

An aerial photograph showing a large, dense crowd of people gathered on a mountain summit. The terrain is rocky and covered in sparse vegetation. In the background, a blue lake is visible. The overall scene depicts a popular outdoor destination.

Crisis point for the conservation sector

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Crowds on the Snowdon summit. The greater use of the outdoors by the general public offers both challenges and opportunities for the conservation sector. Yorkshire Pics/Alamy Stock Photo

The irony of the daunting challenge facing conservation charities in Britain is obvious: at a time when people are displaying more interest than ever in the natural world, there is less money than ever to harness this new passion and revive species and habitats.

The perfect storm is an overused cliché for our times – stormier weather systems are matched by growing turbulence in society and politics as established institutions reveal themselves increasingly incapable of tackling mounting climatic, biodiversity and human crises. Are Britain's wildlife charities capable of riding out this storm, with conditions, in both the natural and the financial worlds, set to worsen?

The furore over the National Trust's plans to sack its education officers (Barkham 2020) as it seeks to plug a £200-million hole in its finances caused by the coronavirus crisis starkly illustrates the conundrum facing the sector. Charities such as the Trust which rely on income from visitors and parking have been hammered by the lockdown. Brexit means

that EU grant schemes and subsidies are no longer available. Charities have no idea what funds will be available in the near future as they wait for the delayed Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMs) that will determine government payments for green 'public goods' provided by landowners. And hopes for 'a green recovery' have been dashed by the current government, which appears bent on flexing its old 'muscle memory', as RSPB chief executive Beccy Speight puts it, of 'build-build-build'. The £40 million recently announced for 'green jobs' (Defra 2020) was old money already pledged and tiny compared with, say, the £500m-plus splurged in August on the 'eat out to help out' scheme. Meanwhile, other philanthropic funders of conservation work are pausing grant awards to see where the financial land lies next year.

If the challenge facing charities was simply to find new forms of income, it might be straightforward. They could probably find new financial backing via popular online fundraisers and businesses keener than ever to do (or at least be seen to be doing)

their bit for the environment. The reaction to the Trust's proposed education cuts, however, reveals that charities must adapt to a new popular climate, too. Volunteers 'on the ground' are always going to be suspicious of 'head office'. But the criticisms by volunteers protesting against the Trust cuts – with children joining protests outside Sheringham Park, in north Norfolk, for instance – speak of a more profound disillusionment. There is a growing critique that over-centralised charities have been taken over by corporate consultants and overweening bureaucracies.

The Trust's proposals to outsource its education work might be good news for smaller educational charities, but it has not yet offered any clear evidence that such outsourcing will widen access to nature for schoolchildren. According to volunteers at Carding Mill Valley, in the Shropshire Hills, the National Trust currently charges £8 per child for its standard guided trip, while the Field Studies Council charges £25 per child for the same experience there. The Trust's current model of usually just one full-time education officer running events at a property or wild place, supported by a highly moti-

vated and experienced volunteer team of mostly retired teachers, already delivers unbeatable value for money.

'With National Trust and others cutting their wildlife outreach work there are huge challenges with ensuring the public are aware of and supportive of making the changes needed to halt the decline of biodiversity,' says Matt Shardlow, chief executive of Buglife. Although Buglife's 1,950 membership before lockdown has grown by 18% to 2,300 today, the coronavirus crisis has forced its cancellation of training, awareness-raising, educational and volunteering events.

The burdens placed on wildlife charities by a lack of nature education among an overwhelmingly urban population are growing. The Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) has lost money like every other charity but reports 'a significant drain on our resources' from fears that bats are spreading coronavirus. 'The misunderstood association between bats and COVID-19 has forced us to divert considerable staff time to managing communications and supporting a wide network of conservation practitioners,' says Joe Nunez-Mino of the BCT.

Restrictions on overseas travel have seen the Lake District and other tourist spots under intense pressure from high numbers of visitors. Anna Stowe Landscapes/Alamy Stock Photo



Charities must also adapt to a wider shift – perhaps linked to that criticism of centralised, slow-moving mainstream charities – from donating to big charities to making specific donations to support grassroots online crowd-funders: to stop HS2; for a WildJustice legal fight against bird-killing ‘general licences’; or to save the Happy Man tree in Hackney. And popular radicalism seems to be growing. As the decline of Britain’s wildlife intensifies, so a minority at least are demanding more. Saving rare species in nature reserves is no longer enough.

A new need for countryside

What do people want from British wildlife and its protectors? There has been widespread despair among wardens and rangers this summer that the answer is a freedom to throw litter across beauty spots, accidentally burn heaths with portable barbecues, and use other species and wild land as a backdrop for narcissistic selfie opportunities.

A survey of more than 300 visitors to the Lakes over the Whitsun bank holiday, conducted by the Lake District National Park Authority, is telling. One in five were visiting for the first time; 70.3% were bringing alcohol and 25.8% were bringing a barbecue. The reasons for their visits were fascinating: 18.8% ‘wanted to meet friends and family in a safe environment’; 15.3% said that it was because ‘the thing we’d normally be doing is closed’. Around one in ten variously loved the Lake District, or wanted to exercise, cool off in the water, or simply avoid other, more crowded destinations.

Such answers could be dispiriting – a quiet appreciation of the wild, or the right of other species to go about their business, is not at the forefront of new visitors’ consciousness – but most conservationists recognise an opportunity here. ‘Basically people are after openness, greenery, clean air – all those things [National Trust founder] Octavia Hill went on about decades ago – and also trying to get away from each other. It suggests there’s an entirely new generation of people wanting to try out nature often for the first time, and they are loving it’ says Matthew Oates, the conservationist and writer formerly of the National Trust.

Oates has spent much of the summer at Knepp, the rewilded estate in Sussex which has been overwhelmed with at least 30,000 summer visitors seeking to experience rewilded nature and to find ‘flagship’ attractions, such as the Purple Emperor

Apatura iris. Oates has seen young girls brandishing butterfly nets, a sign perhaps that families’ enthusiasm for wildlife may be higher than at any time for two generations. ‘It’s a massive opportunity but the conservation movement has got to think itself away from rare species and rare habitats,’ argues Oates.

This kind of new vision for British conservation is enthusiastically taken up at the Wildlife Trusts by new CEO Craig Bennett, who began his job at the height of lockdown, in April, when the Wildlife Trusts estimated that collectively they were losing £10 million each month. Before the coronavirus crisis struck, Bennett (formerly chief executive of Friends of the Earth) was tasked with developing a new strategic vision. Images of people driving from across the country to crowd around Snowdonia shortly before lockdown made that vision ‘crystal clear’ for him.

‘What really matters is to try and protect and restore nature close to where people live,’ says Bennett. ‘The Wildlife Trusts has worked out it’s got more nature reserves than McDonald’s restaurants – over 1,000 more. Everyone knows where their local McDonald’s is but 60% of people live within a three-mile walk of one of our reserves and probably most people don’t know where it is.’

The Trusts’ big vision is to put 30% of Britain’s land and sea into nature recovery. As Bennett says, ‘That has to be about doing it close to where people live rather than rewilding the uplands, much as that is welcome too.’

The RSPB frames the big challenge for British conservation in similar terms. Of course, Beccy Speight argues, the RSPB has to continue protecting rare species and its intensive, expert management of precious reserves. But it must now also address the broader biodiversity crisis and loss of abundance, and do this by working with ordinary people in new ways and in new places – cities, countryside, everywhere.

‘I’m really interested in communities that are active in their own area and where we can connect with them better – a community-led response to climate and biodiversity causes,’ says Speight. She recognises that, traditionally, big conservation organisations have set the agenda. Now their role might be to support and enable community-led conservation (those grassroots online petitions and causes, for instance). ‘The big issue for the

next decade is how we deliver on a mass scale,' says Speight. 'That's why ELMs is important, and community is so important because it's about nature everywhere. That's where conservation organisations have to be at the heart of it, working with farmers and community organisations. It's a different kind of role.'

If conservation groups are to work alongside communities in new ways, then their 'outreach' work – in education, training, volunteers – is more important than ever. While the National Trust plans to cut its education staff, the Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB say that they hope to retain those roles. Conservation education is 'more difficult to fund', says Speight. 'It always has been. A corporate funder or philanthropist can't count exactly how many species have been saved or trees planted. But if we look at what the external world is saying to us and saying what it needs, it is that mass approach rather than that very reserves-focused conservation work. We have to find a way to deliver that mass approach and these posts are fundamental to it.'

For Bennett, there are indications of 'the right thinking' in Whitehall, but he argues that the government must start funding access to nature for children and adults. 'The more we can support people young and old to connect with nature that will produce savings in terms of the NHS and social care and lead to a richer society in every sense. Let's look at that as an investment that will bring dividends in the longer term.'

Calling on the government for significant or game-changing green investment (and specific investment in protecting biodiversity) is all very well, but the current administration looks even less likely than previous regimes to comply with such requests. More than ever, wildlife charities face a series of rearguard actions against planning reforms and infrastructure projects, from the Rimrose Valley road in Liverpool to the Western Link road in Norwich, that decimate nature and green space close to urban areas. And the charities are very much on their own.

NGOs under pressure

While the RSPB has 'no plans at the moment to make redundancies' according to Speight, smaller charities are not so fortunate. Plantlife, a medium-sized beast in Britain's green-charity ecosystem, began the year with 75 staff. It will end it with

60 or fewer. More than half its funding comes from government-related grants, given to deliver conservation outcomes. As these funds vanish, and no alternative pots are available, projects must end. Staff on fixed-term contracts are losing their jobs.

'It's very sad,' says Ian Dunn, CEO of Plantlife. Previously, staff who could not be retained at Plantlife would at least find another conservation job and gain further useful skills. Now this talent and experience is being lost to the sector. 'Many of them will not have jobs to go to. All these species specialists really developing local habitat skills and knowledge, and who knows where they will end up?'

The future of the acclaimed habitat-restoration and species-saving 'Back from the Brink' projects – a multi-discipline partnership involving Natural England, Plantlife, Butterfly Conservation, Buglife and others funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund – looks bleak because the fund does not give out follow-up funding to sustain projects. A tricky scramble to find future funding has become virtually impossible, say charities. 'The Esmée Fairburn Foundation has been just brilliant,' says Dunn. 'They recognised the situation very early on and they've been entirely supportive without any of the bureaucracy that normally goes with it. Other funders are being much more cautious. Understandably, everyone is waiting to see what comes out at the end of this – What's the economy like? What's the government environment like?'

When companies in a sector are faced with financial crises, there are mergers and acquisitions, points out Dunn. He argues that there is a place for both large charities (for influencing government) and small ones (for mobilising grassroots), but 'we've got to find a way of competing less on the same public purse – the people, I mean – and delivering some really good conservation outcomes in far more productive partnerships'. With individual founding principles and loyal members, mergers might not be viable or desirable, but charities could look at efficiency savings, argues Dunn, for instance by sharing offices, IT systems, data, and human resources. 'It's early days but the conversations are happening,' says Dunn.

Bennett is sceptical about the idea that wildlife charities should merge or combine to save money. He believes that there is an 'ecosystem' of charities, and small charities reach different audiences. The coronavirus crisis may have taught us that



Burned area at Thursley Common, Surrey. Problems associated with high visitor numbers, such as fire and littering, have been widely reported over the summer. Sam Oaksey/Alamy Stock Photo

'resilience' is more important than 'efficiency', he argues. 'The assumption behind that kind of question is that big organisations are better. I'm not sure that's right. The bigger an organisation, the more transactional cost there might be, there's a danger of group-think and an assumption that "we know the answer". We need a variety of approaches and a lot of innovation in the sector and must then get behind the approaches that work.'

A chance for action

Somehow, in a country more financially challenged than ever, and facing a relentless decline in biodiversity, environmental charities have to get on the front foot. It looks a tall order, given the constant debilitating struggles to stop not just central government but myriad local authorities and private businesses investing in nature-destroying activities, from open-cast mines, to car-dependent new suburbs, to new roads that only increase traffic and pollution. In his influential book *Our Place*, nature writer Mark Cocker argues for a National Environmentalists' Union, calling for the fragmented environmental NGOs to combine their muscle in a single voice to revive British wildlife.

'Sometimes you need a shock to the system to enable us to innovate and focus and think how we

can best learn from this,' says Bennett. 'At times in past decades we've got trapped into responding to what's on offer rather than creating our own vision. That's the big switch we need to make.'

Beccy Speight is still hopeful. It would be easy to overreact to a summer of damage caused by the post-lockdown rush to the green spaces, she says, but 'this is part of the beginning of a lot more people being part of a change in mass thinking that will force the politics to change and the funding to change. Whilst there are fewer obvious champions in government right now – although I think there are some – that mass mindset is the thing that will shift things around. That's what we've got to fight for. We've got to keep the advocacy pressure on but it's the mass mindset that's going to win it. That's the big prize.'

References

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