

## MY WAY OF THINKING

## MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist gives a critical review of responses to the UK's biodiversity crisis - and explores what we really need to do now.

I've always been troubled by the way many conservation groups seem incapable of telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

I understand that they can't always be doom-mongers – heaven forbid their supporters might think they're not doing enough – but why do they feel such a desperate urge to put a positive spin on everything? Anyone who believes the rhetoric that our wildlife will be just fine, despite all the evidence to the contrary, is living in a fool's paradise.

Thank goodness for the RSPB. Breaking ranks, it recently emailed its supporters with the headline: "We've failed. Nature's closing down." Admittedly, it tries to be upbeat (it's not too late to turn things around, and all that jazz) but it is telling the truth.

The UK is officially one of the most nature-depleted countries in a nature-depleted world. According to the UN-approved Biodiversity Intactness Index released in 2020, we now rank an utterly abysmal 218th out of 240 countries and independent territories. In other words, we lead the world in destroying the natural environment.

We have an index of about 50% – which means that we've retained only half of our original biodiversity (and even this figure is believed by many to be an overestimate). This compares with about 65% for France and Italy, 67% for Germany, 75% for Norway and 89% for Finland and Canada.

We may purport to be a nature-loving country, but our wildlife is in free fall. It's not just biodiversity that's plummeting – wildlife populations are, too. Taking birds as an example, the turtle dove population has declined

by 98% since 1970, willow tits by 94%, spotted flycatchers by 88%, little owls by 69%... and so it goes on. The countryside is emptying.

Wildlife charities have been too soft, by far. Yet the building, farming, fishing and shooting industries have played hardball for decades – prepared to do whatever it takes to get whatever they want. And, I would suggest that, through an unhappy mix of gullibility, laziness, appeasement, scientific ignorance and political greed, successive governments have played along.

A report by the Environmental Audit Committee of MPs concludes that the Government's environmental policies are "toothless". More money is now being spent destroying the environment than protecting it, the report found, while funding cuts and a lack of ecological expertise in the Government and local authorities is making the situation worse.

**"We can no longer rely on saving a few acres here and a family of water voles there."**

It doesn't help that ministers seem to view environmentalists as an unkempt, rag-tag bunch of loonies who spend their weekends hugging trees. We are not the sensible, well-tailored co-conspirators they might prefer to mix with in the Westminster bubble. You'd have thought the climate crisis would have enlightened them: we've been shouting loudly about global warming for more than half a century – and, sure enough, here it is. But apparently not.

The crux of the problem has just been highlighted in another report – this time by an international team of top scientists. They conclude that the planet is facing a "ghastly future of mass extinction, declining health and climate-disruption upheavals" exacerbated by the delay between destruction of the natural world and its impact. This means that even well-informed scientists find it difficult to grasp the magnitude of the problem, let alone Government ministers.

What's the answer? We can no longer rely on saving a few acres here and a family of water voles there. We need to toughen up. In a historic ruling earlier this year, for example, a Paris court convicted the French state of failing to address the climate crisis and not keeping its promises to tackle greenhouse gas emissions.

That's the way forward. We must play hardball, too. 🦊

**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](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)



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