

Mike's Musings: Environment and conservation

Late summer 2010

The weather in August and September

August:

The month suffered mostly unsettled weather with an above average rainfall. It was often cloudy, even on dry days, with temperatures significantly lower than in June and July. It rained on 13 days, there being particularly heavy falls on the 22nd (32.0mms.) and 25th (25.0mms.). Winds were largely from the south to west quarter in the middle of the month veering to the north-west/north east quarter in the last few days. The total rainfall for August was 90.25 (3.54 ins.).

September:

September was quite autumnal and relatively cool, being cloudy in the mornings and tending to clear with sunny periods in the afternoon. It was a quite dry month until the last two days when the weather became unsettled with fresher winds from the south. It rained on only eight days, yielding a total of 54.3mms.(2.13ins). In the first week the winds were light from the south east/south west quarter, veering to the north west/north east in the middle weeks before reverting to a rain-bearing quarter from the east Atlantic at the end of the month.

Biodiversity? What is it and why is it important?

In the media the term 'biodiversity' is often used, somewhat casually and seldom with an adequate explanation of what it means, when environmental issues are examined in connection with the degradation or loss of wildlife habitats. Moreover, little attention is paid as to its importance. The Oxford dictionary definition of biodiversity correctly states that it simply means the variety of the fauna and flora in a particular location or globally, thus omitting to indicate its significance or role in biological and ecological systems and dynamics. Given that this is the International Year of Biodiversity it is appropriate to consider its state and prospects for the future.

Natural scientists have argued for many years that the conservation of biodiversity is vital for the well-being of living organisms, including we humans. The concerns in the 20th and 21st centuries is the loss of biodiversity. Indeed, many scientists argue that such loss threatens the continued existence of life on Earth. More positively it is also posited that as well as the biological, there are economic, political and social benefits of least maintaining biodiversity and even enhancing it.

This year is the one in which further loss should be terminated by attempting to meet targets that have been set worldwide. As with global warming, these will not be met. In the UK this is despite the efforts of various initiatives such as the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) process and the National Ecosystem Assessment and their review of progress and setting of future targets ahead of the International Convention on Biological Diversity to be held in Japan this month (October 2010). The prospects for halting biodiversity degradation and loss are gloomy in the face of the continued commercial exploitation of natural resources in the free market. In fact, in order to mitigate the detrimental effects of the externalities* associated with the processes and structures of markets, costs are imposed on society at large; for example air emissions of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxides, contamination of land and discharges into water courses of nitrates and pesticide and herbicide residuals.

* A definition of externalities and their impact on the public has been widely examined in the economics literature. One illustrative example in relation to the environmental effects of a specific commercial sector can be found in M.Stabler, A. Papatheorodou and T.Sinclair (2010), 2nd Edition, *The Economics of Tourism*, Chs. 8,9 and 10; London: Routledge

The likely environmental and conservation effects of proposed public policy changes

While acknowledging the possible political implications of raising the issue of the proposed cuts in public expenditure, there are very real and serious consequences for rural communities and in particular their environments and their conservation and quality. It appears that many bodies concerned with rural affairs will be subject to severe reductions in their budgets or even be abolished entirely. A recent government leak suggests that more than 150 QUANGOs (Quasi Autonomous Non-government Organisations) will either suffer financial cuts and reduced powers or be subsumed under another body, hence disappearing altogether.

The supposition is that QUANGOs are unnecessary, it being posited that the government ministers or parliamentary committees could rely on panels of experts to give them independent and unbiased advice and/or review the functions of these NGOs (non-government organisations). Critics of such moves by the government argue that abolition of QUANGOs is short-termism gone mad and is unlikely to yield appreciable cost savings. Moreover, it is asserted that the vital 'watchdog' role of QUANGOs will be lost, as well as their function of preventing ill-considered and rushed initiatives by government departments.

The main concern that will have a huge impact on rural communities and economies is that funding and administration by the Department of the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) of a number of bodies will be reduced or completely eliminated. Some notable detrimental actions contemplated by the government are to curtail the activities of the: Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE); Commission of Rural Communities (CRC); Inland Waterways Advisory Committee (IWAC); Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) and Sustainable Development Commission (SDC). Natural England, also under the aegis of DEFRA, will lose a significant proportion of its funds and has already instituted staff redundancies. A third of its employees will be shed that will certainly impair its ability to undertake its many functions, of which two are extremely important for the improvement in the quality of rural wildlife environments, namely its administration of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and the Entry and High Level Stewardship Schemes (ELSSs and HLSSs) under the Single Farm Payment for environmental and conservation management.

The impairment of Natural England's functions will undoubtedly have an adverse effect locally as the two BBOWT reserves in Inkpen (the Common and Crocus Field) are SSSIs. Another local concern is that there is a plan to 'privatise' British Waterways (BW) which currently is a grant-aided body, akin to a QUANGO. This will mean that effectively BW will be run partly as a commercial entity and partly as a voluntary body that raises funds through donations and/or sponsorship. Interestingly, the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust, one of the most successful and professional of the waterway restoration and management organisations, is viewed as a model of how BW might operate. This is disturbing news, for in these straitened times it is not at all certain, given that it is very costly to maintain waterways to a standard sufficient to keep the system open and running efficiently, that the funds required will be forthcoming.

It is likely that it might not be possible to ensure that, the K and A among them, will continue to be navigable. Canals may well deteriorate and return to the deplorable state that they were in the 'dark ages' during the middle of the 20th century when many were under threat of being

filled in and lost forever. There is a great affection for waterways that perform a number of roles such as aiding flood control, supporting aquatic wildlife and, above all, giving recreation opportunities, for example boating, fishing, cycling and walking. They also have aesthetic qualities as they are very attractive resources contributing to the quality of life.

In addition to the afore-mentioned, the government cuts will undoubtedly adversely affect local authority (LA) responsibilities for and expenditure on environmental facilities and projects; they being considered inessential. While not being as active as it could be in its provision and management of the environment in our area, the West Berks unitary authority is better than many in having due regard for the local natural environment and wildlife conservation. For instance, the Living Landscapes (LLs) project, centred on Greenham Common is a joint BBOWT (Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust)/West Berks Council initiative. The LLs project, together with the Discovery Centre at Thatcham, exemplify what LAs are capable of achieving. It is conceivable that funding could be reduced or curtailed entirely to the future detriment of the biodiversity and quality of the environment locally, probably making it more difficult and extremely costly to restore it to its former quality if and when the economy recovers and funds become available again.