

# The Bulletin

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I don't want to overwork this piece: these are off the cuff thoughts gleaned from scribbled note and muffled recorder. Most unscientific you mutter. Perhaps so, but like most of us, I've little time and so I was delighted to allocate three days to attend the BES/CCI event in Cambridge.

But things are never that straight forward.

My rural surveying work took me away for one day and another was spent realising that the single-subject symposium (*'Improving the links between ecological research, policy and practice'*) was anything but single issue. Nor it seems was there enough time to absorb and then question the content. I'm all for stimulating lectures from the word go – the Defra's Chief Scientist Adviser set the scene: "the scientific community has not built trust with the policy community". However, having sparked debate, he left the building before we could ask any questions. Such is the woe of high office policy makers.

But what a fine venue the David Attenborough building is. Standing for all that's great about science today. Lots of conservation NGOs (Birdlife, BTO, RSPB, Fauna and Flora International, Cambridge Conservation Forum) – all an office floor away from each other. It could really do with sharing the space with *Population Matters*, an organisation of which Attenborough is Patron. The venue is a 'loaded' building of influence, power, values and science; the perfect conduit to commission ecological science to fill the huge gaps in our knowledge and explore how *matters* interact with human *population* interests.

There's plenty to do.

Do you remember those media outlets in 2013 that declared 60% of all UK wildlife in the State of Nature report was in decline? ([www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/state-nature-report-uk-wildlife-1929885](http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/state-nature-report-uk-wildlife-1929885)). They didn't read the small print. It's 60% of the mere 5% of species on which we have reliable data. Pedant I hear you cry. But without robust measurable data, how can we improve links between research and policy that influences conservation practice on the ground?

*"I wonder if we recognise the tens of thousands of farmers in our own country as indigenous experts"*

Peter Brotherton from Natural England via Blue Sci, the Cambridge University science magazine. (<http://www.srcf.ucam.org/bluesci/2016/04/conservation-conferencing-cambridge>)

Many of the subjects, including the poster presentations, at this wide ranging fascinating event involved matters that farmers, gamekeepers, wildlife wardens, foresters and land managers deal with on a daily basis. Practitioners at grass root level, thirsty for guidance at the front line of conservation.

Were any here?

No, because they were too busy working. Fighting flea beetles without neonicotinoids (Prof Godfray's restatement), scratching heads on badgers (Prof Beddington's throwaway remark), managing vegetation (winning poster for bird nests in hedges), dealing with heather burning (Juliette Young on resolving conflict [<http://www.thefield.co.uk/country-house/conservation-conflict-ending-conflict-32001>]), debating with rewilders (Andy Stirling on democratic science), delving into GM farming practices (Fiona Fox's media angle), with no time, unfortunately, to enjoy social marketing of crabs affected by fertiliser runoff (Bob Smith's amusing ad).

I loved all of it. I wanted to call, write about, tweet to as many as possible outside the building. Was there a firewall preventing me or is some of this about ownership and values? Sticking to our tribal social media scientific community rather defeated the BES President's call to use the Twitter hashtag to extend the impact of the meeting beyond the building. (see Storify, [www.twitter.com/BESPolicy/status/723080388034347008](http://www.twitter.com/BESPolicy/status/723080388034347008))

If evidence from ecological scientists can help inform gamekeepers and wildlife wardens to save the curlew (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1365-2664.12167/abstract>) let's get on with working directly with them rather than waste too much time improving links with short term politically office-bound gatekeeper-guarded policy makers.

For me, lack of the social element – I don't mean the excellent coffee breaks as which we buttonholed, networked or chatted with various attendees – was the less fashionable social science. (<http://www.nature.com/news/major-biodiversity-panel-desperately-seeks-social-scientists-1.19778>) . Sticking my hand up anyway when they asked how many social scientists were in the room, I counted myself in because I'm a conservation-science-loving conservationist utilising 'skills' (including use of psychology) to communicate tradeoffs and synergies between farmers, engineers, land users and ecologists.

I wonder if we can get away from the idea of ecological science evidence-led policy as the panacea for conservation. Is social science perceived as an inconvenience that muddies ecological science? So then, let us be braver in seeking to be evidence-informed by science and then us roll up our sleeves (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320710001849>) to help interpret how scientific – both negative and positive results – are framed within moral, political, socioeconomic and ethical parameters.

There was shy shuffling in the room when we were told to get on telly, shout about it, generate debate – but then be ready to engage as robustly as the evidence supports your science.

It can get rough. 'Offence is not a defence' when you are under John Humphry-style scrutiny – especially when critical peer review is a keystone to ecological science research.

I don't know what other BES events have been like, but this vibrant symposium was stuffed full of vital information, topical talks, piercing questions (more time for questions, less slides please) and presentations laden with provocation – I'm not sure how many of the audience twigged this significance – whereas to me they were an obvious wake-up call to start adapting to future change.

It's time to find ways to work closer with non-academic local knowledge experts, build on collaborative ownership of research to enable science, in an era of tension, to be used more as a tool, not a weapon. Let's open up the social aspect of the complex intrinsic interaction between 'trust, values and relationships' within science today.

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*Take him to task at [www.rob Yorke.co.uk](http://www.rob Yorke.co.uk)*