

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner airs his views on the UK's biodiversity status compared to other countries, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

We are in crisis. That's a comment I hear increasingly often from friends and colleagues working in conservation. The environmental movement is gripped by a sense of doom like never before. Because, quite clearly, we are failing. We are losing many more species and wild places than we are saving.

Don't get me wrong. No one – at least no one I know – is about to hang up their conservation hat just yet (even though it is quite difficult not to be overwhelmed by a sense of grief, loss and failure when your days are filled with battles and bad news). But we all agree that 21st-century conservation has to change. If we are going to turn this sorry state of affairs around, we need to reinvent ourselves. We need to change tack, think outside the box, up the ante... anything but do more of the same.

You'd expect a country like the UK, with the fifth biggest economy in the world, to be capable of looking after its wildlife better than most. Wrong. The UK's Biodiversity Intactness Index, which estimates the average abundance of originally present species, is the 29th lowest out of 218 countries. In other words, we are officially one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. How depressing is that? More than one in seven of our animal and plant species are already extinct or threatened with extinction, and more than half are in decline. Yet this is despite having one of the oldest and largest environmental movements in the world.

So what's to be done? Top of my list is government support. Without it, we can have as many fund-raising coffee mornings, release as many water voles or put up as many nestboxes as we like but we will still lose in the end. I'm not suggesting in any way that we stop all these other conservation activities. Just that more environmentally friendly government policies on everything from scallop-dredging and intensive farming to logging and fracking is what will turn things around.

There are 650 MPs in the House of Commons. In a sea of economists, financiers, lawyers and career politicians, no more than a couple of dozen have a science background. This spectacular lack of scientific expertise is largely why facts and evidence are cherry-picked, ignored or twisted for

“We need to change tack, think outside the box, up the ante... anything but do more of the same.”

political purposes, and concern for the environment is dismissed as tree-hugging hippie nonsense. Politicians sometimes talk the talk but few have the knowledge, insight or common sense to understand the importance of conservation. And they certainly don't have a clue about how many people – potential voters – care passionately about it.

This is where I and a group of like-minded friends and colleagues come in. We have become political activists. I don't mean we've started wearing balaclavas and chaining ourselves to diggers. I mean we write to MPs. It sounds boring and clichéd, but it is one of the best things we can do for conservation. And we don't just write once. We write time and again. We write about anything and everything, from badger culling and the persecution of hen harriers to HS2 and severe budget cuts for government departments and agencies responsible for the environment. And point out if a different political party has a better policy.

There are a lot of people like us. Nearly 4.5 million people – or 1 in 10 UK adults – are now members or supporters of one conservation group or another. The RSPB alone has 1.2 million members. I believe we need to start throwing our weight around if we are to have any chance of saving what's left in this impoverished country. 🐸

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



The natterjack toad is one of many species threatened with extinction in the UK.