TIMES

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THUNDERER

Putting the needs of wildlife before people is just bats

Rob Yorke

A thriving countryside needs people as much as it needs a diversity of species and habitat. That's why most of us in the country welcome the Government's attempts to encourage affordable housing.

But there's something lurking in the hedgerows and ditches that could scupper these well intentioned plans. Badgers, great crested newts, bats and all wonderful natural things are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Conservation of Habitat and Species Regulation 2010 and the Badger Act 1992. Quiet right too. But overzealous, "belt and braces" interpretation of this legislation is costing us dear within our fragile economy.

Work on a vital waterpipe is postponed when a great crested newt is found under an old carpet in a garden. A road cannot be repaired until licences are sought to work near one of the many exits of a badger's sett. A barn conversion is jeopardised because the owner is put off by the cost of a survey — they can cost up to £5,000 — looking for bats that might never exist. A project is postponed and workers laid off until the flight patterns of a nearby colony of roosting bats are assessed and scaffolding is moved every night so as not to disrupt the bats' nocturnal sojourns.

How did bats survive before we provided houses where they could roost? They were quite happy in trees, but if we disturb them now, we must provide them with "thermally beneficial" huts with experts to monitor their progress for years after the works are complete.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for wildlife. Countryman, paid-up member of the RSPB, Buglife, life member of Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and Wild Trout Trust.

But you are made to feel like a nature basher if you question the common sense of having to commission ecological surveys 500m both sides of a proposed waterpipe that passes near a motorway and through cultivated farmland. Do we really think it likely that a newt will travel half a kilometre through arid fields of cereal crops and cross a motorway — and then topple into a temporary trench?

If there is a hint of newt, the metres of black plastic fencing that sprout around a scheme to prevent them from entering — or escaping — pollute the very environment it purports to protect. Meanwhile the nearby farmer ploughs his field with amphibians moving happily to one side.

Legislation has its place in protecting vulnerable wildlife and habitats, but the green shoots of recovery are being snuffed out by an overzealous green lobby.

Rob Yorke is a land agent and rural commentator in Powys

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