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Re-destroying the Southern English Heathland

Time was, when heathland was valued by most people. As Common Land, it formed an essential part of the English rural economy, providing above all food for livestock, but much else to the villagers who lived around its edge.

But with the Utilitarians and Improvers of the eighteenth century, and the Enclosures of the nineteenth, came a change of viewpoint. In contrast with the lush estate fields, parks and pastures, the heath came to be seen as 'blasted', and a 'waste'. Perhaps partly because it helped to diminish the value of the newly enclosed land in the minds of the commoners from whom it was seized, this view was taken up and promulgated enthusiastically by the landowners, and inevitably spread to the high society of the towns, where they spent their new-found wealth. Instead of a source of wealth, the common lands came to be derided as, well, 'common'.

But, perhaps ironically, it was around our cities that the commons began to be valued once again in the twentieth century, as recreational open space: a place for tired city workers to reconnect with the natural world, and for dogs and children to let off steam. In fact, my own introduction to the commons provided some of my earliest memories, in the form of walks on Putney Heath and Wimbledon Common, where Yellowhammers sang from the gorse bushes, despite the throngs of people who came to enjoy the wide open spaces there.

I was later to learn that it was on the very same commons that Linnaeus, the great botanist, on seeing these gorse bushes in full flower, fell down and 'wept with joy'. But his reaction to the wildlife of these open lands was way ahead of its time. Because, while the more urban common lands were becoming valued as 'lungs' for the cities, many of the rural commons were often neglected or ignored by local people who found less and less use for their traditional purposes.

Enter the tree planters, including the Forestry Commission, who, with messianic zeal, and fuelled by huge government subsidies and private tax breaks, began to turn, as they saw it, unproductive common land into a valuable timber-crop. Not everyone agreed with this, and huge battles were fought, for example in the Lake District and the New Forest in the early part of the 20th century, and more recently in the Scottish uplands and peat lands. Many of the objectors were protesting on landscape grounds, rather than those of habitat destruction and the threat to wildlife, but nonetheless, it is only as the original timber crops mature that we have begun to see how right they were.

Not only was there huge environmental damage caused by the rush to plant trees – mainly alien conifers – but the economic argument for planting them in many of the most vulnerable areas now looks decidedly spurious. Where conservation organisations are managing to clear the plantations in an attempt to restore the lost habitat, for example, far from profiting from a timber bonanza, the problem is often how to pay to get rid of the wood.

But I am getting ahead of myself. To go back to the common lands, while their value as landscape and open space has been seen for over a century, their value for wildlife has only really been appreciated very recently.

In the 1960s, Oliver Rackham's 'Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape' was my first initiation into the value of ancient woodlands, and I think was instrumental in turning the tide of opinion in their favour, and in making us all realise how much damage had been done - especially by the Forestry Commission in trying to convert them into quick-growing plantations. But I think that, now, the ancient woodland conservation battle has largely been won, and that even the Forestry Commission, or its successor, realises the error of its former ways.

Similarly, open downland is now seen much less as a waste of cereal space, and more as an incredibly rich biological community. I'm not sure that it is all safe, but I feel that, again, the argument as to its value has been won. We are also seeing it increasingly from an international perspective, and realising how rare chalk downland is in both European and world terms, and just how much responsibility we have for it here in Southern England.

But as for heathland, the battle is still on, although the tide is fast turning. While we all continued to enjoy our heaths as recreational open space, it used to be only a few specialists and naturalists that really appreciated their unique ecology and diversity. Only in the last ten years or so has there been official recognition of their value, in EU directives and grants, and in national and local planning regulations. At long last it has been recognised that our southern English heaths are, at an international level, scarce, ecologically valuable, and very vulnerable. One result is that conservation organisations are at last getting funding to remove the damaging forestry from some areas.

But why is 'forestry' – or tree plantation as this has come to mean – so damaging to these habitats in particular? The long tradition of these common lands as a valued resource can still be seen in the old names of the commoners' ancient rights: estovers, pasturage, pannage, turbary, and so on. But the antiquity of these names also gives a clue as to why common lands are so valuable for wildlife. They have been used in the same way for centuries, and in places the soil left undisturbed for a thousand years or more. This has given the time and stability for a complex ecology to develop, with a myriad of specialised ecological niches and relationships to develop.

But this ecology is fragile. For example, break up the soil and you destroy the complex mycorrhizal associations on which so many species depend. The same can be said of most other forestry operations – they are not part of the traditional management of these areas, nor resemble it in any form. They are aiming to produce a crop monoculture, and are therefore destructive to wildlife. And they will inevitably lead to a loss of the unique species assemblage that these areas contain.

The damage has already been done to many areas, and, as I say, we have only recently begun to realise what we have lost. But we also, now, have a huge opportunity to restore some of the losses. Not only is there money specifically for the restoration of heathland, but in several parts of it where (against all the odds it as to be said!) the trees have managed to grow to a commercial size, they can now be felled.

It is therefore with complete dismay and astonishment that I see, almost unbelievably, the replanting of trees going on over some of the felled areas. So we have the absolutely ludicrous situation that, on one part of the heath, conservationists are being paid to remove the trees, while, as fast as they do that, the forestry brigade is planting them again. Sadly, it seems that the old 18th and 19th century landowner attitude towards heathland as ‘wasteland’ still clings on, particularly in some of the darker corridors of some levels of government, and in the forestry world. And the result is that, having tragically destroyed much of our heathland in the past without recognising its international conservation importance, we are going ahead and, in effect, destroying it all over again.

I realise that ‘destroying’ is perhaps an exaggerated term to use here, because the destruction happened years ago during the original planting. But by not allowing the land to revert to heathland and recover at least some of its ecological value, it is just as bad.

Before any potentially ecologically damaging building development can take place, an Environmental Impact Assessment needs to be made. I see no reason why forestry should be made an exception to this, and will therefore be pressing, not only for all replanting on former heathland to be stopped, but also for full EIAs to be made before any replanting is henceforth done.

But, deep down, I think that foresters, as land managers (which is the original broad meaning of the term), are better than this. I think that, really, you would welcome the opportunity to be seen as environmental heroes, not, like the old Forestry Commission, always the villains. All you need to do is to stop the replanting **now**, and continue to fell areas as they mature.

In conjunction with the felling of the key conservation areas as advocated by the conservation bodies, this would allow heathland gradually to re- take its rightful place in the landscape of Southern England – and North-west Europe - once more.

Jamie McMillan

Postscript

Forestry and Climate Change

Excuses for tree planting have varied over the years. 'The War Effort' or 'We need Pit Props' were two of the standard ones. But now I notice a new assertion appearing in interviews and communications: 'Forests will reduce Climate Change'.

I suppose the argument is that trees absorb carbon from the atmosphere – carbon causes climate change – therefore tree planting will reduce climate change. There seems to be no science to back any of this up. Or have I missed something?

Have you taken into account the full life cycle of a tree plantation – the soil erosion caused by the initial ploughing and draining, the reduction in soil carbon caused by this and the drying out of peat lands, the huge energy input needed for the forestry operations, and the final use to which the trees are put? Taking the latter point, are the trees going to be buried in the ground and preserved as a carbon store, or what? If timber is being produced, what happens to it at the end of its life, or the timber that it is replacing? And have you compared all this with the effect of leaving the land untouched by forestry, and managed in a traditional way?

For any project or process to help reduce atmospheric carbon, it needs either to hold that carbon in a sequestered form indefinitely – in effect to create a 'fossil' – or to replace the use of a fossil fuel with a renewable resource. An example of the former is the protection of a coral reef, or an area of active peat formation. The second method is achieved, for example, by the use of sustainably-produced wood as fuel, or the replacement of intensive farming using high energy inputs with a low intensity system – in fact precisely what used to be achieved by traditional heathland and ancient woodland management!

To baldly claim that forestry will reduce climate change without any scientific analysis will only make Forest Enterprise and foresters look silly, and I would strongly urge them not to do so, unless they can produce coherent figures to back it up.