

Mike's Musings: Environment and conservation

Late summer 2011

Weather in August and September

This is the third year in a row in which a promising and quite warm and fine spring, especially during April, has been followed by a disappointing and unsettled summer. Indeed this year, even in September, the weather has been changeable. Over the two months reported on below, winds have often been blustery and mostly from the north-east/north-west quarter, so that when it has been cloudy the days were cool.

August:

Apart from the first few days, the month was rather cool with the wind being in the north-east/north-west quarter on 16 days. It was somewhat wet with rain also on 16 days. There was heavy rain on the 18th, 25th and 26th with relatively small amounts on the other 13 days. The total rainfall for the month was 96 mms. (3.77 ins.), which was 6 mms. more than in August 2010 that was also very wet.

September:

The month was considerably drier than August with small amounts of rain, not exceeding 6 mms. on any one day. It rained on 12 days, giving a total for the month of 27mms. (just over an inch) this is exactly half the amount that fell in 2010 the total rainfall for the same month was just over 54mms.. As in August on the majority of days (25), the wind was from the north-west or west giving rise to cool mornings and over night on what were warm days until the last week. It was then we had what people were calling summer when temperatures were in the mid 20s until the 30th when the maximum was 28C; overnight the temperatures were in the mid teens.

The continuing debate on economic activities and government policies and their impact on rural environment

Earlier this year in a musings that examined the interaction between rural land-uses, a promise was made to consider the policy instruments applied in agriculture to encourage farmers to undertake management practices to enhance the quality of rural environments and achieve greater biodiversity and the conservation of fauna and flora. Furthermore, over the last year the musings web page has taken a look at a number of ongoing environmental issues. These have covered farming practices as they affect wildlife, government policies, such as the proposed sell-off of the nationally owned forests and woodlands, the dissolution of many QUANGOS (Quasi Autonomous Non Government Organisations), many concerned with environmental matters and cutbacks in the government funding of DEFRA (The Department of the Environment, farming and Rural Affairs) in its role of pursuing biodiversity and conservation goals.

Moreover, recent government policy enactments and proposals for their implementation have raised several misgivings, particularly by bodies concerned with rural affairs as well as prominent individuals in the wildlife arena. In particular the radical revision of the planning system is being perceived with horror in its potential to devastate the character of the rural environment. The curtailment of the former role of Natural England to comment on government policies affecting the

state of the environment and wildlife is viewed as gagging informed debate on such issues. This action raises the question as to which bodies should stand up and speak for wildlife to counter the possible violation of the government's claim to be the greenest ever.

Thus, in the sections below, the instruments that can be offered farmers to enter into environmental management schemes are considered first. Then the issue of how and by which bodies and individuals can speak for the interests of wildlife and conservation be represented. Finally, the controversy over the revision and simplification of the town and country planning system is examined.

The policy instruments available to agriculture to pursue environmental goals

The Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) was introduced in England in 2005, superseding the previous one; it was slightly modified in 2007 (see the appraisal below). The purpose of ESS is principally to:

- Achieve increased biodiversity, conserve wildlife and genetic natural resources
- Protect and enhance environmental quality and the character of the essentially rural landscape
- Other objectives are to encourage access to and enjoyment of rural areas and to improve flood management.

There are three levels of ESS the elements of which are:

1. **Entry Level Stewardship (ELS)** is the basic scheme, through a number of management options, to encourage rural land occupiers and owners to secure environmental objectives. The agreements reached with DEFRA, that operates the ESS, entail £30 per hectare (ha.) payments that run for five years. Some key benefits of ELS are the prevention of soil erosion, improvement of water quality and the creation of conditions for wildlife to thrive.
2. **Organic Entry level Stewardship (OELS)** is aimed, as its designation implies, at organic farmers and horticulturalists. The OELS options are essentially the same as the ELS with a payment of £60 per ha.. Examples of the options are: the preservation of stone; hedged and ditched boundaries; protection of historic sites and artefacts; the provision of natural buffer zones of two, four and six metres and the conservation of field trees and woodland edges.
3. **Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)** consists of more comprehensive options and is directed at priority areas and situations and incorporates ELS and OELS. The kinds of priorities of HLS are such land features as the preservation and quality enhancement of hedges, natural grasslands (eg. downlands in West Berks), lowland heath (eg Inkpen Common), Wetlands (eg. Thatcham Reed Beds) and prevention of soil erosion. Payments run for 10 years.

Appraisal:

A criticism of the three stewardship schemes when introduced was that farmers chose the easiest options that impaired the attainment of the key benefits sought. Concern was expressed that the gains enjoyed by the earlier set-a-side policy (abandoned in 2008), that took a significant hectareage of agricultural land out of

cultivation, would not be achieved. The aim, in the revisions to the stewardship schemes in 2007, was to secure 'in field' objectives; for instance providing suitable sites for farmland birds in which they could nest and forage for food (including pesticide and herbicide-free areas, appropriately sown with seed bearing plants and those supporting insect life) that would support them and in which they would obtain shelter, particularly from predators.

Another concern was whether environmental management schemes, currently voluntary, should be made mandatory. The question is whether the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE), the voluntary nature of which appeals to farmers and their supporting agricultural organisations, would actually deliver the desired objectives. If the targets of increasing the number and species of farmland wildlife are not met, because farmers are not talking up the required options, the minister (currently Newbury's MP) has indicated that ESS will be made mandatory in 2013. Watch this space!

Speaking up for wildlife

Our local wildlife expert, Peter Marren, also widely respected nationally, recently wrote an article (*Independent 14th September*) in the light of a number of events, namely the curtailment of Natural England's ability to comment on government policies on the environment, the reduction in DEFRA's funding and the relaxation of planning regulations, which raised the question as to how a voice can be given to wildlife. In effect there is no wildlife watchdog. Peter argues that prominent conservation bodies and individuals have been strangely silent on what are essentially draconian measures proposed by government ministers that will result in the degradation of the environment, the loss of wildlife and the impairment of the attainment of conservation goals.

Peter Marren's explanation of this silence is that the UK's largest conservation organisations, for example the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and The World Wildlife Fund, are more interested in international agendas while the wildlife trusts are focused on local issues. Somewhat cynically, and probably rightly so, he suspects that bodies still reliant on public funding are reluctant to be critical of government policies. His suspicions appear to be well founded as a noticeably restrained and weak letter affirms in the same paper a few days later by Simon King, the well-known naturalist and TV presenter, who is president of the country's wildlife trusts.

In the same issue of the Independent, Michael McCarthy, its environmental editor, endorses Peter's views referring to comments by other wildlife writers on the subject who have been equally vociferous in their criticisms of government actions. McCarthy returned to the topic (*Independent 23rd September*) to give further endorsements of Marren's assertions. It would seem that the Independent is conducting a campaign to wake up conservation bodies and urge them to be more forceful in their condemnation of recent policies and to state the crucial role wildlife plays in both the economy and society at large. McCarthy gives sources supporting Marren's observations that are given at the end of this section.

There ought to be a concerted and universal action by the wildlife and conservation bodies and a revolt by the public similar to the uproar earlier in the year about the sell-off of the nation's forests that resulted in a government U-turn on its intentions

and the fracas that the government's planning proposals (see the next section) is kicking up. An urgent resolution of the issue is required and nothing less than an independent and powerful body peopled by strong-willed individuals is essential.

Footnote: <http://tinyurl.com/5ukmqt7> <http://tinyurl.com/3eysl3>
<http://markavery.info/2011/09/19/tangled-bank/>

The Town and Country Planning revolution

The consultation on the draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is currently in progress until October and has generated outrage by bodies and individuals in rural areas. To an extent the proposals are an extension of the regional strategy and local development framework introduced by the previous government.

The essence of the NPPF is to rescind completely the existing system, guidance on which runs to over 1,300 pages; this will be reduced to just over 50 pages. The statement that has caused such a rumpus is: 'a presumption in favour of sustainable development', as opposed to the reverse at present. Many academics and critics of this statement argue that the term 'sustainable development' is meaningless and indeed a monumental oxymoron as the definition of 'sustainability' is debatable but is diametrically the opposite of 'development'.

One can understand the reaction of those horrified by the content and implications of the NPPF, such as the National Trust (NT) and Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and various wildlife bodies which point out that protected areas like the National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest etc. occupy a third of the country; the concern is of course that two thirds would succumb to increased development pressures. Simon Jenkins of the NT made a telling point when he indicated that 'development' is mentioned 340 times in the NPPF whereas the 'countryside' is referred to four times.

Notwithstanding the vociferous opposition to NPPF, it must be conceded that the current planning system is cumbersome and its operation too slow. Furthermore, it is certainly the case that it needs to be simplified. It must also be admitted that around 80% of all planning applications are granted. Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that there is an acute housing shortage (especially of affordable dwellings) in both rural and urban areas which needs to be addressed.

It is apparent that safeguarding the rural way of life, preserving protected areas and environmental quality, enhancing biodiversity and conserving wildlife have not been explicitly included in the NPPF. It is these issues that need to be challenged. Clearly, the debate is going to be even more important than the forestry one. The musings will return to the issue later in the year.

Footnote: If readers of this brief look at the NPPF wish comment officially on the proposals, they could write to Eric Pickles, the person responsible for the document, or the local MP, Richard Benyon. Also, the NT and the organisation Froglife have posted sites on the web seeking support for their stance. The latter body is encouraging people to send a petition against the proposals; see: info@froglife.org

Comments on what appears on this web page are welcomed. Contact: mikesmusings@btinternet.com