

Summary Of Blogs on Nature, Politics and Culture

Chris Rose October 2024

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[Parts 1 and 2](#) of this blog series argued that real world political decisions show that in Westminster, politicians don't really believe voters really care much about nature, so it can be treated as politically disposable, optional extra.

Consequently, the UK nature movement's efforts to change government policies, such as the June 22 Restore Nature Now march, will be subject to heavy discounting, and often ignored. Changing this requires politicians to encounter signs, signals, events and activities in everyday life, which convince them that nature really is valued as part of popular culture. This is not happening, yet.

Part 3 looks at how nature could be better embedded in popular culture in the UK, in seven sections. Here's a précis:

Section 1: Introduction and Nature Ability



If you live in the UK you probably missed this government poster

The nature movement needs to think about and work to build and promote *public* nature culture, not just increase its memberships, funds or build better arguments. Unless prospective politicians experience this, they will not, cannot, change Westminster culture. The UK's history changing culture of food, health and safety, inclusivity and protection of the built heritage, show it can be done.

The first and critical step is to increase and rebuild Nature Ability (aka Natural History Knowledge, Eco-Literacy). The ability to recognize and put names to species of native plants and animals is the most basic ABC level. A GCSE in Natural History is welcome but will not be enough, and studies show formal teaching has less effect on Nature Ability than social connections.

We need a national promotional campaign and programme for nature awareness, ability and understanding. In 2012 the government spent £125m on adverts promoting the 'Great British Countryside' but to tourists, not UK citizens.

The great majority of UK children and adults have become more in favour of nature as a concept but unable to put a name to it, or tell if a place is rich or poor in nature, or if it is real or fake. As a society it is as if we are increasingly in favour of literacy, while becoming increasingly unable to read.

Most people are probably better able to tell one wine or type of architecture from another, than identify plants or animals, or distinguish ancient woods from planted ones. Most children cannot identify a Bluebell (their parents have not been tested).

'Professional' communicators in the BBC, Greenpeace, Department of Education, The Guardian and local newspapers, and outside the UK, even the UN and science publishers, have shown themselves unable to tell wild from ornamental flowers, wild bees from honey bees, one common bird from another, or bees from wasps. As a result, the Honey Bee became "The Wrong Poster Bee" in campaigns against pesticides, which led to a boom in Honey Bee (livestock, not at risk) keeping, which itself threatens endangered wild bees.

UK culture places greater importance on knowing about references to nature in literature, such as Wordsworth's poem about daffodils, than being able to tell a real Wild Daffodil (the sort he saw), from a 'fake', an ornamental variety. Editors and others would not tolerate such ignorance in covering art, sports or politics. This nature ignorance undermines attempts to protect nature.

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Section 2: Missing The Garden Opportunity



On June 30 this post from Natasha Walter in London produced a string of over 400 replies from all over the UK.

An incidental demonstration of both the potential of nature ability and its present disconnect from political machinery, occurred in Spring this year, when people in the UK noticed a marked absence of insects, especially bees.

Mainstream NGOs and the media said very little about the UK's 2024 'Silent Spring' while they were focused on an impending General Election and policy. A massive reduction in insects, especially bees and butterflies, was observed and discussed on social media by wildlife and nature gardeners (and evident even to visitors at the famous Knepp rewilding project) but it did not feature in either the policy asks of the Restore Nature Now march of 60,000 nature NGO followers (22 June), or in or around the Election itself (July 4).

By the time organised ecological surveys intersected with the event, the opportunity to connect informed public concern (from people with a lot of very local nature knowledge) and a political opportunity, was lost. If the nature movement is to make the most of citizen constituencies with real Nature Ability, it needs to become more agile.

Gardening is part of Popular Culture – things people do anyway. It's a huge opportunity and on the upside, most gardeners (a much bigger group than even the most optimistic estimate of NGO memberships) say they use their garden to feed, watch or encourage wildlife, 87% wanted to bring more wildlife to their gardens by feeding them or providing shelter, and 37% think wildlife is the best part about owning a garden, 'rating it ahead of growing their own plants or vegetables'.

Yet the changes people make to their houses and gardens to help nature go unrewarded. Each year £2.4bn is given to farmers to produce 'public goods' such as soil conservation, water management or more birdlife yet nothing goes to gardeners who do the same. They should

get a Council Tax rebate for garden and home nature features, such as Swift boxes, flower-rich lawns, green roofs and living places for insects.

Garden Centres and Supermarkets play a huge role in shaping the choice-architecture of UK gardening. Yet much of what they sell damages nature. Large NGOs such should start their own Garden Centres and encourage their members to use them, to leverage change in the sector.

Section 3: Signalling Nature And Marking Moments

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Just Add Signs



I spent a year in this building, part of UCL in London's Gower Street, without reading this, high above the pavement but a plaque to Darwin first went up on this site in 1906. UK nature is rarely as well marked.

We live in a society estranged from nature. Perhaps the lowest cost, simplest and quickest way to start to elevate the perception or salience of nature is to improve the visibility of what's already there. We put up Blue Plaques for notable people but most important nature goes un-signed, un-signalled. We should, for instance, use existing Public Footpath signs to alert people to the locations of the many types of nature reserves and protected areas such as SSSIs, and include those on OS maps and apps. We should also sign land with ecosystem functions such as the US signing of water catchment creeks and forests (and in our case, peatlands). And we should have a national system to recognize important moments in nature, such as a national Bluebell Day, week or fortnight. The UK is the global HQ for Bluebells.

The BBC could bring back it's historic live Nightingale Song Broadcasts, which from 1924 to the Second World War were hugely popular radio moments of truly popular culture. Light

Music programmes were interrupted to enable the country to share the moment and hear the Nightingales sing live.

Winter Starling murmurations around the Brighton Piers, Knot murmurations on the Wash and gatherings of Red Kites in Wales are examples of other other wildlife “spectaculars” which already exist as cultural touchpoints but deserve more recognition. Night-time “dark sky” experiences including using radar, as is done in the US and Netherlands to reveal over-head movements of millions of migrating birds, could also provide an “expansion of nature experience” for the whole nation.

Section 4: Nature Events in Popular Culture

Oxton: World's first toad closure celebrates 25 years

© 16 March



| A roundel has been handed to Margaret Cooper

By Emily Anderson
BBC News, Nottingham

Popular public activities and events which simply could not happen without nature say “nature matters to these people”, and so (unlike protests, marches, advocacy) are non-politically labelled opportunities for politicians and prospective politicians to see that “nature matters to these voters”. There are already hundreds probably thousands in the UK but many need (careful) promotion and help. Examples:

The Tenbury Mistletoe Fair in Shropshire is an example of promoting local identity (Tenbury sees itself as the Mistletoe Capital of the UK) and cultural reinvention (December 1st is declared National Mistletoe Day) around a nature-based business (the annual Holly and Mistletoe Auction).

Volunteer-led Toad Crossings to help Toads across roads as they migrate back to their ancestral breeding ponds is an example of direct action to help wildlife which has become established as part of life and road-culture in hundreds of places around the UK. At Oxton in Nottinghamshire, Margaret Cooper campaigned for an early spring road closure to protect toads in 1999, won the support of the Council, and her 25 years of running it was recognized with a commemorative plaque from the AA in 2024.

The Suffolk town of Harleston puts up flags to welcome Swifts back each May, as well as Swift nesting boxes and community activities about Swifts.

In the commuter Market Town of Petersfield in Hampshire, PeCAN, a group which mainly formed from Councillors and others who met through Extinction Rebellion, turned their attention to local nature and environmental action which now includes regular Eco-fairs, housing improvements, distribution of thousands of free fruit trees for gardens and native hedging plants, a community cafe and work to reduce pesticide use in the town and increase wildflowers in road verges.

In the 'Golden Triangle' villages of Gloucestershire, Dyfra works to bring back the native Wild Daffodils (ref Wordsworth) which made the area famous with Victorian and early C20th visitors who came by rail, and replace ornamental daffodils which threaten to eliminate the wild ones through hybridization.

In a non-place-based example, Buglife and the Kent Wildlife Trust enlist car and van drivers to run a national insect survey 'Bugs Matter' by counting the number of insects 'splatted' on their number plates. This provides important nationwide data on the decline, and potentially any recovery, of our insects. Tens of thousands of drivers have taken part since it was started in 2003 by the RSPB, as the 'Splatomer' campaign.


Since 2001 the Fairyland Trust has run magical-days out for families with young children, mixing with the entertainment, food, games, music and activities of traditional Country Fairs, with magical-make nature workshops such as Magic Wands, all to increase the Nature Ability of children (and parents). Hundreds of thousands of people have attended these 'Fairy Fairs', and since 2010, a resurrection of the original nature based autumn Halloween celebrations, in The Real Halloween, which also promotes dressing up without use of any new plastic (shop bought costumes being largely plastic and mostly used only once). It's aimed at a core

audience of the 'esteem driven' and 'aspirational' mainstream, and the Trust now has a Wildflower Fortunes Caravan engaging young adults with wildflowers at festivals.

Section 5: Why Conservation Should Embrace Natural History

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LANDMARKS IN CONSERVATION



MAX NICHOLSON talks to Charlie Pye-Smith and Philip Lowe

Max Nicholson's involvement in conservation spans a generation. His greatest achievement has been as its entrepreneur, both in Britain and worldwide. But he has many other facets - ornithologist, philosopher, social scientist and accomplished administrator. In this interview for ECOS, Nicholson surveys his involvement with the conservation movement, identifying the four major landmarks in its development through his lifetime. "Each of these," he suggests, "has opened up a totally different phase of development, complementing its predecessor and creating a dynamism which it is vital to maintain by equally bold strategies for the future."

"we made a policy decision to write off the Natural History Societies, which we considered utterly useless for this new age of conservation" – Max Nicholson

As the wildlife gardeners of Twitter showed during the 'Silent Spring' of 2024 (Section 2), Natural History is alive and well in the UK, and with new audiences not just established Natural History Societies. But the Nature Ability of these groups is the exception rather than the rule.

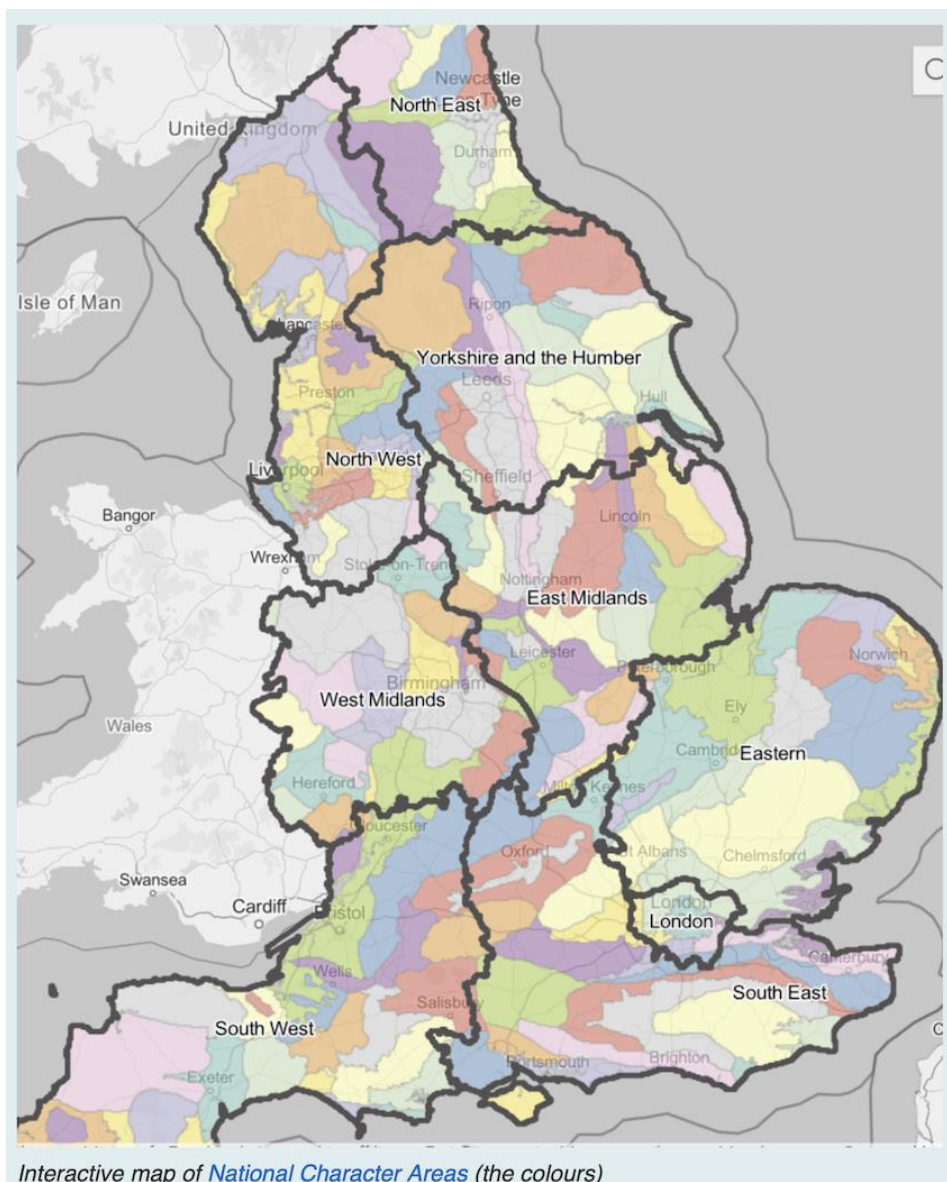
From the Celts and Anglo-Saxons, through 1066, Shakespeare's time and into the C20th, nature knowledge was far commoner in the past and has left its traces in traditions, speech and practices we no longer consciously associate with 'nature' or 'environment' such as "touch wood" for luck. Modern psychological and cultural studies show this knowledge was acquired through the learning process known as 'prediction error', in which people notice anything new or different, such as the missing insects of 2024, and also how people learn to identify species with the help of relatives or friends with nature knowledge.

In the C19th Natural History became hugely popular in the newly industrialised UK and seen as important as part of citizenship by local and national politicians. It was taught in schools and universities but in the C20th its learning methods were seen as inferior by the newer sciences testing hypotheses and Natural History fell from favour. Max Nicholson saw Natural

History Societies as “utterly useless for the new age of conservation” compared to ecological science, when he engineered much of the modern nature NGO and government system from the 1950s-1970s.

In tackling the modern epidemic of nature-blindness with Nature Ability, and embedding nature in popular culture to engage citizens, Natural History has far superior potential to teaching ecology, being socially accessible in time and space, and with a culture allowing emotional engagement rather than professionalised detachment.

Section 6: Organising, Ways and Means



This section makes three strategy suggestions, addresses what people need to know in terms of Nature Ability, and makes six suggestions for early political asks intended to prick the interest of politicians and align the nature movement to any campaign effort.

It suggests:

- Organising effort at the National Character Area level, larger than parishes, smaller than counties, and defined by nature and land-related cultural heritage
- Using the Cultural Dynamics Motivational Values system to engage all the main psychological groups in society, not over-focusing on the Pioneers who are already over-represented in the nature movement
- for PR, the NGOs and those they work with should act like a business group, as they would be taken more seriously by politicians. The nature NGOs should increase their soft power capabilities, as farming does. In this last respect, the nature movement should lay claim to being the social and political Stewards of Natural Capital.

To increase Nature ability, the first things people need to know are the basic ABC of species identification, focused on native wildlife where they live (in their National Character Area). Then understanding how they relate to each others, their habitats and landscapes. In literacy terms, perhaps the ABC is species, the sentences are habitats and the paragraphs are landscapes.

The six proposed political asks are:

‘1. A government funded campaign to promote Nature Ability, including an above-the-line advertising campaign, and a multi-faceted social marketing campaign and a wide array of instrumental projects.

2. Council Tax rebates for nature- and ecosystem-boosting features (biodiversity enhancing, flood reduction etc) of homes and gardens, and financial incentives for the same ‘public goods’ contribution made by agricultural land owners by farmers but for owners of other land, such as businesses and Councils. Non-agri Environment Schemes – ELMS 2.0.

3. Recognition of Ecological Land as a category in statutory Local Plans, and its protection from development.

4. Signing of National Character Areas and all nature reserves and higher level ELMS schemes and nature relevant features, indicating any sort of public access or visibility, (eg along roads, and Public Footpaths using existing signs) linked to the MAGIC system (eg a more user friendly app), including for example Ancient Trees.

5. A system of official recognition for nationally and regionally important annual moments (a sorted of nature-centred equivalent to Bank Holidays or the Blue Plaque scheme), including a National Bluebell Day.

6. Issue all voting age adults with a National Character Area natural identity certificate, citizenship profile or identity card (see p.5), and decide (via a Citizens Assembly?) ways it could be used with some 'official' recognition, beyond just inspiring questions in pub quizzes'.

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

As there is no national promotional campaign for nature and no systematic effort to increase Nature Ability, Natural History Knowledge or Ecoliteracy, no, we are not doing this already.

Although many activities of nature NGOs and government bodies have *some* effect on signalling nature or increasing Nature Ability, even taken together it is plainly not persuading politicians to take nature sufficiently seriously, or tackle the national deficit in ability to recognize and understand nature.

The section uses the case of a fairly Business as Usual scheme, 'Back from the Brink', to make the case that routine NGO activity and government funding will not achieve such objectives because despite some rhetorical garnishing about community and public engagement, it is not what they are designed to deliver.

It concludes by suggesting that the nature movement takes 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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Note:

The first post, 'Focus On Culture Not Policy To Restore UK Nature', from August 2024 is at <https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3115> . The set of seven sections of the second post run in sequence from <https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3381>

Links:

1 – [Introduction: A Campaign For Nature In Culture](https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3381)

<https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3381>

2 – [Missing The Garden Opportunity](https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3338)

<https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3338>

3 – [Signalling Nature and Marking Moments](https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3271)

<https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3271>

4 – [Nature Events in Popular Culture](https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3190)

<https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3190>

5 – [Why Conservation Should Embrace Natural History](https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3179)

<https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3179>

6 – [Organising Strategy and Ways And Means](https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3162)

<https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3162>

7 – [Afterword: Aren't We Doing This Already?](https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3156)

<https://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=3156>

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