

Mike's Musings: Environment and Conservation

Spring 2011

The weather in April and May

Following the pattern in March, the weather over the two months has been exceedingly dry. In April over the country as a whole the rainfall was only 10% of what it would normally have been. There were only two days, on the 3rd and 4th of the month, when it was measurable, the total being 3.25 mms. On only four days, at the beginning of April, was the wind in a southerly or westerly quarter. For the middle of the month the winds were fresh or blustery from the north-west, veering to north or north-east for the rest of the month. It was quite chilly in the mornings and evenings although there were sunny days in the third week with temperatures in the mid-twenties.

May was also generally a dry month with, after two heavy downpours on the 6th and 7th when 21 and 14.5 mms. of rain fell respectively. There were very light showers on four days in the middle weeks when barely significant measurable falls were recorded. It was sunny on the dry days with temperatures in the high teens and low twenties, but often accompanied by quite blustery winds, mostly from a north-east/north-west quarter. Indeed on the 22nd and 23rd they were almost of gale force. It was not until the 26th that there was heavy rain in the morning followed by showers in the afternoon but the total was only 4.4mms.. After a dry start it rained steadily for most of the day on the 29th clearing in the evening, but again the rainfall was quite modest at 5.5mms. The last two days of the month started clear, becoming cloudy/bright later; remaining dry.

Another marvellous spring (for some species of fauna and flora)

There was a superb spring in 2010 for displays of flowers, shrubs and trees, but this year it has been surpassed because the weather has been dry and everything seeming to emerge a little earlier, despite the cold winter. After the fantastic show of snowdrops and celandines, there have been incredible displays of wood anemones and lately bluebells, rivalled by the blackthorn, hawthorn and elder blooms. There has, however, been the concern for the horse chestnut candles, which were disappointing as a result of the afflictions that these trees are suffering.

With respect to birds, particularly summer migrants, the numbers of house martins, swallows and swifts seem to be considerably lower than last year in our area; likewise nightingales. It is possible that the persistently strong and cold northerly winds (see the weather for April and May above) have affected the migration so that fewer have made it to the UK. However, somewhat surprisingly, since they faced the same weather conditions, the warblers, blackcap, chiff chaff, garden, reed, sedge and willow warblers are very much in evidence, especially along the canal and river Kennet in the Kintbury to Hungerford stretch and beyond into Wilts. Despite concerns that the near drought conditions, with the soil being as hard as concrete, would make it difficult for resident ground-feeding

birds, such as blackbirds, dunnocks and wrens, to find enough food for their young, the survival rate of fledglings has been acceptable.

The government's policies appear to be increasingly at odds with conservation and environmental maintenance and enhancement

The coalition's boast, when formed in May 2010, that it would be the greenest government ever is beginning to look a hollow one. A number of proposed and implemented policies are certainly not conducive to maintaining conservation initiatives and the current state of the environment, let alone improving them. Notwithstanding the abandonment of the sell-off of the publicly owned forests and woodlands in the face of fierce and well-argued opposition (examined in the previous Musings), the policies introduced or planned will run counter to their intentions. Three examples are considered below to support the accusation that the government is reneging on its promises.

National Nature Reserves (NNRs)

There are 224 (including Lundy, currently the sole Marine Nature Reserve) legally protected NNRs total nearly 95,000 hectares (0.6% of the land area) in the country of which there are 37 in the south-east region (covering Berks., Bucks., East and West Sussex, Hants., Kent, Oxon. and Surrey). The NNRs are geological and wildlife sites that began to be designated at the same time as the National Parks in the late 1940s. They were established to protect the sensitive characteristics and to enhance on-site scientific research of pristine habitats and rare species and geological features. The NNRs cover a wide range of habitats, such as: cliffs; downs; dunes; estuaries; heaths; marshes; meadows and woodlands.

Natural England (NE), under the umbrella of DEFRA (The Department of Farming and Rural Affairs), is empowered to declare NNRs, many of which have EU conservation status. About two thirds of NNRs are managed by NE, while the remainder are managed by bodies approved by that organisation, for example LAs, the National Trust, the RSPB and wildlife trusts, for instance our local one, the Berks., Bucks. and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). DEFRA and therefore NE have suffered a cut in their funding, as reported in an earlier Musings, so the appropriate care of NNRs is already being impaired.

The Central Government wants to pass the 140 NNRs that it owns outright to the charity sector, which *prima facie* would safeguard them. However, it is not offering any guarantee of giving the charities the necessary funding to maintain them. Understandably, the charities are unwilling to accept such an arrangement. Moreover, they want the:

- conservation of and access to NNRs to be legally secure,
- protection and value of NNRs to be an imperative guaranteed by legislation
- that civil society capacity is maintained and indeed enhanced

Only partial assurance has been given, by the minister responsible, that no NNRs will be sold off. Given the current position, the charities have grave misgivings over the Government's intentions.

Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF)

The ALSF was a charge on mineral extraction (mainly gravel and sand) the proceeds from which have until now have been applied to environmental schemes in locations adversely affected by the said extractions. The levy in future will be remitted directly to the Treasury to offset the public sector financial deficit.

Well, well we live in interesting times! Yet another renege of the pledge by the coalition to safeguard conservation schemes and environmental enhancement has occurred.

Town and country planning and the environment*

In a relaxation of planning constraints, the government is introducing a default stance ie the presumption of granting permission. This is almost certainly going to give developers greater freedom to acquire land and effectively create the same problems that prevailed with the 'Green Belts' (GBs) introduced after the Second World War. The designation of GBs led to extensive speculative land purchases surrounding towns and villages and the sterilization of potentially productive agricultural land, often resulting in an ad hoc land use, such as for casual 'horseculture', or simply leaving the land unused, having a derelict and scrubby appearance, that encouraged fly-tipping.

The current planning proposals are likely to reinforce speculative purchasing and in these depressed economic times it would probably lead to the postponement of development for prolonged periods. Thus, the same outcomes experienced with GBs would recur. The Woodland Trust is fearful that the more relaxed planning approach, with permission freely granted, will increase the sale of woods for development and the loss of habitats as they are cleared of trees.

Moreover, the looser control will exacerbate the pressures put on planning authorities by developers who will be given almost *carte blanche* to ignore the conservation and environmental safeguards planning guidelines currently give. It is possible that planning authorities may simply quietly ditch them.

**This piece on planning and the environment draws on material from one by Sue Everett in her Conservation news in British Wildlife, Vol. 22, no.4, April 2011 p295.*

Postscript

It would seem that concern for conservation and the enhancement of our environment are likely to be given a much lower priority with funding being further curtailed. The schemes presently extant for agricultural environmental projects are under review and a look at these will be taken in a later musings.