

We want wildlife, so bring on the medicine...



Wildlife lament: Chris Packham & Billy Bragg at Hyde Park.

Views from the People's Walk For Wildlife... and beyond.
Saturday, Sept 22, 2018, Hyde Park, London.

Written by Alex Morss.

Soggy weather aside, I thought Saturday's huge march in London felt a bit like a happy pill for Britain's great outdoor depression. We do need one of those, before we all just shut our ears and switch off the life support to our wildlife amid the tsunami of miserable news. Most of us know about the state it's all in, and many feel frustrated but powerless.

What we now need is for Chris Packham et al's actions to transform into a remedy pill, and it looks like there is a chance that might happen.

What a state we are in though, for a naturalist to personally feel he has to bankroll such actions to bring about the change we need. A crowd funding site indicates he is about £30,000 out of pocket, not to mention the unpaid time the team have all devoted to this. There is now discussion about creating a not-for-profit organisation to help springboard their ideas into policy.

The People's Walk For Wildlife and accompanying draft *People's Manifesto For Wildlife* include some potent ingredients, which you can read here:

[www.chrispackham.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Peoples-Manifesto-Download.pdf]

Personally, I would have added a few other things to that wish list of 200 ideas to help Britain's ailing biodiversity, but there are some very strong issues raised and it's only meant to be a first draft. It doesn't offer details of how people can contribute, although they are invited to do so. Hopefully that will be clarified soon.

Crucially this campaign comes packaged with a promise - in the words of Billy Bragg who sang on stage at the rally: *"This is just the beginning."*

HYDE PARK

Saturday's first dose of medicine was launched with a stage of inspiring speakers in Hyde Park plus a march to deliver their demands to No 10 Downing Street. I think the team did incredibly well in organising the entire endeavour and then successfully motivating an estimated 10,000 people across the country to descend on London, in dripping grey weather, to stand in solidarity with our suffering wildlife.



Early rain: many scurried off to the trees.

About those numbers - the figures are estimates and have caused much debate online. Numbers began low when I arrived at 10am, with perhaps a few hundred, early on. First photos were used as ammunition by a few in the hunting and shooting community to claim, falsely, that almost no-one turned up.

The crowd had grown into a four-figure number by the time a series of uplifting speeches got underway at noon, accompanied by songs from

Billy Bragg, Grace Petrie and Saskia Eng, and a spot of passionate karaoke from Packham ;D

THE MARCH

The police told one walker they had only anticipated 1,000 walkers, but subsequently estimated it to be 10,000; a claim The Met then officially denied: *"It is not standard practice for the Metropolitan Police to give attendee numbers as this can be perceived in a number of different ways," they said. "You often find people/the media quote a 'Source' within the Police who gave them the figure."*

That prompted @Brefugees to dig out evidence showing that The Met had in fact publicly declared estimated numbers for almost every big protest in London over the past few decades.

Whatever the precise count, which no-one seems to have actually done, it's worth bearing in mind that damp people have a tendency to give up and go home, or not even show up at the very thought of getting wet, so several thousand people rocking up in the rain is a highly impressive turn out. Some folk claimed on Twitter that it was the biggest wildlife march London had ever seen.



Adorned in costumes, bearing giant 3D models and placards, and playing a chorus of bird song recordings, they marched to No 10. With numbers still swelling, police cordoned off the roads because the march was at least 20-30 people wide multiplied by dozens or perhaps hundreds of rows deep. You couldn't see both the start and the end of the long people snake.

Once at Downing Street, Packham and a posse of teen conservationists handed in 'Draft 1' of the Manifesto to the Government.

Environment Minister Michael Gove was nowhere to be seen, and failed to comment on the march, either on the day or during the days following the event. He was quoted the week beforehand on the Defra website saying he'd welcome Packham's 'important contribution' and would consider it in depth... except it was obvious from his further comments that he mistakenly thought Saturday was something to do with a bioblitz.

So he's in for a surprise. I posted on Gove's Twitter feed, asking if he would make any further comments, and tagging in the organisers. I hope he will respond. Perhaps he could confirm if he will make a commitment to action, and in what way. Ten thousand or more would like to know.



WILL IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

People engage and respond better to ideas and solutions than they do to hearing more problems. Bad news on wildlife declines rushes at us in an unrelenting torrent. Satiated audiences carry on scrolling, with much of today's media /social media happier noise acting like a soothing drug that merrily silences grim warnings. But without strong public and political engagement in these issues, it can be harder to win policy changes. And even when governments do finally listen, they seem to move at the pace of a tortoise - take the 25 Year Environment Plan, as an example.

Against that backdrop, Saturday felt positively different. It brought a prescription for a cure. It also vocalised the amazing passion that I often see in young people, to create a better future.

VOICES FOR TOMORROW

For example, my seven-year-old daughter is a mighty young tiger who has already stormed three public rallies on environmental matters this month. Even at her age, she is frustratedly aware of how bad us grown-ups are at fixing things, how little our actions appear to show we care about wildlife losses.

As the chief pragmatist in our house, she despairs at the lack of urgency and failure by adults to *'just sort it out'* in her words. She expresses disbelief at how stupid us grown-ups seem to be, on no-brainer issues. With all our maturity and wisdom, when will we listen to our children - it's their future we are ruining, after all?



She insisted on bringing her soft toys along in case people on Saturday didn't know what a hedgehog or an otter looked like. I thought her idea was cute, but I must admit I didn't yearn to carry a rucksack full of teddies across London, but then 15-year-old Bella Lack stood up on stage on Saturday and declared she had never actually seen a hedgehog in real life. *"Well it's a good job I brought one,"* beamed my daughter.

AMAZING YOUNG SPEAKERS

In her brilliant speech, Bella revealed: *"I have only ever seen hedgehogs through the rectangular screen of a phone. I've only heard the chatter of a hen harrier through a muffled video. The reality is bleak. It is terrifying. There is no one specific generation that can be blamed for our planet's destruction, but my generation has been handed a decimated world that has been stripped of its magnificence, stripped of its life."*

"And people ask why our generation is connected, why we turn to our devices rather than our gardens, our houses rather than our parks, and our cities rather than our woods. Perhaps it is because some people my age have never seen what many others have had the privilege to see.

"Many of us fail to picture the bumbling walk of a hedgehog or hear the joyous calls of a skylark flying above us. Many of us haven't experienced the bounty of nature and I fear so much that my generation will grow up disregarding our natural heritage. We have lost so much. Statistics will never do justice to the magnitude of our crisis."

Let's hope Bella is right when she declared Saturday as the turning point. We need to listen more seriously to, and act on, the pleas of young people such as @BellaLack and the other incredibly articulate youngsters up on that stage.

WAR OF WORDS

Away from the amazing children, some adults were busy bickering. There was criticism from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and the Countryside Alliance, plus several rows on Twitter.

Guardian writer George Monbiot highlighted that divide: *"The message I'm getting from critics of the #PeoplesWalkForWildlife is: 'How dare you have an opinion on farming, you townie bastards? But you'd better keep paying our subsidies.'"*

The following person's comments on Saturday were an example of the blatant denial and intransigence that still exists, and some of the problems of trying to bring 'grown-ups' together to resolve conflict and disagreement, and get on with tackling the very real, evidenced declines in British wildlife, which are largely associated with modern farming. This person tried to ridicule the event, dismissing a string of experts including a conservation professor, and declaring he, as a farmer, already knew everything there was to know about everything, apparently:

"If the right people were involved and not folk hell bent on removing us indigenous rural dwellers then I would support [the walk]..."

"Thing is, I don't need so called experts to tell me what to do...I would hope I know more than experts..."

"If someone came here to tell me what to do they would get short shrift as I know exactly what I'm doing."

Sometimes, trying to bring everyone round the table to acknowledge we have problems, and agree solutions, seems like scraping at a coal-face with a feather. We need to overcome that mistrust, but that goes both ways, with the public needing to put their money where their mouthful of food is, in supporting better, more wildlife-friendly farming alternatives, and lobbying for better policies that support farmers to do that.

Michael Gove appears to working along those lines to some extent with his post-Brexit ideas, but the devil will inevitably be in the details, and ecological there are huge numbers of those fine complex details that will need addressing thoroughly. Much could go wrong, and with a backdrop of wildlife declines, now is a critical time.



Several other rural types had declared they felt they would not be welcome at the walk, because their views were opposite to many on the walk - including some in the shooting, hunting and badger culling crowd who complained about some of the *Manifesto's* content.

Green Party former co-leader Caroline Lucas and Bristol and south west MEP Molly Scott were on the march. Molly told me: *"I was pleased to be on the march. Most of the manifesto is already Green Party policy and we're considering the rest. We have our wildlife policies across various areas like farming, planning, transport, etc. But we may pull them all together into a wildlife manifesto."*

Speaker Amy-Jane Beer made some excellent comments about equality in conservation, something she and I have both been ranting about in recent times. Go Amy!

Chew Valley 16-year-old Mya-Rose Craig also spoke intelligently about diversity inclusion. She highlighted only seeing about 0.01% visibly 'ethnic' minority people in the crowd. That's a tricky one because ethnicity is often not visible. But afterwards I checked the 2011 Census, which showed just under 13% of British people to be 'non-white' and the greater London area to have more than 20% 'non-white' - so Mya had made a very good point. Follow Mya on @birdgirlUK for more on this topic.

Other groups will have been under-represented at the march too, such as those who couldn't afford time for their voice to be heard and a day in London. Barriers such as language, class, disability, family, farming responsibilities, poverty... including all those dedicated conservation graduates who are skint but feel forced to work unpaid doing the obligatory 'volunteering' - something that has increasingly replaced decent investment in conservation careers in the Government's austere 'Big Society'.

Here in inner city Bristol, a few dozen people including some of my friends who could not get to London for various reasons, made banners and held their own mini walk for wildlife around an estate on Saturday, in solidarity.

Back in June, when Packham called for a public uprising over nature losses, I told him I was convinced most of the country and very many conservation organisations would support a call for action, and I hoped he and all who agreed would muster something. [My previous piece summarises the big picture: <https://bit.ly/2NxoceH>].

In a speech at the end of the march, came a call from Monbiot for Britain to *"turn the silent spring into a raucous summer"*. With the vast majority of politicians seeming to have their fingers in their ears, I am so pleased to see Packham and other well-respected public figures stepping up, writing a prescription and rallying the masses.

You can ask your MP to look at this new Wildlife Manifesto. Find out who your MP is here: www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/ If you have better or alternative ideas then why not suggest those too?

=====
Alex Morss
www.alexmorss.co.uk
September 2018