

Section 7 - Afterword: Aren't We Doing This Already?

There is no national promotional campaign for nature and no systematic effort to increase Nature Ability, Natural History Knowledge or Ecoliteracy, call it what you will, so no, so we are not doing this already.

It's true that it's not a new idea to set out to embed nature 'in culture' and even just in the UK, there are many more existing moments or activities established in popular culture, which have nature content, than I have mentioned. Most of those were never started with any intention to roll back a problem of national nature blindness because in the past, it wasn't seen to be a problem but now they could be built on to help do that.

But isn't it also true that almost all the communications or outreach activities of organisations in the 'nature movement', however you define that, may have *some* effect in signalling nature and the work done to try and protect or restore it? Yes that is true but even taken together it is self evidently not tackling the problem of a lack of public nature ability, or sufficiently convincing politicians in government that nature is a real political imperative.

The main reason that existing activity is not doing the job, is that it hasn't been designed to do so.

The Participation Principle

Ultimately the point of this proposal to invest time and effort to embed nature in culture is to show people who are or may become our elected politicians, that nature is an integral part of social life. As behaviours shape opinions and behaviours are tangible and visible, we need the valuing of and engaging with nature to be expressed through events and activities. Both *which* and *how many* people are involved, is important.

For good reasons, most voluntary sector nature conservation effort is either aimed at delivery in terms of species survival and natural ecosystem quality and quantity, and the area of habitats protected or restored, or fundraising, including recruitment and retention of supporters or members.

The logic of nature delivery investment is to achieve the maximum gain for every pound or hour spent, and that generally applies to government nature agencies too. The logic of fundraising and membership investment is to gain and retain as much support as possible for each pound or hour spent. But the objective of investing time and effort, and money in a drive for public nature literacy, and to create or promote popular culture nature events, is to maximise participation.

Efficient Business As Usual leads to Different Outcomes

So, 'Business As Usual' for efficient habitat delivery, and efficient fundraising/ membership recruitment sets priorities which are different from maximising nature ability and sending signals that nature is popular and important to the public.

For example, imagine what happens if one woman takes the time and trouble to grow 100 hectares of wildflowers on her land. A good thing but it sends a different signal from 100 women growing one hectare each, and a different one again from if the 100 hectares were made up by 10,000 women growing 1 square metre each. (1 Ha = 10,000 square metres).

For targeting agri-environment grants or a NGO buying land, a single 100Ha wildflower meadow makes sense but politically the single landowner is one vote, the 100 are 100 votes and the 10,000 votes is larger than the majorities of many Westminster MPs. It's participation in activities that is important from the politics-signal point of view.

NGO fundraisers also often pursue a strategy of efficiency, targeting people most likely and able to give the largest donations, which is usually existing long-standing and richer supporters. This is one reason why nearly all NGOs gave up street collections even before the decline of cash but that also had the effect of making themselves and their cause less salient in the world outside their mailing or emailing lists. That involved a loss of quality too: the human contact disappeared into direct mail and online giving.

Fundraisers in NGOs often have bigger communications budgets than the communications or campaigns departments, as the organisation relies upon them to keep it going. Inadvertently, this efficiency also focuses the organisation's communications and relationships on maintaining and recruiting to its funding base. It's normal for most of what people outside a NGO know and think about it, to be down to its marketing and fundraising comms, not its a change advocacy or delivery.

But if you accept the logic of this paper, which is that to make the nature movement more effective politically, nature needs to be more expressed in *public* culture, targeting the base is not what's most needed.

The Curse Of The 'New Project'

Business as Usual nature-related projects are often given aims or objectives about 'public engagement' and even 'sustained' support but subsidiary to the main tasks of land management for species, habitats and ecosystem function. At the same time, funders may require projects to be 'new' activities. This combination tends to significantly reduce the chances of the projects leading to sustained outcomes of public engagement in terms of nature ability, or nature embedded in popular community culture.

Providing that its current owners are open to growth, investing in a project which already has social 'roots' in the shape of people who are committed to and understand it, is probably more likely to yield sustainable results in terms of embedding and expressing nature in social culture, than investing in a completely 'new build'. Each new build is like a prototype, a seed, or at best a seedling. There will be a high failure rate. Existing rooted activities have already gone through a sort of natural selection process and developed some sort of resilience.

So in terms of priorities, I would suggest taking the time and trouble to locate existing projects or activities which are already all or most of the way to making nature part of the culture, or where it already is, and wherever possible building on them, however modest they might be.

Back From The Brink

Many Business as Usual nature projects start, stop and relatively quickly, leaving little trace. One with quite a good account which is still available online, is [‘Back From The Brink’](#) a £7m scheme which ran for only four years from 2017 to 2021. This is a short time in which to expect a project to develop much in the way of social roots, especially if they weren’t designed with that in mind.

Nineteen Back from the Brink projects were administered by Natural England with money from HLF (Heritage Lottery Fund), and run by seven nature charities including RSPB and Plantlife. In 2015 NE announced that Back From The Brink would aim to ‘save 20 species from extinction and help another 118 species that are under threat move to a more certain future’.

With a mix of familiar subjects like ancient trees as well as obscure rare plants like Cornish Moss, and the Narrow Headed Ant’s only remaining colony, the scheme’s aim was ‘for threatened species to be restored to a steady state’. But as well as improving the immediate prospects for rare bats, butterflies, crickets, birds and flowers, Back From The Brink wanted to ensure that ‘landowners and communities’ were ‘working to actively sustain them’.

The post-programme summary states that Back from the Brink involved 59,000 people, including over 10,000 who ‘learnt new skills’ and nearly 4,000 who volunteered their time, while people had ‘185 million opportunities to hear about Back from the Brink’ (eg media mentions).

It aimed to deliver a legacy in these terms:

for threatened species to be restored to a steady state, with landowners and communities working to actively sustain them

The result was described like this

A legacy of success: the prospects for targeted populations of our threatened species have been improved from hundreds of practical actions carried out to support them, with more people knowing about and acting for them, and more effective collaborative working by conservation bodies on species recovery as a result.

Which doesn’t say anything about ‘communities working to actively sustain them’.



[Back From The Brink map](#)

The interactive map above takes you to two layers of details on each project. I looked at ten of them and none of the ‘community’ or ‘legacy’ parts mentioned a specific community or group continuing the work, or taking on responsibility as ‘stewards’ for the projects.

Declaring an aim to create sustained community action may reflect over-specifying and inflating aims so the scheme could be announced as ‘ambitious’, especially when it was primarily a ‘shot-in-the-arm’ habitat and species ‘rescue’ operation. More first-aid than a public health programme. In fact it was not large, compared to HLF’s own land, nature and biodiversity programme, and miniscule compared to government support to ‘farming and environment’ payments (which of course have almost no affect on public nature ability or popular culture as they are generally in the professional farmer-contractor world).

The overall aim for ‘community’ was also bit hyperbolic: to ‘inspire a nation to discover, value and act for threatened species – aim of 1.3 million people so engaged’.

To set such an engagement aim for a £7m programme of 19 localised and mainly rather specialist projects where much of the effort was necessarily detailed habitat, survey and estate management work needed to directly benefit the wildlife, was over-ambitious but perhaps not intended to be taken seriously. £7m is not much if you are buying and managing land but it’s a lot if you were primarily doing communications work and community engagement. £7m could be spent so as to ‘inspire the nation’ but not like this.

‘Engaged’ can mean many things and ‘community’ is often sprayed around in project specs and promotion like a rhetorical garnish. In this case community engagement was essentially a side effect in the projects I looked at, not a detectable objective. These were *not* bad projects – they were great conservation projects. They did involve people and in all cases they probably raised nature ability, and in a few cases by a lot, judging by descriptions of numbers and training in Natural History.

But they were conventional Business as Usual projects, more run by NGOs, more professional than volunteer organised, more parachuted in than embedded in society and unlikely to last as something that people would get involved with on an ongoing basis, becoming part of popular culture.

Some of the projects involved activities and events with artists, poets or musicians but these are injecting 'Culture' into nature projects rather than the nature projects becoming part of community culture.

Pick Up The Threads?

It could make sense for NE and HLF to go back to these projects, and pick up the threads of the 'collaborative NGO working' and the glancing through-to-deep engagement with many people no doubt had with them, in a new tranche of projects. These could explore connection to local communities, and see if the nature could become central to events, business or social activities which are or become an ongoing part of community culture. Then communities might be 'actively working to sustain them'. But as this was a project launched under a Conservative Government the new Labour Government would probably not want to do that.

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund

What several groups running Back To The Brink projects did mention under 'legacy', was continuing NGO posts and project work by seeking funding from the the [Green Recovery Challenge Fund](#) (GRCF), the next temporary pot of money to hove into view.

GRCF was a small £80m part of government COVID largesse and was also distributed by HLF, in 2021 and 2022. It initially aimed to create 3,000 jobs in England to 'restore nature and tackle climate change', the latter through 'nature solutions'.

The subsequent [evaluation](#) recorded that over three years, 1.7m trees got planted, conservation activities took place on 1,500 square km of land, 25,000 'engagement events' were held involving 400,000 people, and 1,500 jobs were supported.

It involved [159 projects](#) and linked to NE's Access to Nature programme. Activities [included](#) nature walks, training in identifying species, citizen science, wildlife watching, habitat restoration, school curricula related or forest school type (ie outdoors) activities, gardening, mindfulness, and social media engagement.

An example which involved local distinctiveness was working to restore abundance of the rare but once common flower Sulphur Clover in verges of the Norfolk 'Claylands', an often overlooked area. A [great project](#) but it ended in 2023.

Although this funding was put together in a hurry, and ended after three years, it is probably closer in scale and management to the sort of programme that would be needed to make a dent in the problem of the national deficit in nature ability, and developing and running projects to embed nature in social culture. As well as money, the HLF and its partners have a lot of relevant experience and skills, particularly with social activities and culture. Such a scheme would have a greater chance of success if it was preceded or accompanied by a national promotional campaign for nature ability.

Conclusion

To UK practitioners struggling to do what they can to make a difference to the nature crisis within the system as it stands, my arguments may seem annoyingly unrealistic but that is partly as their movement has become used to subsisting on a dwindling supply of scraps.

I'd suggest taking inspiration from the establishment of the The Lottery back in 1994, by then Prime Minister John Major. Experience of working in the Treasury, convinced him that the Treasury would never give '[more than scraps](#)' of funding to the arts, and he wanted to ensure 'a rebirth of cultural and sporting life in Britain'.

The Heritage Lottery Fund could now be part of the answer to the nature ability deficit, and a political realisation that nature is important to voters is a pre-requisite to restoring nature in the UK.

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