

Facing the predator- are we ready?

Well...I've been given around 25mins to try and bring some context to a discussion, which has developed over 25 years and will likely continue well beyond the next 25. A discussion, which is gaining prominence, a discussion that, for the first time, has some substance. A discussion that would have been taboo even a short time ago. But a discussion nevertheless which is not about wolves, bears or lynx - this is a discussion which reaches right into the heart of modern society. It's a discussion which embraces not only environmental, but also social, economic, cultural and political considerations. It's a discussion that touches the very core of society's values.

Now I could stand here and talk about ecological niches, ecosystem services, evolutionary processes...trophic cascades, symbiotic relationships. This is the language of the ecologist who sees and understands how the jigsaw of life needs to be complete before it can properly function. These are perhaps the things that most people here would argue as justification for restoring large carnivores to Britain.

But I'm not going to talk about any of those things – for one thing because there are many others far better qualified to do so but also because I don't think any of that stuff matters. It's irrelevant. It makes no difference.

Our fair and green countryside is doing OK isn't it? It's neat and properly ordered and we've exercised our rightful dominion over nature. We're safe and comfortable aren't we?

So why would we want to change any of that? What's the point? Where's the benefit? The wider ecological implications of predator-prey relationships are completely irrelevant to most people, so trying to 'sell' the ecological science in my view, is a waste of time.

Now there are a fair few scientists in this room – a number that are personal friends of mine – and I can feel their eyes burning deep into my soul – at such outrageous flippancy. But genuinely, I don't think science does matter...or at least it doesn't matter right now...within the context of returning large carnivores to this island.

Science doesn't matter because the decision to even consider such a radical move will not be scientifically motivated. In my view, those who advocate the return of lynx, wolf and even bear, should be in no doubt that this is a socio-political and economic issue. It is to do with us – people. Our perceptions, our beliefs, our priorities and our values.

It is public opinion that drives political policy and without sufficient public appetite to see large predators returned, I believe the scientific community will not even be called upon to lend weight – one way or another – to the discussion.

Now, I hope I'm not being overly cynical but just ask yourself. In the present political climate of ultra-conservatism (small c), what politician in the right mind is going to stick his/her neck on the line and suggest returning wolves to a 'safe' and sanitised countryside that for generations, we've grown comfortable with? A countryside where in the main jobs and productivity outweigh ecological integrity. A countryside that has, to be fair, changed radically since these animals were last here – culturally as well as physically.

So science doesn't matter and neither does European legislation...at least not yet anyway. It's public opinion, the cultural mindset that matters here and now.

So returning to the original question - is the British public ready to face the predator? In my view, no.

Is it likely or even possible that this might change? In my view...yes.

But should it be changed...well that depends very much on who you're asking.

Now, us righteous 'conservationists' (I'm never quite sure whether I'm in or out of that group), we like to bang on about how the wicked...

...gamekeepers, farmers and land managers of the past exterminated just about everything that threatened their stock and of course much of that is true -but there was a reason why our predator populations were decimated.

Motivations in the past were very different to those of today's society and we shouldn't forget that the only reason 'conservation' is now possible - the only reason this conference is taking place - is that we have – for the first time in history – the economic luxury of allowing the conservation of other species to be part of our lives.

So what happened in the past is exactly that..in the past and I for one, think no purpose is served by continually pointing an indirect finger of blame at different interest groups.

What matters is now and the building of bridges, the nurturing of common objectives, the cementing of relationships.

Wildlife management is to do with people – and if we're to arrive at any sort of consensus about HOW our wildlife should be managed - presently and in the future, we have to learn to work together -like it or not.

Now, convincing a livestock farmer or a deerstalker that it's a good idea to have large carnivores running around is of course a tall order.

There are already issues with the relatively insignificant predators that are here right now.

But division on which predators should live where, in what numbers and to whose benefit, is not confined to pine martens nor is it confined to the game shooting industry...

AV SHOW

I think those views offer a clue about a much bigger hurdle to overcome,. One that is developing throughout modern society, a society becoming increasingly alienated from its roots. A hurdle that if you're serious about carnivore reintroduction – will need to be addressed. Public indifference or dare I even say ignorance?

Our lives have changed beyond recognition in recent decades and although yes, there is greater support than ever before, for conservation organisations, the vast majority of the British public are ill-informed about natural processes.

They're also indifferent because whether there are wild wolves in Scotland or pine martens in the New Forest or wildcats in Snowdonia, makes no difference to them – their needs are already easily met so why should they be interested? It's not relevant in their lives.

For an increasing majority of people, this is what's relevant: Victoria Beckham's breast implants or whether the winner of X Factor has a drug addiction..or whatever..

So how do you reach out to this audience? How do you bring about relevance of natural processes into their lives? How do you fuel a shift in values?

I'm kind of reluctant to draw analogies with America but there's an interesting insight to be gained from what happened there. As you know, wolves were reintroduced to parts of the Rockies in 1995 - only sixty years after The Americans had got rid of wolves. So how did a country that eradicated wolves, come to restore them only a relatively short time later?

Education. The American public who voted to restore the wolf was a better-educated public than that which destroyed it.

And also marketing. A small but determined and professional group of advocate organisations invested heavily – and I mean heavily- in a long-term, major innovative education and awareness campaign which ultimately gained sufficient public favour to force the political hand.

They took the wolf and its story onto the streets. They got the everyday public excited about this animal, they marketed it - warts and all and the perspective of the American public was changed. And for enough people in America – enough being that number needed to sway political policy – having the wolf back became important.

This is not some kind of black magic; it's already been done here in Britain. The RSPB and others have done a great marketing job with red kites, peregrines and sea eagles.

Tigers, pandas, whales and even sharks have all been packaged and sold to a global public, which, if the right buttons are pressed, will be receptive and will change their perspectives.

In Britain, it's now unthinkable for most people to not have kites, peregrines, sea eagles and buzzards around and that's a relatively recent development brought about through marketing and education.

So if it can be done with birds of prey and other charismatic species, why not large carnivores?

If you can't sell a wolf, then there's something wrong with your marketing.

This is Saxony in eastern Germany – a pretty unremarkable landscape and not dissimilar to many parts of Britain. But Saxony is home to around 60 wolves that have wandered across the border from Poland and set up home.

From initial hysteria, it's taken around 8 years to establish some sort of calm and indeed a sense of pride in having wolves back in Germany. This has been achieved through a dedicated public relations campaign that has turned the wolf in Germany from vermin to A list celebrity.

That might be a little simplistic but there has nevertheless been a tangible change in perceptions in Saxony.

So yes, it can be done. It won't be quick, it won't be easy and it will never gain favour with everyone but it can be done.

It won't however happen in an arena like this – a closed shop where most folk I guess are already in favour of seeing a more ecologically efficient countryside. Let's be honest, I'm preaching to the converted here.

In my humble opinion, there needs to be much more ambition, innovation and yes, investment. Those of you who advocate the return of extirpated species need to reach far beyond this room and engage a much wider audience in this process. An audience that needs to be engaged, entertained and inspired. You are competing with X factor for their attention.

That audience also includes a significant sector of the 'conservation community', a surprising number of whom are opposed to large predator reintroductions - for a whole range of reasons. And of course, it includes land management interests.

The wolf, the lynx, the bear and their benefits need to be packaged and sold using straightforward language that is easily understood. A language that people can relate to. A language that excites and involves them.

All of this BEFORE they are lectured about ecological niches and trophic cascades.

I believe that without that widespread public support, large carnivore restoration is a political non-starter.

So are we ready to face the predator? No...or at least not yet.

Just one final thing to think about.

The wolf in America is of course not universally welcomed – the families of many ranchers fought hard to eliminate the wolf and its return is seen as an imposition forced upon them by external forces.

But is it the wolf that's the problem...or is it the change that the wolf represents to a traditional way of life? Is the real 'enemy' the federal government who (from a ranchers viewpoint) know nothing of rural issues?

I think so.

Interestingly, Ed Bangs the man in charge of all wolf decisions in N America has said that 'people don't hate wolves, they hate what wolves symbolise and similarly people don't love wolves, they love what they symbolise'

It's not so different here. I believe that this bird, the hen harrier is the wolf of Britain's uplands. It is not so much that some land managers hate harriers but resent those who seek to protect them and the perception that control of their own lives is slowly being eroded.

I've spoken to many keepers about raptors and it doesn't take very long before the word 'harrier' or 'peregrine' is lost in the conversation. They're quickly replaced by 'RSPB, SNH' and 'those conservationists'. Us against them.

Predators have become the pawns in an ongoing debate about what our countryside should look like and more importantly, who should control it. It's not about the hen harrier, the fox or even the wolf, lynx or bear, it's about us.

Wolf management in America, just as predator reintroduction in Scotland is about managing people's perceptions – not through propaganda but through honest, transparent communication. Dialogue, collaboration - I'm not pretending this is easy but it has to be the foundation for the future because it won't be science that dictates how many wolves, lynx or bears are considered appropriate for a given area, it will be how many WE are prepared to tolerate.

Different people have different values.

Living alongside large predators will never be without its fair share of problems. Concerns are both understandable and legitimate.

Whatever your perspective or opinion on returning lost species happens to be, the chances are that it's different to that of the person sat next to you. That doesn't make you right and him/her wrong.

I'm sure some of you will know Alistair Bath. Alistair has spent 25 years studying attitudes towards large predators and has long since concluded that living alongside these animals is about us and that solutions are achievable only by listening to all interest groups. He said. "We're all born with two ears and one mouth, so we should be doing twice as much listening as telling."

When it comes to predators, that can take a long time...

VERBAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Sharing has never been our strong point but if we are to accommodate large predators in the future, that has to change and we have to be re-educated to live as part of ecosystems rather than outside them, accepting that there will be consequences for us.

I'm not convinced we're ready to do that.. just yet.