

An ecologist's perspective:

We need a radical rethink of our 'love of nature' and what we call urban wildlife conservation...

*How did the UK's greenest city fail to include wildlife issues in its flagship festival on sustainable cities this week? Delving into the explanation reveals a much bigger national issue about us as a species, how human-centred we really are when we claim we love nature, and perhaps why biodiversity is in crisis, writes **Alex Morss**.*



BRISTOL, the UK's flagship 'green city', came under fire this week with critics for not putting wildlife anywhere in the programme during its high profile Festival of Ideas. The whole point of the event was to focus on making cities sustainable for the future.

Yet the words wildlife, biodiversity and nature were not featured anywhere in the FutureCity17 three-day events list. It was ignored on Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees' Top 100 achievements list too, which was unveiled during the festival.

I asked the event's organisers why wildlife was not on the radar, and argued that this was surely a central theme, and appealed for it to be included. The initial reply was that they covered it last year, and the year before. It felt like wildlife had been dropped into the ideas compost heap after Bristol European Green Capital 2015; a leftover, to decompose quietly.

Others on Twitter agreed. Conservation group Bristol Nature Network, said: "Totally agree, the fact biodiversity and native wildlife is nowhere to be mentioned when considering the future of our city is quite shocking."

Plantswoman Sara Venn said: "If that's the case how are we a future city? Nature and biodiversity are vital for a truly healthy city. Both for people and planet." Caz Speaks added: "This Mayor's administration signalled their attitude towards biodiversity when they decided no more funds for parks from 2019."

I had hoped - in fact expected - to see a raft of innovators highlighting and debating new thinking on urban conservation. Bristol, after all, is a global hub of major players in this field with thriving green industries and leading environmentalists. We are home to the BBC Natural History Unit, the Soil Association, Sustrans, Natural England, the esteemed Festival of Nature, four universities close by, leading in biology and environmental science research, and home to the Natural History Consortium, which runs wildlife citizen science across the UK.

If nature is not at the forefront of minds in sustainable city planning here of all places, then what aspiration is there in any of our other towns and cities?

Environment speakers briefly took up my absent wildlife question during a debate on Thursday, with author and Guardian writer George Monbiot, 'Birdgirl' Mya-Rose Craig, Green Party co-leader and MP Caroline Lucas and architect Papa Omotayo, chaired by Rich Pancost (see photo).

Professor Pancost asked: "Biodiversity, nature, urban wildlife - none of us have used that language much today. Is that a mistake? Have we failed to deal with those more fundamental issues? Have we lost the bandwidth in an era of Trump and Brexit?"

Replying, Caroline Lucas said she felt the love of nature was key, not words like biodiversity: "I think by using words like biodiversity, people think, oh for god's sake what does that mean? For those people it is not a meaningful term and I think if we are not careful the whole language of 'natural capital' and 'biodiversity' makes this whole debate about the environment seem very 'other'; the property of some other scientists and people that know more than we do, and takes it away from something that is in our hearts."

She added: "I would love us to get back to our love of nature and beautiful things and how that makes us feel. There is a huge amount of evidence that time in green space is better for our mental health."

LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED?

That is precisely my worry. That is why we are doomed. Love alone and this common aversion to science - if Caroline Lucas is right - will not save the natural world.

We need to change our perspective and not treat wildlife as a soft subject, about love and beauty, walks in a park and well-being. We are obsessed with what we love, feel and enjoy seeing - but that is so much about us, not the species. We risk failing in conservation when we measure nature emotionally, by way of its desirability to us. It also makes conservation an easy target for budget cuts. This is fundamentally a problem that must change.

Architect Papa Omotayo pointed out this human bias: "For me, a city is about love and emotion," he said. "When we stand on a vista somewhere we are not thinking about the scale and the technologies, we are thinking about the emotional response. The important thing in our work is to make the community we work with have an emotional response."

Here are two incredible facts that should be a catalyst for replacing 'love of nature' with a more radical drive to save biodiversity. The RSPB's latest State of Nature report showed the UK is one of the world's 'most nature-depleted nations'. Ironically, the UK's Biological Records Centre has shown that for decades we have also been the best in the world at monitoring wildlife, with thousands of passionate naturalists and academics recording 100 million species records over 50 years - mostly as volunteers because they love doing it. Sadly, those two facts tell us that we are exceptionally good at closely observing nature's decline, whilst simultaneously being rubbish at stopping it. So loving Britain's wildlife has not saved it.

GETTING RADICAL

I think Britain needs a far more radical approach. But the problem goes like this: if we share entertaining photos and videos of stunning wildlife, everyone likes and shares them on social media. If we share shocking truths about species declines, about the predicted, impending mass extinction, and the loss of insects people have never heard of, then most people will feel depressed and powerless and switch off. The popular people-centric adoration of cute animals will never be enough to stop extinctions, even though it wins more hearts.

This week, scientists in the journal *PlusOne* announced that a crash in insect populations is leading us to a catastrophic ecological Armageddon - but of course it didn't make the list of most read news items. Relatively few people feel the love for insects.

We are too whimsical and emotional with our choices, not objective, and that is why we need to engage with a radical new framework to save biodiversity, not just love nature.

I appealed to the Festival organisers to put biodiversity and the serious problems we need to tackle, high up on the agenda. The festival's director, Andrew Kelly, acknowledged my plea - but we also discussed this dilemma of how to engage

audiences with the hard-hitting issues that everyone needs to confront, instead of the soft appealing side. "If you do that, do you keep people's interest?" he pointed out.

George Monbiot agreed the missing wildlife theme was important and touched on this point too: "I think it is a good question," he said. "I am mad about wildlife and habitats but I do increasingly find myself talking about structural forces, because unless we tackle the structural forces we will constantly find ourselves overrun when we are trying to do front line defence." His new book, *Out of the Wreckage*, calls for radical changes to the way that cities are run, to make them more sustainable, socially, economically and ecologically.

He added: "A classic example is the Sheffield tree massacre that is taking place at the moment. Why is this happening? Not because the trees need to be cut or anything but because the council agreed a contract to restore the streets. It is a brick wall. So unless we are dealing with the politics and the economics of this, we are always going to be at a disadvantage when we try to engage with people."

URBAN WARRIORS

I hope this won't offend, but I wonder how much of the Sheffield trees protest is predominantly about conservation, and how much is driven more by the same people-centric love of trees? Of course, as an ecologist, I think it is a travesty for the people, the dependent fauna and the environment that 6,000 beautiful trees - described by Sheffield Tree Action Group as an 'urban forest' - are to be removed for highways maintenance.

It is largely only happening because of draconian contracts between Sheffield Council and a private contractor - more or less admitted by the Council's Labour leader and by Sheffield Tree Action Group. It will result in the loss of habitat for a range of species, unless or until the trees are replaced like-for-like.

But I wonder how much of the Sheffield tree issue is largely about people and what nature they 'love' seeing on their doorsteps? I have never seen people protesting so loudly about farmland insects being exterminated, for example. To my knowledge, the insect Armageddon story did not prompt rioters to go and stop farmers from spraying fields.

Just imagine if we put the equivalent of the Sheffield tree protest effort and all that public disobedience into stopping our supermarkets from obliterating our ecosystems when they sell us thousands of aisles of food that contain palm oil. Consider the critically endangered orangutan: it has lost millions of acres of rainforest to palm plantations. There were important insects in there too. That does not get so much coverage. We could widen our effort to other unsustainable food production. This would significantly help reverse our ecological crisis.

This is where city nature lovers need to focus. We are not powerless. In fact we have too much power, including over global markets, and we abuse it. Every single adult in our city, any UK city, is in some way implicated in biodiversity decline - complicit unwittingly or by choices made. Throw in Christmas and you might as well say most children, too.

This is the most powerful 'urban' wildlife conservation issue, because 80% of the UK population lives in cities, detached from the impact millions of us are causing elsewhere. Our power is in our numbers. We should not limit ourselves to fighting for the tree on the corner of our street. We can tackle wider global issues at a local level when there are so many of us in one place.

Radical policies and/or byelaws introduced in cities, particularly about shopping habits, pollution, energy use and recycling, would have a significant impact on conservation, regionally, nationally and internationally. Removal of certain urban freedoms over choices where sustainability is at stake should be part of the public debate. Our choices have unacceptable environmental impacts precisely because we

are permitted to behave badly on environmental matters. We abuse consumer choice because no-one stops us.

We need innovators, policy makers, law makers and decision makers to get on this issue of urban freedom. We need more laws to restrict the trade on products that support ridiculous environmental injustices committed unwittingly by all of us. We need higher tax levied on purchases that come with higher conservation costs.

PICKING FIGHTS

Bristol is already leading the way in this area, and we need to see more of it. For example, Bristol campaign group Fin Fighters has recently petitioned Bristol City Council to enforce a byelaw banning the sale of shark and other threatened marine species, after its secret DNA spot checks revealed local places are selling mislabelled endangered fish. They are caught in international waters, exempt from the trade restrictions of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species).

We can go so much further if we wish, with tighter regulation and/or tax on plastic straws; packaging; food miles; the unregulated pesticides on foods imported from outside Europe; the palm oil impact; the enforced intensive farming driven by politics and economics that has brought a loss of butterflies, bees, other insects, wildflowers, hedgerows and farmland birds - all to give us cheaper food.

Why are we even given a choice of cheaper food if these are the consequences? Once the ecosystem Armageddon happens, we can't undo it. Most of us do not even see the grave extent of our impacts. We can't even swallow the word biodiversity!

GREEN SPACES

Aside from all of that, a more radical new urban conservation focus needs to fight for better land management choices to become compulsory, that design-in wildlife and respect it.

Urban areas make up only about 7% of the UK's land, (about 11% in England) and although they are not naturally-constructed ecosystems they do include pockets of ecological richness. There are priority species that rely heavily on these areas, whilst having been lost from rural habitats, largely because of modern farming.

We can help wildlife greatly in this way, but only with proper funding, because success depends on how we manage that land. This means restoring proper budgets to green spaces. Several English cities including Bristol are currently threatening to slash all funding to parks amid cuts from central government.

Urban ecologist, Matt Collis, who is working on making Bristol a more nature-rich city, said: "Everyone thinks that nature is free. Unfortunately, in an urban environment, we have removed a lot of the processes that used to make nature free. There is a cost and its priority level is too low. It is often the thing we will sacrifice first in budget cuts or because the council needs to sell land to raise money for other things. One of the big barriers I come up against all the time is that communities do not know that they've got green spaces around them, and they are not supported by any funding."

ECO-ISLANDS

Outside the nature reserves, most of the rarer stuff was lost from cities years ago, but if we are smart, and strict with planning, we can design-in and sustain the return of abundant wildlife. Species do still cling on, recolonise and even thrive in cities, wherever we have not yet fully dominated, destroyed or isolated their habitat.

Consider Bristol's labyrinth of gated back alleyways and abandoned corners of cemeteries. Thanks to a fear of crime, they are often places no-one goes at night, providing locked eco-islands, in spite of humans, where long grasses, brambles and nettles are stuffed full of hedgehogs and other small mammals, foxes, badgers and invertebrates that feed the birds. We even have newts, frogs, toads and reptiles scuttling through central Bristol thanks to networks of green spaces and ponds.

Anywhere that still has thoughtless design, such as the wrong drains or developments blocking off habitats, will trap and kill them though.

Our cities still have underground rivers and harsh concrete banks where there could instead be an oasis of kingfishers, water voles and otters. I still see metal mesh fencing where there could be native mixed hedgerows bursting with berries, rustling with birds. There would be more bat highways by night, if we chose more sympathetic lighting design and stopped 'accidentally' killing bats during loft conversions. Many bats rely heavily on buildings instead of natural alternatives, with thriving populations in cities, including some very rare, light-shy species such as greater and lesser horseshoe bats. They suffer if we install unsympathetic lighting and remove linear flight paths such as hedgerows and planted river banks.

A study by leading universities, including Bristol, proved that urban areas are now vital lifelines for some pollinator species too, especially bees. To sustain them we need to create their habitat needs. Butterfly Conservation this year reported drastic declines in 40 out of 57 British butterfly species, significantly so in urban areas - even species that have very simple habitat needs like the Small Copper (common dock leaves), Gatekeeper, Grayling, Wall, Meadow Brown (they just need longer grass). How difficult is it to switch to longer grass on road verges and parks, to help tackle this?

DISREGARD

And yet all over Britain, towns and cities still favour expensive exotic council flowerbeds cut among manicured turf, where there could be more, far cheaper, native wildflowers and mini-meadows festooned with endangered butterflies and desperate bees. Myself and hundreds of volunteers in Bristol have created a few of these areas with council agreement. But I have also seen council 'operatives' mow them off by mistake, repeatedly and in several places.

The message is one of disregard. How do we explain that attitude to the 300 school children who helped create the habitats that got destroyed, who thought they were

creating a better, greener future? I know from talking to volunteers that it's happened in other places in Britain too, including the accidental obliteration by contractors of a grass verge that had contained one of the last populations of a critically endangered plant.

Our human-centric priorities also mean our towns and cities are too stuck with concrete and roof tiles where there could be more green roofing. Bristol has been impressive in this field in recent years. But when I recently asked a leading city councillor if they could consider adding extra green infrastructure, such as green roofing, on an old concrete car park, even offering to help find funding and guidance, he replied: "We have very limited space and budget and references to roofs etc are pie in the sky."

To me, all of these reasons make it screamingly obvious that we need radical change in how urban dwellers regard wildlife. Our lifestyle makes it too easy for us to choose to forget how much we are all implicated in the destruction of local and global biodiversity. We must stop relying on love and goodwill in the voluntary and charity sector and the reliance on engaging volunteers to save biodiversity. Urban policy change must be enforced by decision makers, but it will take people power to achieve that. Only then can we get back to loving nature.

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September 2017.

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