

Whither Diversity

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A presentation read at The Shotover
Conference at the Oxford University
Museum of Natural History
17th May 2014

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Oxford University owns a small portion of Shotover Country Park, but most of it is owned by Oxford City Council, who are responsible for its management. Since 1986 - most of the park has been a SSSI, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and Natural England is responsible for this aspect. Invitations to this conference went to both Natural England and Oxford City Council.

This presentation is partly to help those less familiar with the government's approach to wildlife protection, and partly to encourage the sharing of our own thoughts and experiences of the threats to our declining biodiversity. Then perhaps we can mature a better appreciation of how this decline is played out in the wider countryside, and especially at Shotover.

I guess it's unlikely we'll find a lasting magical solution to this problem - but if we did - it might go down in history as another of this building's great debates!

So with apologies, I'll mis-quote Sir Walter Scott, "Oh, what a tangled web they weave when first they practice to deceive".

The deception I refer to is our government's approach to the protection of species. Long ago, it seems a decision was required; either

to genuinely and demonstrably get it right for vulnerable species wherever possible; or politically assemble a system that gives the majority of people the feeling that wildlife is being well protected. And I feel it's the latter. In our experience the state forces on us an inadequate system of wildlife protection - that only fits where it touches - and it should come as no surprise that biodiversity is in decline, in general and on Shotover.

In England, wildlife legislation is pretty weak and there's little effective protection for genuinely vulnerable wildlife, and while the strategists wring their hands at the loss of biodiversity, they probably know full well that their proposals will make very little difference.

One only has to look at the lists of legally protected species: birds 80, wild flowers 120, butterflies 35, beetles 8 and spiders 2! That's 60% of butterflies, and 0.02% of spiders.

This is species protection to keep people happy.

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However, one saving grace is that whatever the state thinks it's doing for wildlife diversity, it's really down to landowners to care for future wildlife, and if a landowner is keen and committed they will seek to do the right thing anyway, to the best of their ability. And if it happens to fit the state system - that's fine - take the money.

Quite a lot of the money is handed out by Natural England - sometimes sensibly - to pay those who are willing to fall-in-line with the inadequate system; and there's no money for those that won't, regardless of their

expertise or experience. From time to time, our ecological consultants may have to put-aside their PhDs and MScs in ecology and take work that helps Natural England meet its targets - or look for newts and bats on development sites. And it is on development sites where a peculiar extreme of wildlife protection is played out - and I'll bring that back in - in a moment.

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Let's look at Sites of Special Scientific Interest - SSSIs - of which Shotover is one. The recent Lawton Report, which is all about the current state of wildlife in England, is held in Biblical reverence in many circles, partly because everyone can find a bit in it to support their particular agenda. Well I can cherry-pick too! - and would like to extract the following:

SSSIs are ... "Sites whose **primary** purpose is nature conservation and which have a **high** level of protection ... the backbone of wildlife protected areas in England"

Who sold that one to Sir John Lawton?! The SSSI land area may be protected from development, but the species within them have alarmingly little enforceable protection. This is due to a weakened and under-resourced Natural England. And so bizarrely, biodiversity can receive less protection in a SSSI than in other less critical circumstances.

How can this be ?

Whereas a developer must jump through all sorts of hoops, a landowner can operate in a SSSI with impunity. Permission **should** be sought from Natural England before doing a potentially damaging operation, but if you don't tell them what you're doing ... they'll never know.

At Shotover - on pointing out obvious biological damage we were surprised to find that Natural England always had a reason to find the damage excusable and usually some excuse for the actions of the City Council - like 'I'm sure they didn't mean to'. Worse, the Council then realise that they can get away with pretty much anything.

So at this point I'll just bring these threads together with a current example

[Talking to overhead slides.]

*The recording of reptiles over the past 15 years has shown that Mary Sadler's Field - near to the main car park in the SSSI - is the local epicentre of Grass Snake and Common Lizard activity across the whole Hill. For many years and in consultation with the Oxfordshire Amphibian and Reptile Group, and under the permission of the City Council's Countryside Service, Shotover Wildlife worked to enhance this area to conserve reptiles.*

*Then last year, on the north side of Shotover, the extension to the Thornhill Park-and-Ride car park was being held up because a Grass Snake - a 'legally protected' species - had been seen on the development site. This then required much time and effort to move any snakes onto a neighbouring piece of land with a special fence so they couldn't get back.*

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However, whilst thousands of pounds were being spent carefully moving Grass Snakes on the north side of the Hill under close inspection ... in the SSSI, much of the best habitat was being casually swept bald by a tractor [2014 slide of extensive clearance in Mary Sadler's Field], including reptile refuges, basking areas and hibernation sites - simply on the

general idea that Natural England think there should be more open space in the SSSI.

This is going on all the time at Shotover, in many different guises (for example, 'Logs for Labour' ... a scheme for incinerating rare insects). Yet both authorities are happy ticking each other's boxes and meeting conservation targets - but usually to the detriment of species that are supposed to be protected.

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So now let's imagine the situation: you're on the Hill and you tap the tractor driver on the shoulder and say, "Good morning - I'm not sure what you're doing here can be good for wildlife", and he replies, "It's OK, we take our advice from Natural England and ... we've got a Management Plan". I'm sure that 99% of people would think that was fine. Which brings us to Management Plans.

Sadly at Shotover - and other sites too - the dominant motives for a Management Plan are not what you would hope for. For Natural England - at Shotover - the main purpose of a Management Plan is to elevate the SSSI, on paper, to a better condition status - simply on the basis that a Management Plan exists. This is purely for meeting government targets - and only vague optimism for wildlife.

For Oxford City Council, a good Management Plan that befits a fine and complex SSSI such as Shotover would actually be beyond their capacity to deliver. **But that doesn't matter** - our tractor driver has already demonstrated the plan's key purpose. Its very existence can be used as a badge - a facade - of competence. And in this role the plan is a very important document for the

Council, but an **extremely** dangerous one for wildlife, because it is constantly used as a licence to do dubious work in the name of wildlife conservation.

Would you fly in a plane ... that's going to be piloted by a 10-year-old ... whose only qualification is to have just been given a flight manual? It's no different.

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I appreciate these authorities have had to deal with fearsome budget cuts - but the problem is how they have chosen to deal with them. At the City Council, David Steel's visionary Countryside Service was dissolved a few years ago, and their only naturalist-manager made redundant, leaving no qualified provision for wildlife management. There have been 2 Shotover managers since - both landscape gardeners.

For Natural England I take you back just 7 years to 2007, and a pivotal moment. At the time, *Shotover Wildlife* was delivering well-researched community conservation, in regular consultation with the City Council and attracting thousands of pounds of grant each year. Meanwhile, Natural England had been told to revise the condition statements for SSSIs. **And here we get to the point which has now defined the present and future for biodiversity at Shotover.** For site assessment Natural England put on its narrowest blinkers and chose to disregard the 20 years of research and data accumulated since 1986, most of it by *Shotover Wildlife*. But worse than that, they told us they weren't permitted to regard new data ... **This was a most shocking non-truth.**

They told us that they could only use the state of knowledge as of 1986 when the SSSI status was awarded,

some of which was based on data from the 1930s!

**For me, this is where the pressure to tick boxes, with the minimum of effort on the ground, is at its ugliest.**

And perhaps now it is possible to understand why wildlife conservation at Shotover is such a difficult issue, and why the public authorities will always be uncomfortable with, and often hostile towards, community expertise that gets in the way of their quasi-wildlife agendas.

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However, let's step back a moment to get some perspective. Jacqueline Wright [earlier presentation] tells us that over the past 450 million years mosses have shrugged-off 5 mass extinctions - so what's the issue?! Eliza Howlett our palaeontologist [museum staff exhibitor], reminds us that not long ago Shotover was under the sea, and if you read the last chapter of Colin Tudge's remarkable book *'The Variety of Life'*, he points out that species losses, fast or slow, are inevitable. And through reading Colin's probing narrative I start to question why I've been bothering with wildlife conservation at all. Let it all go! Continue our mad dash towards human extinction and hand the planet back to the beetles and ferns.

Of course in the end it comes down to one's own feelings for wildlife and biodiversity, and how widely you choose to set your values in space and time - locally, globally ... since the last interglacial or since breakfast.

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So for my final point ... I invite you to join me for a virtual walk on Shotover.

[Talking to overhead slides]

*For this walk I'll give you the pleasure of 30 different species of tree, 150 different wild flowers to see you through the year, 50 species of bird, 35 butterflies, 10 mammals, 50 fungi, .... what a fine walk this is! ... 20 grasses, 10 ferns and rushes, 10 mosses to keep Jacqueline happy, 15 bumblebees and 120 additional miscellaneous insects of your choice: grasshoppers, beetles, dragonflies, hoverflies, etc. That's 500 species for those wonderful days walking on Shotover.*

*Now I wish to make a point that has been made by several observers, including Peter Marren in the 'British Wildlife' magazine, and that is ... **Ninety percent of species could be removed from the countryside and wouldn't be missed by most people** [pie-chart slide - 5,600 species recorded at Shotover to date.*

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So I think within us all, not just us here today, we have an innate desire to look after what we have so that it is there for future generations - and that includes the 90% - all of it.

Is there a future for biodiversity at Shotover? Perhaps not a very good one for the coming generations - and it could be so much better in different circumstances. I think that only the more robust species will survive and the rather special and vulnerable species will continue to fall away. So what to do? Do we lean on the gate and watch ... or is there another way?