

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the need to be more ambitious when it comes to rewilding, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

I was reprimanded by a friend recently (someone who's been working in conservation for almost as long as I have – he's not quite as old) for using the term 'conservation'.

I hadn't really thought about it before. After all, I've been bandying the word about since I first started working in you-know-what at the age of 21. It's in my blood. Like so many people, I am a conservationist, always have been a conservationist and always will be a conservationist – and I've taken the term for granted.

But he's right. 'Conservation' means 'the careful preservation and protection of something'. And that's what my friend doesn't like. It suggests that its followers have little ambition beyond 'conserving' the fragments of nature we have left. It implies that all we're trying to achieve is not to lose any more – which would be a pretty sorry admission to make.

It would be like turning the natural world into an open-air museum (except, of course, we're not even doing that – species and habitats are being 'stolen' from the museum all the time). Whereas our aim should be nothing less than full ecological restoration.

With this in mind, my friend considers himself a 'rewilder' rather than a 'conservationist'. Rewilding is a more progressive approach to conservation, of course, designed to restore ecosystems to the point where nature can take care of itself. That means saving the wildlife and habitats that are left but, equally, bringing back the wildlife and habitats we have already lost.

Unfortunately, there's a long way to go before rewilding becomes the new

conservation. There is still a complete lack of ambition in many corners of the conservation world – especially among some of the larger, more corporate, politically correct, risk averse and bureaucratic conservation organisations. While they drown in reports and consultations, and tiptoe around the powerful farming, landowning, fishing and sports hunting lobbies, they seem to set the bar depressingly low with half-hearted measures and half-hearted expectations.

It takes time, but conservation does evolve. It's changed profoundly since I began my first job (and, to be honest, the only proper job I've ever had) at the World Wildlife Fund in 1981. Indeed, WWF changed its name in 1986 specifically to reflect changing attitudes and ambitions away from

“Conservation has slowed the decline but it has failed to stop the decline and reverse it.”

species protection alone, and many other conservation organisations have followed suit in the years since. (As an aside, the name was changed to 'World Wide Fund for Nature' which resulted in inevitable ridicule, confusion and embarrassment until, in 2001, it opted to be known by its acronym – simply 'WWF' – and thus failed to achieve its original aim at all.)

At the time, we were just beginning to understand that this piecemeal approach of isolated protection didn't work on its own. We needed wider managed landscapes and wildlife corridors, for example, and had to take into account the livelihoods of local people. But this broader approach clearly hasn't worked either. We are not exactly on a winning streak, are we?

As my friend says, “conservationists have had their chance and it's time for a fresh, more ambitious approach focused on restoration and recovery”. Traditional conservation hasn't been a waste of time, because we'd be in a far worse place without it. At least it has slowed the decline. But it has comprehensively failed to stop the decline – and certainly hasn't reversed it.

Whether we call it 'conservation' or 'rewilding' or some magical combination of the two that elegantly suggests something more ambitious, more holistic and more hopeful, I don't know. But whatever the right word, we should be aiming higher. 🐾

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



Could rewilding see species such as the Eurasian lynx reintroduced to the UK?