

IN A COUPLE OF TWEETS ABOUT A white-tailed eagle – found dead in his West Dorset constituency – my local MP demonstrated such apparent ignorance that it raises questions about conservation’s own failings.

White-tailed eagles were driven to extinction in the UK by gamekeepers, who relentlessly shot and poisoned them. But now they are being brought back – there are already 130 breeding pairs in Scotland and we’re in the middle of a five-year programme to reintroduce them to England. One of the release sites is the Isle of Wight and, as hoped, some of these birds are now dispersing along the south coast.

But two white-tailed eagles died under suspicious circumstances earlier this year (one in Dorset, the other in Sussex). Although the birds of prey are protected by law, they have been the target of persecution because of the perceived threat they pose to game bird shoots and sheep farms.

So when Conservative MP Chris Loder criticised Dorset police for investigating the eagle’s death and argued that they should direct their resources to catching drug dealers instead of wildlife criminals, his comments were met with derision and disbelief by many.

Loder denies any vested interest or wrongdoing (*The Guardian* reported that his 2019 election campaign had received a £14,000 donation from a shooting estate in his constituency), so the only alternative explanation for his comments is sheer ignorance. First, you can’t pick and choose which laws to enforce (by suggesting that you can, he has essentially given eagle-killers a free pass). Second, there is overwhelming support for the reintroduction of raptors to the UK (a 2018 public consultation in the Isle of Wight, Hampshire, Dorset and Sussex, where the reintroduced birds are most likely to settle and breed in future, revealed an impressive 76 per cent of people supported the project), so he wasn’t representing his constituents. And, third, clearly he doesn’t know much, if anything, about white-tailed eagles.

Fighting back, the MP posted two pictures of an eagle eating a lamb, “For local people asking why I don’t want eagles

Conservationist Mark Carwardine says we shouldn’t assume politicians understand wildlife and conservation

White-tailed eagles are making a comeback but still face persecution



“We have a duty to ensure politicians are informed about wildlife”

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

in Dorset, killing our lambs and plaguing our farmers”. Unfortunately, though, he had failed to realise that his ‘evidence’ had been staged with a captive eagle and a dead lamb for an article on the subject. In truth, lambs form only a tiny part of a white-tailed eagle’s diet (they prefer fish and seabirds, and are happy scavenging fish scraps or eating carrion) and even then, they take almost exclusively stillborn and non-viable lambs very early in the lambing season. They are not, by any stretch of the imagination, plaguing our farmers.

The idea of MPs pontificating about things they don’t understand, or forming strong opinions based on frighteningly little knowledge, is nothing new. But we shouldn’t just despair. When it comes to wildlife, we have a duty to ensure they are informed.

We often grumble about the ‘Westminster Bubble’ – in which MPs and

their cohorts live in oblivious isolation from the ‘normal’ world outside – but we spend too much time in our own ‘Conservation Bubble’. By mixing with like-minded people, who reinforce our views and share our aspirations in a conservation echo chamber, we forget that there are influential people out there who have never even heard of a white-tailed eagle, let alone have an informed opinion on whether or not they should be living in West Dorset.

To ensure our good work isn’t undone, we need to get out of our conservation bubbles and into the real world – before other MPs declare that eagles (or other endangered species) are not welcome in their constituencies. Or worse. The Dorset wildlife crime team has since been ‘rebranded’ as the ‘rural crime team’, reflecting a change in focus. It raises concerns about the hostility to wildlife crime investigations. MP Chris Loder and his landowners got their way. 🐦

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