to do with seeking attention which you can give or withhold. In this case, if ‘bad’ farming is motivated by profit or simply by familiarity and the Consistency Effect (“I’ve always done it this way, so ... I’ll do it again”).

Fiennes (p9) describes talking to a sceptical farmer about ‘how we could incorporate a wildflower strip around some of his fields to increase biodiversity’. Despite the prospect of Stewardship payments:

*'The idea of growing something which would not directly be part of what he could sell was hard for him to swallow. "But that's not what I'm used to doing" he said, "I have spent my whole career killing the things I don't need!"'*

Since the 1980s (arguably since the 1960s) the main British conservation groups have routinely praised the good in farming and ignored the bad. More, specifically, they have ignored the bad by not identifying instances of 'bad farming' in a way which you could put names and places to, produce in evidence, or show on the ground, while publicising 'good farming' through exemplar farmers. Both the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts have done this and so has Natural England.

Leading conservation organisations have put names and faces to the positive while resorting to statistics to represent the negative. Joseph Stalin famously identified a big communications problem with this. He said "If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that's only statistics".



*Joseph Stalin – one thing he got right was understanding the weakness of statistics*

So if one person (or bird) dies, the question arises, who's responsible? Hence in England, outrage over poisoning or shooting of individual Hen Harriers and Sea Eagles. A million die, and the suspicion is, maybe there is no single person to be held responsible. Consequently statistical reports like 'State of Nature' [see Annexe] did not translate into "Most Wanted" posters, and while the good-farming exemplars are great as 'Most Liked' poster boys and girls, the villains have remained conveniently invisible.

TWTs, NE and RSPB have all produced galleries of case-study farmers doing wonderful things for nature but without the equivalent, let alone a proportionate equivalent, of farmers doing bad things.

### **A Failed Strategy**

The reason for this is that these organisations predicated their agriculture strategies on the idea that they could only or best have an effect by being 'farmer friendly'. As they had no good and bad farmer camps to deal with at a national level (nothing equivalent, for instance, to renewable as opposed to fossil energy), that meant not falling out with 'farming' per se, which at least in England, defaults to not confronting the NFU. The NFU has maintained its monopoly as representing "the voice of farming".



Both the TWTs and RSPB work with lots of ‘good’ farmers. The Wildlife Trusts [explain](#) that they manage ‘26 working farms [including organic] where we demonstrate wildlife-friendly farming’, some of which are run by local farmers, and, ‘give advice to around 5,000 farmers and landowners each year’, as well as working ‘to improve agriculture policy for wildlife’, and managing 100,000 hectares of their own land.

In 2017, the RSPB created the [Nature Friendly Farming Network](#) (NFFN), [now a](#) ‘farmer-led independent organisation’. It has at least 2,000 farmer members and more non-farmer members.



NFFN is a serious organisation and could be taken up a level by the RSPB certification scheme FTN or ‘[Fair to Nature](#)’, if that translated into a certified branded products available across mainstream retail outlets. The RSPB states that Fair to Nature is:

*‘the only UK certification scheme with a focus on biodiversity and a proven approach to restoring the balance of nature in farming. Working with people across the supply chain, we help to protect and restore nature on farmland while making it easier for people to recognise sustainable products and support businesses that are committed to making a genuine difference’.*

In the style of an AES option, Fair to Nature farmers ‘dedicate at least 10% of their farmed land’ to ‘six key elements advocated by the [Farm Wildlife partnership](#)’ [the partnership is the EU+ Life Programme plus 11 voluntary organisations including The Wildlife Trusts, RSPB and NFFN]. [These are:](#)

- *Semi-natural habitats in good ecological order (no minimum percentage but counts towards the 10%)*
- *Flower-rich habitats (minimum of 4%)*
- *Seed-rich habitats (minimum of 2%, unless farm has less than 10% cropped land)*
- *Wildlife-rich field boundaries and margins (minimum of 1%)*
- *Wet features (1 per 100 ha, with an average size of 25 m<sup>2</sup>)*
- *Other in-field habitats (no minimum)*

The RSPB writes: ‘If all UK farms turned 10% of their farmed land into managed ecosystems, we WOULD reverse biodiversity loss and ensure our land is fit for future generations’.

That is no doubt true and I don’t know how Fair to Nature is getting on but at the time of writing its website only lists two certified businesses, Lordington Lavender and Honeychop (oat straw) Horse Feed.

Fair to Nature works closely with the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN), which has been set up by farmers to help support the growth of nature friendly practices. You can sign up as a public member free of charge via [their website](#).



The graphic features a white horse on the left, looking towards the right. In the center, there are three bags of Honeychop horse feed: 'HONEYCHOP', 'HONEYCHOP TOPLINE & SHINE', and 'HONEYCHOP CHOPPED OAT STRAW'. Above the bags is a yellow box with the 'FAIR TO NATURE' logo, which includes a bee. To the right of the bags, the text reads 'HONEYCHOP HORSE FEEDS' and 'Case Study'. Below this, a paragraph states: 'The Honeychop range of high fibre chaffs for horses are made with oat straw grown on a Fair to Nature certified farm in Suffolk.' At the bottom right, there is a dark brown button with the text 'READ MORE'.

Suppose the NGO 'partner' farmer networks comprise about 5 – 6,000 farmers, that's about 5-6% of farmers. The reality may be a smaller number, maybe only 2%.

Phil Rothwell, an ecologist who worked with the RSPB on issues including agriculture until 2003 told me:

*"The established wildlife charity sector effectively stopped campaigning. They were both bought off by increasingly being dragged into government meetings, 'secret' briefings ....[by Ministers]*

*They believed they had the inside track and could afford to be nicer to farmers and landowners which had a secondary benefit in their eyes of making land purchase and reserve management easier by aligning themselves as legitimate landowners.*

*Clearly - now - a failed strategy. Often the [NGO] sector would quote 'good guys' who were farming in a sensitive way. The belief being that if you bigged them up the rest of the sector would follow. That was clearly nonsense. The thing they forgot, and for science-based organizations this is criminal, is that the friendly good guys are about 1 % of the total and had limited impact ... In both agriculture and [regarding] grouse moors they were just being 'managed'".*

So while in theory they want to, the main NGOs have been reluctant to call out 'bad farming'. For a number of reasons, Jake Fiennes has no such self-inhibiting qualms.

## Taliban Alley

I first heard Fiennes use the term ‘Taliban Farming’ when I visited Great Farm, which is on Holkham Estate and where he starts his book with a chapter entitled ‘Hedge Porn’. Tony Juniper and his partner Sue Sparkes were with us.

Jake described how the land here had been “hammered” for years by a tenant growing root-crops, planted right up to the hedges which were cut back to head height every year. For the past few years he’d released the hedges so they could grow and flower, and reoriented the cropping to leave large margins and introduced longer crop rotations.

The field edges were full of flowers, not sown but regenerated from seeds left buried in the ‘seed bank’ which had somehow survived herbicide applications, including now rare arable ‘weeds’ like Rough Poppy and Night Flowering Catchfly or Clammy Cockle. Birds had recolonised the hedgerows, including lots of Yellowhammers.



*Tony, Sue and Jake at Great Farm, 2022*

“How’s it going with the farmers?” asked Tony. Jake said something like “Pretty good, most people are moving [ie changing their management] except for a few hold-outs, ‘the Taliban’ who will never change’.

Such a shame I thought, that I can’t use Jakes’ rather un-PC ‘Taliban’ name for bad-farming in public communication. Then I read his book and discovered he uses it all the time.





Above (left) Taliban Alley, and (right) Great Farm, both on Holkham land, both described by Jake Fiennes in *Land Healer*.

He says in *Land Healer* (p 89):

*'It takes about six years to return some kind of natural balance to land that has been farmed intensively, what I usually call 'Taliban-style farming', which kills everything it doesn't want'*



*Taliban Alley on the way to Wighton, Norfolk*

Towards the end of the book on p 257, he even names a place: 'Taliban Alley':

*'I am driving along the road I call 'Taliban Alley', west of Wighton. It's still Holkham land, but it's part of an area where the farms have been in the hands of older tenants, the generation on the point of retiring, who have been immersed in the high-productivity, high-input attitudes that I have previously described. There is a slight rise in the land, and the hedges both beside the road and dividing the crop fields have been shorn and slashed into neat rectangular lines. Many of these hedge species – which stubbornly, miraculously, somehow cling to life – are little more than ivy-covered stumps, physical demarcations in the land but of almost no biodiversity value, a useless habitat for feeding or nesting birds'.*



He adds:

*'In fairness to the farmers, many of these hedges were planted during the Inclosure Acts period and they contain just one or two species of plant ...'*

When I read that, I realised I know 'Taliban Alley'. Every year for the past decade I've made a stop there during a day of 'nature training' for [www.fairylandtrust.org](http://www.fairylandtrust.org) crew. These are people from many walks of life. It's a nature charity for families with young children so they come primed to some degree with pro-nature attitudes but they are selected for their ability or interest in performing, not any nature knowledge. They're a diverse lot and have included nurses, teachers, builders, carpenters, scientists, civil servants, planners, musicians, artists, shop workers, film-makers, a PA, a coppicer, a hospital consultant, electrical and computing engineers, and a social worker.

We show them the hedges and verges at Taliban Alley but not as an example of particularly 'bad' farming, just sadly typical fields the [North Norfolk 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'](#), before showing them a very different verge and hedgerow. It's testament to the sterilised nature of countryside in this area that when we started this training it took me days of searching to find just one really biodiverse stretch of roadside verge near our route (there are a handful of others).

We do the same thing, with woodland: contrasting an estate plantation woodland whose ground flora is restricted to a few nitrogen-tolerant plants, with a visit to an ancient woodland with bluebells, wood anemones and a host of other plants which survive there as they are restricted to woodland with a natural soil structure. And with grasslands: we show them basics of how to read the landscape, for instance how bright green fertilised grassland will contain hardly any flowers, whereas biodiverse 'grassland' with dozens of different species looks brownish from a distance, as it's mostly not in fact grass. They are usually amazed and say things like "it changed my life" and "I will never look at the countryside in the same way again", and of course they want to do something about it.

This isn't rocket-science psychology but it illustrates a task which needs to be undertaken if a wider public is to actively support what 'good farmers' are doing, and demand that Taliban Farming is ended.



They need to be able to discern the difference, so that bad change and good change can be perceived in real life, on the ground, on a walk or looking at a view, so the politics of nature and farming can become local for more than a few ‘experts’, and so policies can be tested against real-world outcomes at the local political level, not just via social media debates about aggregate statistics or online outrage at bad doings reported by ‘experts’.

### **Dramatic Polarities**

Journalist Simon Barnes once wrote of a Greenpeace campaign that it was composed in “dramatic polarities of the most unsubtle kind”. It’s this which often fuels revelatory experiences and the binary good v bad contrasts sought after by journalists to give emotional impact to stories that are otherwise ‘just facts’. Having disclosed in our conversation at Great Farm that there were a few Taliban hold-outs among Holkham’s tenant farmers, Fiennes wryly added (I paraphrase):

*“Still, they are quite useful really. First I bring people here [Great Farm] and show them the birds, the plants, the flowers or fruit on the bigger hedges, the hares, and they get it but it only really hits home when we visit the Taliban farms, where there is almost no birdsong, no flower rich margins, the hedges are cut right back and the crops sown right into the hedge. It’s the contrast”.*

So unknown to me, he’d been doing essentially the same thing in Taliban Alley with farmers, as I had with the Fairyland Trust trainees. The more dramatic the polarity, the greater the impact. Just before midsummer Sarah Wise and I went to Winks Meadow nature reserve in Suffolk. It’s a miniscule 1ha of old hay meadow surrounded by intensive barley that Taliban Farming would be proud of.



*Outside and inside Winks Meadow run by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust*

The contrast is all the greater because it is delineated by a large hedge. Step inside and you leave neat and tidy but seemingly lifeless industrial farmland and enter a paradisaical island of biodiversity. We visited under leaden skies just as a thundery squall arrived: a turtle dove flew out from a hawthorn, yellow birds foot trefoil and pink pyramidal orchids glowed under the leaden skies and quaking grass and hay rattle quivered under heavy raindrops.

[Winks Meadow video see <https://vimeo.com/743955566> ]

There is [reason to believe](#) that such relict survivors cannot be 're-created' for hundreds of years, possibly ever. We can only appreciate and value them as what Richard Mabey called "life rafts out of the past". But what is scandalous, and thus more motivating is that so much *can* be restored.

Consequently rewilding and habitat restoration can have a similar motivational effect. They show the difference we can make. If it invokes a memory of what was believed lost forever, the response is even more acute.

Graham Harvey's 1997 [The Killing of the Countryside](#) starts by describing the recovery of a Cambridgeshire hay meadow by Robin Page and Gordon Beningfield who set up the [Countryside Restoration Trust](#) (CRT) in 1993:

*A few miles west of Cambridge, where the Bourn Brook meanders toward the River Cam, something very curious is happening to the countryside. Wildflowers have begun to appear in the wet meadow-land which now lines the stream banks – ox eye daisy, lady's bedstraw and birdsfoot trefoil. Nearby a grass field blazes with the flowers of meadowland, while a wheat crop is speckled with cornflower, corn cockle and the rare shepherd's needle ...*

*The contrast with the surrounding countryside ... featureless blocks of chemically-manicured crops stretching away to the far horizon ... could scarcely be greater ...*

*Robin Page tells of taking a group of elderly people to see his restored Cambridgeshire hay meadow. The experience proved too much for one woman. As she gazed upon the meadow flowers that had been such a familiar part of her childhood she was moved to tears . It was a sensual delight she had not experienced for years but one which she had never forgotten . No one too young to have been a child in the 1940s or 50s could have any conception of it , nor of the appalling destruction wrought by the post - war obsession with agricultural efficiency'.*

The CRT is still in business and encourages public involvement and visits to its restoration sites but as I remember, when Page started his Cambridgeshire project we conventional nature conservationists regarded it as eccentric and idiosyncratic. Perhaps if it had been taken more seriously as a model, we would be in a better position today.

In 2015 Phil Rothwell [described](#) a similar encounter:

*'A 1990s trip to a see Suffolk farm with the farmer and his father, sticks in my mind. The older man had passed management of the farm on to his son some years earlier. As we stood in*



*the middle of a wheat field looking at a dry, hard soil, with cracks in it that you could lose a 12 inch ruler down, the young farmer said that he failed to understand the fuss. The land as far as he was concerned, had always been like this, and for him a skylark- free field was normal and always been so. It was his father who corrected him and confessed that much had changed, the soil seemed less alive and the farm had changed its cropping patterns significantly. He recalled that when his father had passed the farm on to him there were lapwings and skylarks in the same fields. There were also sheep and cows and pasture, now all long-gone as the once mixed farm had given way to a winter- sown monoculture’.*

In *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm* (2018, p 149) Isabella Tree wrote her own account of taking visitors to see the ‘Southern block’ at Knepp where land had been allowed to revert from arable to ‘scrub’ since 2001. ‘The real surprise’ she said, ‘came from the oldest generation’. Those in their eighties could remember seeing Knepp when it had been allowed to revert to nature once before, during the inter-war agricultural depression.

They saw ‘clumps of dog rose and hawthorn, thickets of hazel and willow – even swathes of ragwort’ and it recalled the countryside of their childhood ‘heaving with birds and insects ... a covey of grey partridges in every field’. To them it was ‘positively beautiful’.

The group included another father and son pair:

*“You don’t know what you are talking about”, one old boy berated his son – a baby during the war – who insisted that what they were seeing was ‘unnatural’.*

### **Realising The Revolution**

If we are to realise the full ‘revolutionizing’ potential of what Fiennes and the 3Rs are doing I draw two conclusions from such stories.

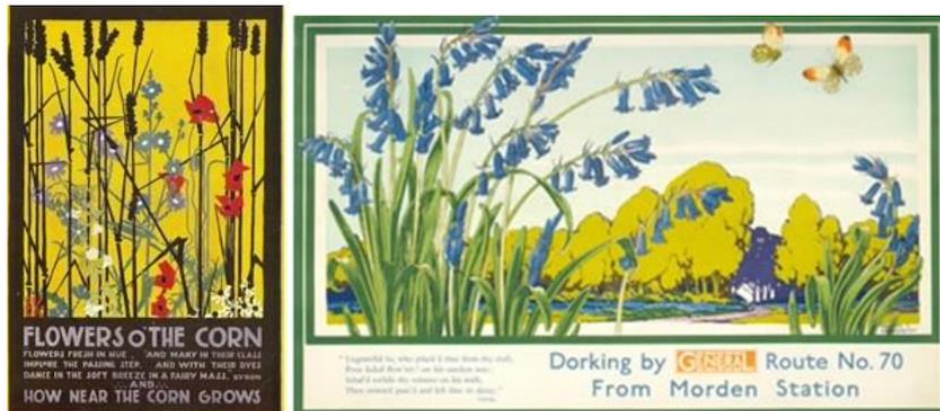
First, we need to give many more people the first hand experience of the contrast between nature-rich and nature-poor farming, in places and ways as dramatic and unmistakeable as possible.

Second, we need to enable people to perceive and understand nature, to *know* what they are looking at or hearing, to be able to see and read the landscape from the turf or garden lawn directly beneath their feet to a single roadside verge or hedgerow, to a panoramic view across hills and valleys.

Teaching people more about the history of what has been lost might be tempting if one is thinking in terms of trying to hold farmers, governments, politicians or landowners to account but there is no meaningful judicial opportunity where the evidence will be weighed with any effect. Some of that may happen but to catalyse change leading to nature restoration requires more understanding not of history but of natural history.

This may sound obvious but it is not what is happening now. The great majority of people in the UK are now blind to the detail of nature which past generations could see. Yet there is no significant effort to change this.

The 2014 post [\*Why Our Children Are Not Being Connected With Nature\*](#) (with [this report](#)) argued that a country like Britain needs remedial public education campaigns to rebuild the ability to recognize nature and its absence. Not environmental or scientific concepts: search for 'Eco literacy' online and many of the projects you find are essentially dealing with attitudes about environmental issues, not capabilities. We need natural history ability relatable to conservation and people's lives. Mary Colwell's new [GCSE in natural history](#) is a great thing but we need a multi-stranded large-scale public education campaign.



Walter E Spradberry's 'Dorking' (1929), shows recognizable bluebells and orange-tip butterflies. His spring 'Flowers of the Season' poster (1933) could serve as an identification guide, showing realistic bluebell, ragged robin, violets and lady's smock, amongst others. At the time these were all familiar: Edward Step's Wayside and woodland blossoms describes lady's smock as "a multitude" in "all moist meadows". Not now of course. The summer poster shows yarrow and harebell and different species of scabious, cinquefoil and other flowers.



In the 1950s, a London schoolchild or commuter staring at platform posters might have seen Derrick Sayer's red admiral 'Butterflies' poster, perhaps explaining why it became our 'best known' butterfly, whereas a third of modern children cannot recognize it.

Above: extract from the report: [\*Why Our Children Are Not Being Connected With Nature\*](#) showing old London Transport posters from a time when these wildflowers were still familiar

The farmer who cannot tell a turtle dove from a collared dove is not in a position to know if his or her practices have brought them back. The gardener who wants to help nature but cannot tell the difference between a real native primrose and a sterile garden-centre primula will be unable to use their garden to sustain wildflowers and the insects which rely on them. The voter who wants her or his MP to help conserve a local meadow can make a far more convincing case if they can walk them around it and name and explain what's growing there, and not just cite stats on historic meadow loss. In each case and many others, ability is essential to make a difference.

We have more than 50 years of lost ground to make up in terms of 'nature literacy', and it will be needed if campaigns for nature are to be effective.

### **Illumination and Agency**

Jakes Fiennes describes (p 59) how aged eight, he found his mother's lost car keys while out on a walk with her because she had "taught me to notice the smallest changes in the natural landscape and think about what they meant ... in my mind's eye the walk had been punctuated by all of the things my mother had made me stop to observe and really take notice". They had spent time admiring some fruiting trees, and that's where the keys were.

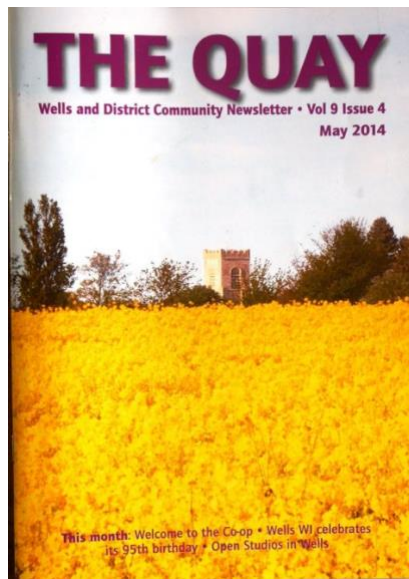
An ability to tell one plant, bird or animal from another is not the whole picture but it's like learning the alphabet: it helps you learn how to read, and once you can read, a library is more than just set of shelves holding books. Being able to read changes the value we put on books. Being able to read nature changes something as simple as a walk.

Geoffery Grigson's classic *The Englishman's Flora* was written in the 1950s as the chemical sterilisation of England's countryside was only just starting. He collated dozens of local names for plants, a diversity acquired when they were still widespread and abundant enough to be familiar to 'everyone' (39 names for Cowslip alone). In the 1960s his daughter Sophie wrote in the introduction:

*"Reading it takes me straight back to the foraging strolls through my native Wiltshire countryside. My father transformed what might, for a child, have been a penance, into a voyage of discovery. He illuminated the hedgerows and fields with his knowledge of the plants that grew there".*

It seems clear to me that the ability to read nature is instrumental in enabling us to save and restore it. As David Attenborough said: "no one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced".





*A field of Oil Seed Rape adorns the cover of the local magazine for Wells Next the Sea, a very small town in a very rural area. In England it's often wrongly assumed that 'people in rural areas' live much closer to nature and therefore know and care for it better. In fact it's not unusual for them to mistake this intensive crop for a wildflower meadow, something they've all heard of but very few have ever seen.*



*Wendlebury Meads hay meadow in Oxfordshire, near Otmoor. A 1979 survey had found 148 herbs, mosses and grasses in the sward, at densities up to 45 species per square metre (in*



*Furze Ley, the oldest field which had probably never been ploughed). Even in fields which had experienced agricultural rotation over the previous 170 years, the pasture had always recovered as the seed cycle remained unbroken, and no chemicals or artificial fertilizer was used. In 1980 I witnessed 29 acres of the site being ploughed up by a local farmer, tired of waiting for a pay-off from the NCC in return for leaving it intact. I later [wrote](#): ‘An extraordinary deep black soil was revealed beneath the turf, torn like a huge green carpet .. Ragged robin, yellow meadow vetchling, orchis, cowslip, carnation sedge and hayrattle hung upside down, green for a long time before wilting on the upturned turves’.*

Ability to read the detail of nature affects our aspirations and ambitions for it, so it has a direct political consequence. If all ‘green-space’ is equivalent, then monoculture fields of rye-grass are as good as [Wendlebury Meads](#), with it’s 160 different flowers and plants in just a few meadows. Why visit or protect somewhere like Wendlebury when there’s “nothing but mud and grass” and “nothing to do” there? The greatest library in the world will seem boring if you can’t read.

I’m not arguing that everyone has to become as nature-capable as Jake Fiennes. But I am sure that the conservation movement needs to make it a priority to enable this generation to go on the same sort of voyage of discovery that Sophie Grigson described, and that means communications and engagement way beyond NGO supporters and members, or schools.

### **Involving ‘Protected Areas’**

Despite great efforts the area of land strictly protected for nature in the UK is still very small, so what happens on farmland remains hugely important for nature.

The 2019 *State of Nature* report cited 5,000 nature reserves run by its partnership, covering an area more than five times the size of Greater London. A generous six times Greater London is about 943,000 hectares. In contrast the utilisable farmland in the UK covers at least 17 million hectares, around 18 times bigger. The 5,000 nature reserves are only 5.5% the farmed area. Figures from [Rewilding Britain](#) for the 22 largest rewilding projects (those over 600ha) so far cover 56,088ha (including several nature reserves), 0.3% the size of the area farmed.

A [2022 study](#) by the British Ecological Society (BES) assessed what would need to be done to protect 30% of Britain’s land and seas for nature by 2030, a commitment made by the government. It noted that in theory 27.8% is already under ‘protective’ designations such as National Parks and AONBs [Taliban Alley is an example!] but in practice these are often no more than ‘lines on a map’ and the ‘effectively protected’ area (eg ‘strict nature reserves’) may be as low as 5%.

The report states:

*‘evidence suggests that at least 16% of strictly designated land should constitute the backbone of a resilient network of core sites to be effective for nature’s recovery. However, this minimum may not yet be realised across the UK, as only approximately 7% of land in England, 11% in Wales, 10% in Northern Ireland and 17% in Scotland is strictly designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)’.*

Farmed land plays a critical role in the effectiveness of protected areas as the less hostile it is to nature, the better it can help wildlife spread between sites. AES schemes fall into a BES category called OECMs or 'Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures' but although 'longer running Higher Level Stewardship schemes' could provide an 'essential' role in joining up landscapes for nature, more evidence is needed.

The current reality is that especially in England, many UK nature reserves are surrounded by very hostile intensive farmland.

A Wildlife Trust reserve near my home 'protects' a fragment of wood-pasture crammed with ancient trees but it's flanked by an arable field. A year or so ago the field was flooding and someone, presumably the farmer, simply cut a ditch which emptied the water into the nature reserve, along with whatever agrochemicals it contained. That certainly contained a lot of nitrogen as fertiliser. I've not discussed it much in this essay but high fertility wipes out most wildflowers and fungi almost as effectively as a herbicide, a fact revealed by the Rothamsted experiment [begun](#) in Victorian times.

In practical terms a tangible difference could be made quickly by requiring all nature reserves and SSSIs to have a protective buffer zone around them if the land is farmed, at the very least of regenerative non-chemical farming. The same would also benefit housing, schools, hospitals and organic farms. Remarkably, although a 2017 [German study](#) famously showed a long-term decline in the amount of insects *within* nature reserves in Germany, there has been no such study in the UK, and it's sometimes presumed that 'protected areas' and unfarmed habitats are somehow not affected by agricultural pollution (eg [moths](#) in broadleaved woodland).

From a public engagement point of view, as nature reserves and other protected areas are places people can and do visit, they are an important context for communications about farming and nature, as well as what's 'on the reserve'.

## Looking Forward

In 1997 Graham Harvey ended his book *The Killing of The Countryside* with the words: 'with the healing of the land will come our healing as a nation'. It's a coincidence that Jake Fiennes book is called *Land Healer* but a quarter of a century later it is perhaps, a hopeful response.

## Good News

The good news is that Britain's most important nature groups are now paying more serious attention to intensive agriculture and agrochemicals, and building a wider alliance.

In part this may be down to new leadership. Two of the NGOs – The Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB – had new Chief Execs and had already started to reposition themselves on chemical farming before *Land Healer* came along. Craig Bennett arrived at TWTs in 2019 from FoE. The

RSPB under Beccy Speight has produced a new strategy and is committed to become more campaigning.

In 2019 some of The Wildlife Trusts published a report by Dave Goulson '[Insect Declines and Why They Matter](#)' calling for 'major reductions' in pesticide use. Steph Morren, a senior policy officer at the RSPB, [linked](#) a need to reduce pesticides to a 'Lost Decade' on biodiversity in 2020. Also in 2020 the WT's published '[Reversing The Decline Of Insects](#)' with Goulson as lead author. It called for a UK target to cut pesticide use and risk by at least 50% by 2030. In 2021 and 2022 The Wildlife Trusts, RSPB and Buglife [opposed](#) government plans accede to NFU demands to allow the use of the 'bee killing neonic' Thiamethoxam on sugar beet.

In July 2022 the RSPB announced it was "[time for a rethink on pesticides](#)", as "we've stumbled into toxic territory, and we're seeing the effects". It published a comprehensive report, '[Pesticides and Wildlife: A Decades Old Nature Crisis](#)'. Steph Morren [wrote](#) of 'glaring omissions' in the pesticide testing and authorisation process, and warned that 'long-lasting and cumulative effects are ignored'.

While much of what these reports covered was not new, the agenda focus is new, as is the now close alignment of the major groups with organisations such as PAN UK, Buglife and the [Pesticide Collaboration](#). The Collaboration includes 81 'health and environmental organisations, academics, trade unions, farming networks [including organic] and consumer groups'.

It claims to represent 3.5m UK citizens, although it doesn't yet seem to include the National Trust, which is the UK's [largest private landowner](#) and has about 3-6m members depending on how you count them. The Trust has 1,500 tenant farmers and 250,000ha of farmland making it [the biggest](#) farm owner in the UK. Aside from it's push on [engaging children](#) with the outdoors (not specifically nature), unless I've missed it, the Trust has not campaigned on nature and agriculture.

In August 2022 the Collaboration published [Chemical Pollution: The Silent Killer of UK Rivers](#), highlighting the fact that 40% of the dire state of British rivers is due to pollution from farming.



*Rivers campaigner Russell Biggs, @RussellB1ggs Russells ChalkStreamsInCrisis on twitter, in the Babingley River in Norfolk – one of a few hundred chalk streams in the world. Here clean, further down polluted by sewage and agriculture*

Most of these organisations are supporting the governments ‘[Nature Recovery Network](#)’ following a [proposal](#) from The Wildlife Trusts in 2018, and part of its 25 Year Plan for the environment. In 2017 the National Trust [committed](#) to creation 25,000ha of new habitats on its own land by 2025. Also in 2018 Environment Minister [Michael Gove pledged](#) to reshape post-Brexit British farm subsidies to be ‘public money for public goods’, a revolutionary change which had been called [for by voices ranging](#) from the National Trust down to individuals like myself.

(In what may have been a last throw of the dice in establishing a ‘green legacy’ for Boris Johnson, on 2 September 2022 it [was reported](#) that the UK would set up 22 ‘nature recovery areas including on 2,000ha of farmland along N Norfolk coast, that one the brainchild of Jake Fiennes).

Which is great. The 3Rs and establishment conservation NGOs are converging over ‘solutions’. RSPB, TWTs and support both regenerative farming and rewilding, as has even the NT despite some predictable [opposition](#) from those who want to maintain maximum sheep farming .

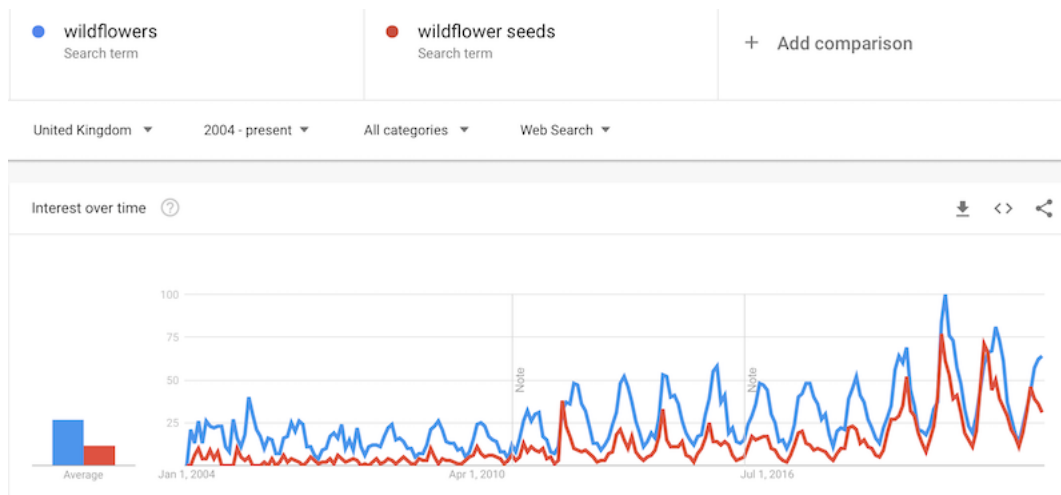
A Sussex Wildlife Trust blog [enthused](#):

*‘Fantastic organisations such as [Agricology](#), [Groundswell](#) and the [Oxford Real Farming Conference](#), have been fast tracking regenerative and sustainable agriculture, with outstanding results. Regenerative agriculture is clearly out-performing other farming systems in many areas, including food production and wildlife enhancement’.*

There is also increasing public interest in taking personal action to help nature. Some of this translates into joining conservation organisations but for the 16 million households with gardens, growing bee-friendly flowers (or what they are [told](#) are bee-friendly) is a tangible way to make a difference. Conservation professionals may see a big difference between restoration and rewilding but for many this is ‘rewilding’ at home.

The rising level of UK Google searches for ‘wildflowers’ closely tracks that for ‘wildflower seeds’ suggesting that it’s the idea of helping wildflowers and the easy retail opportunity of buying seeds, rather than discovery of wildflowers ‘in the wild’ and then turning to the garden, which is behind this trend. (In a small way, wildflowers ‘in the wild’ are also starting to trend online – check out #wildflowerhour on twitter and other platforms ([website](#))).





Google search statistics (UK) for wildflowers, and for wildflower seeds, 2004-2022

Whatever the dynamic, this is another indication of the potential to engage the 80% of people in the UK who live in urban and suburban areas, in nature restoration. If they are doing this themselves, then they will be psychologically more 'available' to engage with campaigns from [pesticide free towns](#) to pesticide free farming, and for Restorative Farming, if they are given the opportunities. Coupled with a campaign to reverse 'nature blindness', this could help develop an 'ecological aesthetic' and combat the tidy-mindedness syndrome which Fiennes deplores in farmers, is widespread in towns, cities in villages, and culminates in the fashion for [plastic grass](#).

## Bad News

The bad news is that the UK government's newfound enthusiasm for greening farm policy has proved fragile and superficial, and the NFU remains a bulwark of chemical intensive farming.

As well as pushing for 'derogations' (exemptions) to neonic bans, in April 2022 it [emerged](#) that the NFU had helped organise legal action by 'at least 200 land users in nearly 40 river basins and groundwater catchments to fight against' nitrate vulnerable zone designations. David Baldock from the Institute for European Environment Policy said:

*"The NFU has always had its sights set on trying to push back against these nitrate regulations. Previously Defra was under pressure from the European Commission to ... demonstrate that they were complying with the EU nitrate directive, but now that Britain has left the EU this is no longer necessary".*

In June 2022 all the main environment groups joined in condemning the UK Government for [failing to make good on eight specific commitments](#) to protect and recover biodiversity, from cutting pesticides and species reintroductions, to dropping a promise to set aside a third of the farming budget for landscape recovery.

The post-EU ELMS or Environmental Land Management Scheme (payments to farmers) was watered down after pressure from farming and landowning interests and rightwing MPs who see anything 'green' as a wedge issue to drive the Conservative Party further to the right.

Michael Gove was kicked out of government by Boris Johnson, who will now be replaced by someone who looks certain to care less about the environment than he and his wife did.

In August 2022 in the middle of the holiday season the UK environment was headline news because around most of England untreated sewage was pouring into the sea, and into rivers, some of which were running dry without sewage effluent. Yet the government response was to trot out platitudes and no doubt hope that the media agenda will 'move on' in the autumn. People kept pointing it out to me and suggesting that I should write a new edition of a book I published in 1990: *Britain The Dirty Man of Europe*. Depressingly, the political reasons it happened then, are much the same as why it's happening now.

My take on this is that even with the added advantage of some sort of alignment with the 3Rs and Jake Fiennes within farming, the fundamentals have not changed so much that the nature conservation movement can achieve its objectives without significant campaigning.

### **The Ground War**

The UK nature lobby now runs the risk of repeating the mistake of the environment lobby back in the 2010s when it won the 'air war' (public opinion) and lost the 'ground war' (constituency Westminster politics) over Onshore Wind. Many of the same political calculations and actors were in play, as detailed in the blog [Killing The Wind Of England](#) (see also supporting docs), as are in play now. One consequence of the decision to ditch onshore wind, then the cheapest and quickest-to-deploy renewable energy, is that Britain's energy and gas crisis, including ironically, for [farmers](#) and [water companies](#), is much worse than it needed to be.

If the UK's ruling MPs feel they can ride out a tsunami of sewage on holiday beaches and an energy crisis, I don't see them being very worried about criticism by the birds and bees lobby because they are retreating from Gove's promises, unless that involves more than reports and media work.

So do the NGOs have the will to act? Even with the lower bar provided by Jake Fiennes and the 3Rs I am doubtful, if hopeful. To speak out about 'policy', yes. To seriously disrupt Business as Usual, I am not so sure. In the 1950s and 60s as Director General of the Nature Conservancy (a government body), Max Nicholson made a policy decision to build up the Wildlife Trusts as a force for nature. He [said to an audience of naturalists](#): "Never put your trust in the state and observe that I say this to you when for all practical purposes in this field I am the State !" Having served in key roles at the heart of government, Nicholson was well aware of how the state pursues its interests as perceived by its stewards, just as a corporation pursues its interests – and that isn't always the public interest.

Since the time of Nicholson and Ratcliffe the official nature agencies have shown little will or capability to take on the conventional farming lobby, despite the ongoing loss of nature. It should be acknowledged that for decades, the RSPB in particular has been a pretty effective policy watchdog and advocate for conservation in the UK, sometimes the only one with a grasp of all the technicalities on agriculture policy. But they and the other NGOs have long relied on the influence of the EU as a backstop to prevent the UK political class from reverting

to type and backsliding on the environment in all respects. Now that backstop has gone and without public campaigning, rather than just informed advocacy, on farming they will be taking a tea-spoon to a knife-fight.

### A Candidate To Do List

This isn't a campaign strategy let alone a plan, more a sketchy could-do list if Britain's conservation NGOs are to make the most of the opportunity presented by the fledgling 3Rs revolution. Some of it invites a bit of lateral thinking.

- **Local Resourcing and Organisation.** To run a ground war campaign requires being present with local volunteers and supporting staff at the critical political level of the Parliamentary Constituency. At present none of the relevant NGOs have the logistics, assets and resources or enough trained and skilled staff to deploy in campaigns. Between them those people need to be familiar enough with farming and agrochemicals to take on evidence gathering, media work (etc) and be inoculated against industry bullshit. This means a team in each area. It is quite different from national 'policy work' supported by episodic displays of agreement from supporters. It requires resourcing as serious as that given to land management or fundraising.
- **Nature Ability.** We need national campaigns of public education in Natural History (aka ecological literacy), starting with NGO supporters and local initiatives but aiming to secure government and business backing for much [larger campaigns](#), along the lines of Public Health and Information campaigns. Unless the ability to (eg) recognize the difference between a wildflower meadow and a rye-grass ley, a crop or even a flower-bed of colourful annuals is widespread, there can be no effective political constituency for nature at the grass-roots. Localise this at the vernacular landscape level (eg Landscape Character Areas [now [National Character Areas](#)]). Use guided walks/ visits to demonstrate dramatic polarities between nature rich and nature poor places. Segment outreach by [motivational values](#) and demographics.
- **Set up Taliban Farming Demonstrations.** NGOs like the RSPB, TWTs and NT have avoided calling out bad farming at a farm level, with the results discussed above. As the 3Rs begin to take effect there is an obvious need to demonstrate bad farming. Instead of more conservation-group-owned demonstrations of pro-wildlife farming such as Hope Farm, conservation NGOs could buy and run some land as demonstrations of 'Taliban Farming' to show the difference, without any risk of conflict with individual landowners or farmers involved. Unlike the invaluable Rothamsted [Broad Balk](#) experiment started in 1843, these could be discontinued on ethical grounds once Taliban Farming dies out.
- **Taliban Geography.** Go out and map good and bad farming at a Parish level. Taliban through to Restorative. Publish the results, engage civil society, media, politicians and farmers. Create conversations and from that, specific instrumental change campaigns. (For an inspiring model of true community and political engagement which was remarkably innovative and involved nature restoration, read this account of what happened at Hainault Forest, particularly from [1852 through to 1906](#)).

- **Develop the Practitioner Lexicon.** Systematize and give names to the steps and processes involved in Restorative Farming as described in *Land Healer*. (This is presumably best done by Jake Fiennes and his colleagues, and then embedded in training systems). For example, possibly, 'hedge fattening', maybe 'enflowering' for field margins. This is important as it would (a) enable the public to see, recognize and appreciate good farming, and identify its absence, and (b) enable farmers and land workers to develop and improve procedural knowledge for ecological intensification, a professional ability that could be recognized and rewarded. Create a Farm Nature Code based on Restorative Farming practices equivalent to the Highway Code.
- **A New Social Enterprise.** Work with 3R farmers and landowners, private investors, food retailers, the catering and hospitality industry, and NGO supporters, to transform initiatives like FTN into a national network of certified, branded retail outlets (shops, cafes, restaurants etc) supplying nature friendly food, owned and operated as a (John Lewis style) Partnership across suppliers, staff and customers. Start with outlets in city centres, market towns and at some nature reserves and protected areas. Become a conservation actor in the food chain – be a business voice not just an external commentator.
- **Enable Stakeholding in 3R Farming.** Trial and introduce a system of private [Countryside Contracts](#) whereby NGOs and others work to encourage public investment participation in local farm networks practising 3R farming, on a time-share basis with landowners and tenants. (Finance in return for access and agreed influence, access rights etc). Create a free market vehicle for nature.
- **Agrochemical Free Buffer Zones.** Campaign for a legal requirement for Regenerative/ Restorative/ Organic farming of up to 2km around all Nature Reserves and Protected Areas and make it mandatory across farmed areas of National Parks and AONBs.
- **Rewild BTB Hotspots.** Campaign for the withdrawal of the most persistent problematic BTB areas from livestock farming in favour of rewilding under ELMS or future AES.
- **Open Up The Policy Community.** Campaign to democratize the representation of farming to government by requiring Ministers not just to consult the NFU on policy but actively and transparently demonstrate that they have consulted the full range of farming, environmental and civil society organisations ([S2 of the 1947 Agriculture Act](#)) via public hearings. An open rather than a [closed policy community](#).
- **Reward Everyone Who Helps Nature.** Campaign to democratize the use of public money for nature (public goods) so it is not restricted by 'eligibility rules' based on agricultural holdings (area, crops, livestock numbers etc) but on outcomes. While the majority of finance would still flow to farmers as so much land in the UK is farmed, there is no natural justice in paying a farmer if s/he produces two Song

Thrushes where there was one before, and not a householder with a garden, or other landowner. One way to deliver this would be through Council Tax rebates for nature features on properties, funded by Central government.



*"Song Thrush" by [PapaPiper](#) is licensed under [CC BY-ND 2.0](#).*

- **Treat Farming Like Other Industries.** Campaign for a review of intensive farming in order to treat it in the same way as other chemical industrial processes, and licence it by activity and location. Set environmental quality targets based on a return to 1947 levels of ecological health. Impose planning or other controls on any activities producing or likely to produce significant harm to the environment (effectively zero emission for many pesticides etc). Require farming as a land-use to be as unpolluting as woodland. Outlaw practices known to cause such harm, for example maize growing in vulnerable catchments. Assess the sustainability performance/ potential of alternative food production systems such as 'Vertical Farms' and [retire land from intensive outdoor agriculture](#) proportionately.

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