CORRIDORS OF (NATURAL) POWER

Fraser Wheeler outlines the real concerns about the decline in our natural environment and argues the case for greater biodiversity, the urgent need for change and what we can all do to help

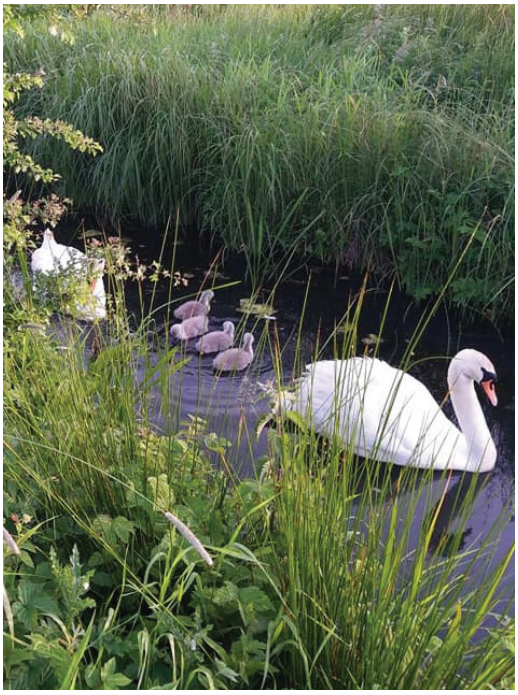
The River Arun (Pam Keeble) and below, cygnets on the brooks (Xenia Coventry)

We are part of nature, not separate from it. We rely on nature to provide us with oxygen to breathe, food and clean water, air quality, a regulated climate, the control of disease and pests, recycling of waste, the maintenance of nutrient cycles, and our health through recreation and recuperation.

It has massive intrinsic value. This includes a fundamental economic role. As natural capital, it is an economic asset, just as produced capital (roads, buildings and factories) and human capital (knowledge and skills) are assets. Biodiversity enables nature to be productive, resilient and adaptable, just as diversity within a portfolio of financial assets reduces risk, so diversity within a portfolio of natural assets increases nature's resilience to shocks, reducing the risks to nature's services. Our future is fundamentally dependent on biodiversity.

In the Anthropocene, the age of humans, nature has come under massive pressure. We are experiencing the highest loss of life since the dinosaurs: biodiversity has declined by 70 per cent since the 1970s. One million animal and plant species are at risk of extinction. Shocking statistics.

Estimates show that between 1992 and 2014 the global stock of natural capital per person declined by 40 per cent, while produced capital doubled, and human capital rose by 15 per cent. In other words, our prosperity continues to be built at the expense of nature. It is rather like a planetary Ponzi scheme, using vast amounts of natural capital to make false profits. On this trend, it is judged we will require 1.6 earths to maintain our living standards. It underlines the un-sustainability of the path we are on.



Those in the corridors of power are waking up to the enormity of this challenge. We hear much about climate change these days, most recently the news that a 1.5C degree increase is likely soon with the added impact of El Nino.

But biodiversity, the other side of the climate coin, has tended to take more of a back seat. There is now a growing realisation that this has to change, to create balance between the demands on nature and the supply of its services.

Existing conservation efforts, while important, will no longer cut the mustard.

There was a shift in this direction at the climate change conference in Glasgow (COP26), when, for the first time, nature was put at the heart of the climate change negotiations. This created an opening for further progress last year with a landmark global agreement on nature through to 2030. Highlights included an agreement to put 30 per cent of the planet and 30 per cent of degraded ecosystems under international protection by 2030; and all large companies to assess and report nature-related risks.

Like climate change, solutions to biodiversity will require complex systemic changes involving substantial trade-offs, and thinking outside the box. For example, our measure of economic performance is inherently flawed.

We hear much about Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the news, almost an obsession for governments and markets. But as the term suggests it is gross, not net, and takes no account of depreciating assets like the natural environment. There is acknowledgment that GDP as a measure is flawed but no agreement yet on what might replace it.

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Change, such as incorporating natural capital into national accounting systems, would be a big step in the right direction, that should lead to radical shifts in the global financing of nature. Increased use of innovative technology will be another, particularly in food production, allied to better systems like large-scale regenerative agriculture, and targeted wilding.

Change in how we treat nature will be messy, challenging, and highly political, but I believe the trend to be unstoppable. We need to find a way for people and nature to thrive, or at least exist more sustainably, together.

There has been plenty of activity in the UK corridors of power, too. In fact, UK environmental legislation is regarded as ahead of the curve. The 2021 Environment Act set new targets for halting the decline of species by 2030, and will help the transition to a more circular economy.

Duke of Burgundy butterfly

A UK environment plan this year introduced the Environment Land Management Scheme, to re-fashion agricultural subsidies to support nature. The cogs are turning slowly, and there is plenty of criticism of government inertia and conflicting policy, but they are turning.

The UK government also commissioned the ground-breaking Dasgupta review into the economics of biodiversity, which has caused a stir here and internationally. We will, as ever, need to keep the government's feet to the fire on implementation.

In this context new schemes are proliferating across the country. In West Sussex we have the Knepp Estate rewilding project, which goes from strength to strength and is recognised internationally.

Barn own in flight (Mike Beck)

To counter the fragmentation of nature here, caused by built-up areas, roads and intensive land use, an emphasis is now on creating wildlife corridors to connect nature, with a focus on landowners and communities to help get it done.

Weald to Waves is aiming to create a 100-mile corridor from the Ashdown Forest to Climping on the coast; and Wilder Horsham is similarly focused on habitat restoration and connectivity within its area. Natural England is investigating with local partners how to restore our wildbrooks, which are in a failing state. Amberley, which has some unique and valuable habitats, is centred on this activity, and our community is in a critical position to help nature recovery.

Amberley Parish Council has now set up a working group on climate action and network recovery, to build on some great work locally, from recycling to wildflower meadows, and to act as a catalyst particularly with neighbouring parishes and new partners. For example, Amberley gardens are highly regarded, and to kick things off we might look at how to stimulate connectivity between the gardens, and with surrounding areas.

The day I write this a hosepipe ban (in East Sussex and Kent) has come into force which will not help. But whenever possible we can facilitate soil health, cut sparingly and wild where we can, plant for bees as pollinators, and support the return of creatures such as the Duke of Burgundy butterfly, and the barn owl. The scope is wide indeed, and Weald to Waves has a specific gardens initiative for Amberley to plug into.

Overall, priorities will be established, funding will be sourced, and volunteers sought. Nature will bounce back if we get it right. The fight is on: to create corridors of natural power, and more.

Something to ponder…

I have a £50 banknote in my pocket. I go to a restaurant and pay for dinner with it. The restaurant owner then uses the note to pay for the laundry. The laundry owner then uses the note to pay the barber. The barber will then use the note for shopping. After an unlimited number of payments, it still remains a £50 note, fulfilling its purpose to everyone who used it for payment. There is nothing in the cash transactions for the bank or any other financial institution.

But if I go to a restaurant and pay for a £50 dinner bill digitally – using a credit or debit card, bank fees for my transaction charged to the seller are 3 per cent - around £1.50. Thus a similar amount for all the subsequent transactions – by the restaurateur to the laundry, the laundry owner to the barber, then the shop and so on. After 30 transactions, the initial £50 will be worth only £5, the remaining £45 having be absorbed by the bank or other financial institutions. Cash really is king.