Fifty years of wildlife conservation in Britain — a personal view

Richard Fitter

Although the nature conservation movement had its beginnings a century ago, there was a lull in activity between the two World Wars. Richard Fitter, former FFPS Honorary Secretary and Chairman and now a Vice-President, became involved in the middle of World War II, just as the movement really got off the ground. His account of wildlife conservation in the last 50 years reveals the tremendous changes that have occurred and gives us glimpses of his own deep commitment and contribution to the movement. This paper was originally delivered at a joint meeting of the British Ecological Society and the Society for the History of Natural History in London on 12 November 1988.

Pioneer days

The pioneer period of the British nature conservation movement began with the foundation of the (now Royal) Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in 1889, continued with that of the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire (SPFE) (now the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society) in 1903, and ended in 1912 with Charles Rothschild's creation of the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (SPNR) (now the Royal Society for Nature Conservation). Right at the end, in April 1913, came the British Ecological Society (BES), at first an entirely scientific society, having started life in 1904 as the Committee for the Survey and Study of British Vegetation (later the British Vegetation Committee). On a parallel course, the National Trust was founded in 1896, to own and preserve both land and buildings of historic and amenity interest, and so almost by default became the owner of such early nature reserves as Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire, and Blakeney Point, Norfolk.

Between the two World Wars all three of the original wildlife conservation societies continued at a rather low level of activity, the SPNR in particular brooding happily for 20 years over Rothschild's bequest of £50,000, a sum which could at that time have bought a high proportion of the total present portfolio of national nature reserves.

The conservation movement gets off the ground

In the middle of World War II, the SPNR at last bestirred itself. Stimulated by the discussion of plans for post-war reconstruction, it at last carried out one of its founder's wishes and launched a survey of actual and potential nature reserves, to bring up to date the list Rothschild himself had prepared in 1915 to try and guard vital sites against the wartime ploughing campaign of the then Board of Agriculture. This survey was carried out by a network of county comittees, and I owe my own introduction to the conservation movement to being invited, as a leading member of the London Natural History Society and editor of *The London Naturalist*, to join the London Area sub-committee of the SPNR's Nature Reserves Investigation Committee (NRIC).

Most, if not all, of these sub-committees managed to report by the end of 1945, and their work formed one-half of the basis on which the next step was taken. The other half was the policy statement issued by the BES in 1944, advocating the establishment after the war of what was then called a Biological Service, and later emerging as the Nature Conservancy (now

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the Nature Conservancy Council).

Some influential behind-the-scenes work by a group that included Julian Huxley, A.G. Tansley, Max Nicholson, Cyril Diver and Sir John Fryer, the Secretary of the Agricultural Research Council, resulted in the appointment of the Wild Life Conservation Special Committee (WLCSC), under Huxley's chairmanship, as an appendage to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning's Hobhouse Committee on National Parks, to whose report we owe our present network of national parks in England and Wales. To this Wild Life Committee I was appointed the very junior secretary. The Hobhouse Committee, incidentally, was the outcome of a report commissioned from John Dower, who became one of the Committee's most influential members, and who is commemorated in the name of the headquarters of the Countryside Commission, today's name for the National Parks Commission, which resulted from the Hobhouse Report. Meanwhile, Huxley went off to head UNESCO, where he insisted on the inclusion of the S for Science, against the wishes of the cultural establishment, while Tansley took over the chair of WLCSC. Its report, published in 1947, was drafted by Diver, based on the BES report, with myself contributing the detailed appendices based on the NRIC surveys. The result was the creation by Royal Charter in 1949 of the Nature Conservancy, with Tansley as its first Chairman and Diver as its first and Nicholson as its second Director.

The county trusts

Even before the Conservancy was launched, the three major voluntary societies had started to show further signs of life, the RSPB celebrating its 60th anniversary in 1949, and the SPFE changing its own name to Fauna Preservation Society (FPS) and its journal's name to *Oryx* in 1950. At about this time as well, I myself joined the councils of both the RSPB and the FPS. However, perhaps the most significant event on the voluntary side occurred in Yorkshire, where the local naturalists emulated the foundation in 1926 of the Norfolk Naturalists Trust and in 1946 set up their own county trust, being followed two years later by Lincolnshire, which brought into the movement A. E. Smith, who was to play a leading part in the development of the county trust movement, as well as serving as Chairman of the Nature Conservancy's England Committee.

By the mid-1950s not only were several other counties thinking along the same lines but strong attempts were being made to prod the SPNR to take on the leadership of the nascent county trust movement. These resulted, first in the formation of a new committee, for the existing trusts, and second in the holding of the first county trust conference at Skegness in 1959. After this the trust movement really took off, and within 5 years a network of county trusts covered virtually the whole of England and Wales, with the Scottish Wildlife Trust for Scotland as a whole. One of the most significant features of the county trusts was that, unlike the natural history societies that preceded them, they were companies limited by guarantee and so, like the National Trust, could own as well as manage land.

A missed opportunity

The SPNR was thus in a key position and might have been still more central to the development of the movement if the efforts by Max Nicholson and others to make it go further and take up the leadership of the whole voluntary movement had succeeded. However, the SPNR drew back from this prominent role, contenting itself with the leadership of the county trusts, and instead offered a substantial grant to enable a Council for Nature to be set up. This body represented both the conservation and the natural history societies, and in its early days played quite an active part, especially in presenting the conservation case at public inquiries, and in organizing two National Nature Weeks in 1963 and 1966. It played a key role in the establishment in 1959 of what used to be called the Conservation Corps, but is now the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, a key institution in conservation management.

At about this time the membership of the RSPB began to take off, from a base below 10,000, and as the Society became increasingly professional, though still with much local assistance from volunteers, its membership has continued to

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increase until it is now around 450,000. This, incidentally, is far above the combined membership of all the main political parties in Britain. As the county trust movement also gathered strength, voices began to be heard advocating its amalgamation with the RSPB. The marriage seemed to be a natural one, since the RSPB had a strong central organization but no local groups, while the SPNR, as it still was then, had thriving local groups, in the shape of the county trusts, but only a weak central administration. However, after several years of fruitless negotiation, the two strong elements in the set-up proved unwilling to make the compromises needed to make one large and powerful voluntary wildlife conservation organization, and a chance was missed that many people still regret. Today the RSPB is developing its own regional organization, while the RSNC has greatly strengthened its central administration.

During the early 1960s yet another body, this time a primarily fund-raising one, appeared on the scene, the World Wildlife Fund-UK, (WWF-UK), but as this originated from overseas, I will deal with it when I come to the international aspect. Suffice it to say that WWF-UK is now the most important source of funds for voluntary wildlife bodies in Britain, second only to the Nature Conservancy Council, and perhaps before long it will be second to none.

The Nature Conservancy transformed and renamed

The 1960s and 1970s saw big changes in the status of both the Nature Conservancy and the Council for Nature, the comprehensive pressure group Max Nicholson had helped to create, in order to simplify the problems the Conservancy found in dealing with a multitude of smaller bodies. The Conservancy began life under the aegis of the Committee of the Privy Council, which supervised the Research Councils. But the need to take an active part in conserving threatened sites, notably at the public inquiry into the construction of the first nuclear power station at Dungeness, which threatened one of the top conservation sites in Britain, drew the attention of the Civil Service mandarins to the fact that they had what they regarded as a cuckoo in their nest. If I may mix metaphors, dog does not eat dog, even if the second dog is about to destroy a prime site. So the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) was created and the Nature Conservancy included with its clutch of primarily research bodies. But still the great strength of the Conservancy, from the conservationists' point of view, that it combined scientific expertise and research with active conservation management, stuck in official gullets. So once again, following the adoption of the 'customer-contractor' principle, the Conservancy was changed, renamed the Nature Conservancy Council, and attached directly to the Department of the Environment, where it still remains. Having been deprived of its original scientists, who remained with NERC, it proceeded to recruit a new scientific capability of its own.

Of very recent developments, at the hands of a government that appears increasingly reluctant to finance scientific research, it is perhaps too soon to speak.

Birth of Wildlife Link

The Council for Nature had a different fate. It simply expired of inanition, or lack of interest by its members. By the late 1970s the whole voluntary wildlife conservation scene had changed, with the arrival of such activist bodies as the Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, each significantly, like WWF, the local branch of an overseas organization. It was the reluctance of the Council for Nature to admit these bodies, and the equal reluctance of the activists to join up with what they regarded as dead wood, that led to the demise of the Council for Nature in 1979. However, on the initiative of the FPS, whose Hon. Secretary (myself) was the Council's last chairman, it was almost immediately reborn in 1980 as Wildlife Link, a pressure and lobbying group representing the whole spectrum of wildlife conservation, including the animal welfare groups, with Lord Melchett, a former Labour junior minister, as its very able chairman. Without his political knowhow, it could not have become so successful so quickly. So the new Nature Conservancy Council has been able to interact with the new Wildlife Link in the far more activist and stressful atmosphere of the 1980s.

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Specialist societies

One interesting feature of the post-war years has been the development of specialist conservation societies for groups of animals. The first was the Wildfowl Trust, founded in 1946 by (Sir) Peter Scott at Slimbridge on the Severn estuary in Gloucestershire, as the Severn Wildfowl Trust. The Wildfowl Trust specializes in ducks, geese and swans, with a few related groups such as flamingos, and over the years has built up the finest collection of these wildfowl in the world, besides stimulating and carrying out much research and other conservation activity. Bodies with similar aims that cover other groups are the Otter Trust, the Hawk Trust and the World Pheasant Association. The British Deer Society, with whose beginnings I was myself concerned as its first chairman, is more sport-oriented and does not maintain collections. Several existing specialist scientific or natural history societies, such as the Botanical Society of the British Isles and the British Herpetological Society, have also set up conservation committees, while the entomological societies are represented by the Joint Committee for the Conservation of British Insects, a most admirable co-operative effort. Currently, specialist conservation bodies for herpetofauna and wild plants are in process of formation, their founders evidently feeling that the existing natural history-based societies are not promoting conservation actively enough.

Legislation

Conservation cannot be achieved without some legislation and the RSPB in particular has been concerned throughout our period in bringing the Wild Birds Protection Acts up to date, and extending their scope as widely as possible. The two major Acts were passed in 1954 and 1967, and were followed by the Wild Creatures and Wild Plants Act 1975, which for the first time dealt with wildlife other than birds.

The FPS was concerned particularly with legislation to control international trade in endangered animals, passed in 1964 and 1976; as its Hon. Secretary I was appointed to the official committees that advised the Government on the detailed administration of these Acts. On the home front the FPS was concerned with the Conservation of Seals Act 1970, which originated at a meeting held in its offices and has been described as the first British conservation law based on scientific principles. The British Deer Society has been concerned with legislation to regulate the sporting and control aspects of deer populations in the Deer Acts of 1963 and 1980.

Finally, the new-born Wildlife Link was able to cut its teeth in the prolonged struggle to improve the current basic law, the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981, while it was passing through Parliament. A key feature of this Act was the strengthening of the provisions for safeguarding Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

The international scene

In July 1946, soon after I became secretary of the WLCSC, I found myself whisked off on the Committee's field visit to inspect the Swiss National Park in the Engadine, along with conservationists from Belgium, France, The Netherlands and Switzerland. None of the British participants in that visit had any idea that we might be about to found an international conservation body, but that was what our Swiss hosts, the Schweizerbund für Naturschutz, had in mind, and on our first evening with them they launched into their proposal. They had good reason for doing so, for twice already had such initiatives been thwarted by the outbreak of a World War. In 1914 the painstaking preparatory work of the Swiss under Dr Paul Sarasin had been nullified by World War I, and a quarter of a century later a similar Dutch effort under Pieter van Tienhoven fell victim to World War II. This time both the Swiss, and van Tienhoven who was also there, were determined to succeed. After another meeting at Brunnen, Switzerland, in 1947, the International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUPN) was founded at Fontainebleau, in France, in 1948. It has the unique distinction of comprising in its membership both governments and their agencies, including both the British Government and the Nature Conservancy Council, and non-governmental organizations, the so-called ngo's, such as the BES and the FFPS. In October 1988 I was able to be present at the Union's 40th anniversary celebrations, held in Paris and graced by the presence of the Prime Minister of France.

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Like so many other conservation bodies, IUPN soon proceeded to change its name: at its Edinburgh general assembly in 1956, as a condition of United States conservationists joining in, its objectives were broadened so that it could be renamed the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). The thinking at that time was that preservation was a static concept, equivalent to just protection, while conservation was dynamic and allowed for management utilization of wildlife. However, saddled with such a long and indigestible name, IUCN has long wanted to do something about it; in June 1988 it decided to keep its name, particularly as it is now a quite well-known acronym, but in future to refer to itself as the World Conservation Union. Britain is one of a number of countries that have national committees for its IUCN membership, and the UK-IUCN Committee has been increasingly active since it was started in the late 1970s. It has the great merit of bringing together both government and non-government members of the Union.

I did not resume my early link with IUCN until I took on the honorary secretaryship of the FPS in 1963. I was then appointed to IUCN's Survival Service Commission (SSC) (since, needless to say, renamed the Species Survival Commission) at the beginning of Peter Scott's 17-year chairmanship, in the course of which he invented the *Red Data Books* for endangered species, which are now perhaps the most widely known aspect of IUCN's activities. I can even claim to have played a small part in this, having helped to redraft some sheets in one of the early revisions of the mammal volume. Incidentally, the failure to produce a *British Red Data Book* for any vertebrate animal group—there has long been one for vascular plants and the insect RDB was published at the end of 1988—is one of the curious lacunae of the movement in recent years. For about a dozen years until 1988 I was Chairman of the SSC's Steering Committee, and still remain a member.

IUCN, WWF, ICBP and others

The problem of adequate funding affects all conservation bodies, and by the early 1960s it was apparent that IUCN was badly in need of a fund-raising mechanism. Hence the creation in 1961 of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), with the support of IUCN as one of the main aims of many of the original founders. However, WWF International was set up as a body quite independent of IUCN, with its own trustees, and not even as a membership society, so in the course of time the WWF international trustees became increasingly reluctant to provide core-funding for IUCN, and today, although they occupy the same building in Switzerland they are quite separate bodies, each with its own conservation programmes, and, though inevitably linked in some ways, are not so financially. Like everybody else, WWF has succumbed to name-changing, apparently on the ground that 'wildlife' is a difficult concept to translate into some languages. So it is now called the World Wide Fund for Nature, thus, like IUCN, managing to keep its familiar acronym, WWF.

WWF set up branches in most of the developed and some Third World countries and its United States branch, being for legal reasons quite independent of WWF International, still has the strength of mind to call itself World Wildlife Fund. The British branch, WWF-UK, was the first to be set up, almost simultaneously with the International, and I have served as one of its Trustees and have also for many years been a member of its conservation advisory group.

There is another international conservation body, which chronologically preceded both IUCN and WWF, the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), founded in 1922 as the International Committee for Bird Preservation. This also has national sections, many more than either IUCN or WWF, and both the international body and the British Section were for many years associated with the name of Phyllis Barclay-Smith. I have myself been a member of the British Section, representing at various times three different societies, for most of the period since 1952. It was at one time customary to suggest that ICBP was an unnecessary body that ought to be subsumed within IUCN. However, ICBP is at present highly efficient and effective within its restricted remit and I very much doubt if bird conservation would be served in any way by amalgamating it with IUCN.

As birds are to the rest of the animal kingdom, so in institutional terms wildfowl tend to be to other birds. So there is a parallel body to ICBP in the

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International Waterfowl and Wetland Research Bureau (originally the International Wildfowl Research Bureau) for ducks, geese, swans and allied birds. This has for many years been located with the Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge.

In conclusion

At the end of the penultimate decade of the twentieth century, we realize how far we have come since the BES and the SPNR refounded the conservation movement during World War II. The conservation scene is quite unrecognizable and has become professional to a degree that would have been unimaginable to those who set out on the long trail in 1941, certainly unimaginable on the voluntary side.

So what can we imagine will happen in the next half century? Forecasting, in the shape of extrapolating from existing trends, is made difficult by the large number of quite unexpected events and developments that occur. In the 1940s neither the myxomatosis epidemic of the 1950s nor the elm disease disaster of the 1970s could have been expected. Yet we can predict some probabilities and possibilities. In the next 20 or 30 years we might easily see the loss of all our beeches and many fungi and orchids due to acid rain. A rabies epidemic in our fox population is always on the cards, and we might lose many or most of our seals even within the next 5 years. How will our breeding seabirds cope with the commercial overfishing of sand-eels? And what will be the long-term effect of set-aside in agriculture and of the rising sea-level that seems an inevitable result of the greenhouse effect? Will many of our calcicolous plants be eliminated by the out-of-control atmospheric pollution of the past decades, and will many of our low-lying coastal nature reserves be submerged by 2030? The half-century began with wartime defence flooding giving us the RSPB's Minsmere reserve in Suffolk. Will Minsmere survive to celebrate its century or join neighbouring Dunwich under the sea? I leave you with these intriguing thoughts, convinced that what will happen on the ground will be much more interesting than anything that may happen to all the voluntary organizations on whose committees I have sat and deliberated for so long during the last 50 years.

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