

Reversing the Trend

Wiston House – 18th July 2014

REVERSING THE TREND: THE FUTURE OF MEADOWS?



'When people come to Highgrove and see the flower meadow there they often say that it reminds them of their childhood. As time goes on there will be fewer people for whom that is true.'

- HRH The Prince of Wales
Patron of Plantlife, Rare Breeds Survival Trust and the Wildlife Trusts



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In July 2014, 100 people gathered at a conference in Sussex to discuss the future of meadows in the UK. The aim was to explore how to reverse the decline in flower-rich meadows. This paper reflects on the themes presented and discussed, and proposes action based on ideas from participants.

Valuing meadows

Why should we care about meadows?

- Because they are beautiful - and the seasonal, ephemeral nature of their beauty makes them even more special.
- Because they are part of our cultural heritage and history (some as old as medieval cathedrals).
- Because they are threatened in many ways and often not protected, either from development or change in land-use.
- Because they harbour rare plants, scarce invertebrates and declining bird species.
- Because they are difficult to replace or restore once lost.
- Because they are places which bring rest, joy and spiritual refreshment.
- Because they provide sustenance for pollinators and other insects beneficial to farming.
- Because they are good at storing carbon - better than improved pastures.
- Because they act as water filters, removing pollutants, and also water sponges, delaying run off and reducing flooding.
- Because they sustain healthier cattle and sheep which produce tastier meat and milk.
- Because they produce "local food" with low food miles for livestock- grazing and winter fodder.
- Because they are a precious genetic resource - and source of products as diverse as hay and honey.
- Because they have been part of distinctive cultural landscapes with associated vernacular architecture, local traditions and shared memories.

There are lots of reasons to cherish and protect surviving meadows and also to create new ones. And yet, flower-rich meadows have declined in extent by 97% in the last century. Losses continue today as hay meadows are converted to arable or silage production, lost to development or simply neglected. It is clear that meadow



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enthusiasts' views are not shared by all, or at least, that there are powerful forces at play that mean they are overlooked.

Some meadows are owned by conservation bodies whose job is to protect them. But many more are owned by private individuals, most of whom are farmers, and who usually need to make a financial return out of the land that they own. The fate of meadows depends on the individual business decisions made by those disparate enterprises. When a land owner considers what to do with a meadow, the long list of reasons why we should value meadows appear to count for little. Why is this?

First, the list of reasons why meadows should be valued is not a well-known or even a fully accepted list. Some of these reasons are more widely held than others, and some are contentious or weakly supported by evidence. Perhaps such evidence should be better communicated or more compelling evidence researched?

More importantly though, even if all of the reasons for valuing meadows were true and undeniable, many of them reflect public goods as opposed to private opportunities. Take carbon storage, there is evidence that swards of mixed grasses and flowers store more carbon in the soil than do single species swards.



But the private land owner does not benefit directly from this except as a member of society - it is a shared public benefit and yet it is dependent on the land owner's decision. And, crucially, although economists will put estimated monetary values on public goods such as beauty and carbon storage these do not yet translate into cash in hand for the land manager. Public policy currently recognises these "ecosystem services" - but that recognition is not yet being translated into public payments. This is just another way of saying what many farmers will say 'Nobody pays me for the view, even though I help to create it and protect it'.



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Given that we regard the hay meadows that remain as being precious, perhaps we should know more about the reasons why their owners and managers have kept them - these farmers are rare and precious too, and also hold a declining source of knowledge and skills in meadow management. Meadow management was once the sign of a truly successful farmer - the ability to keep animals fed all year was literally vital to sustainability. As such they are probably worthy of more study alongside their meadows. Are they the richest or the biggest farmers or the poorer or smaller farmers? Have their meadows been saved through love, by accident or through benign neglect? What are their thoughts on the future of their meadows?

Winning Hearts and Minds

At heart, we have the commercial interests of individual landowners in conflict with what might be the wishes of a broader society. However, we should not fool ourselves that the average person in the street knows much, or cares much, about meadows. People might now protest about the loss of a tree, or ancient woodland, but not often the loss of a meadow. If nature conservationists and others feel that they need a better deal, then they had better spread the word further and better about their joys and their value to us all. Meadow conservation can only be strengthened by having more supporters and more advocates, and if they are to have any chance of protection a public profile as high as ancient woodlands may be required.



At the conference, a variety of means were discussed to create a greater public awareness and enthusiasm for meadows: open days, webcams, guided walks, visits, posters, plaques proclaiming the importance of a site, ways to involve children in growing meadow plants for the re-creation of meadows, ways of involving artists, etc. All of these might play a part in building general public awareness and local community pride in those that remain.



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We need to appeal to hearts as well as heads - evoking the cultural and artistic significance of meadows, as well as the botany and other science, and to both capture and tell their stories as part of our social history, before those who remember them as part of their day-to-day lives are no longer here to do so. Every meadow has a tale to tell - of the people who owned them, the workers who maintained them, the name of the horse that ate the hay, or the type of cheese made from the cows that turned out to graze in late summer. Some of those tales are recorded in field and place names, or reflected in local dialect or folklore.

Protecting Meadows

But their fate still lies within the hands of a relatively small number of land owners who are being pulled by short-term economics into activities that threaten the future of the last remaining flower-rich meadows. What can conservationists do to protect them?



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One mechanism little mentioned in the conference is land purchase. This is the most certain way to protect any area for nature conservation and yet it was hardly discussed. Perhaps this is because meadows are so obviously a human-created and managed habitat, which need very exact cutting, mowing and grazing regimes, and don't fit a 'protect nature' model as well as more obvious 'wildernesses'. Land purchase by nature conservationists is essentially a means of taking land out of primarily economic activity. But taking them out of production is essentially undermining the essence of a meadow: created by a highly specialist and highly successful economic activity. These days, a wildlife-rich meadow is likely to be a single field on an otherwise more intensively managed farm. Nature conservationists may be unable, if they even come on the market, to buy a whole farm for the sake of one hay meadow field.



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Livestock and their feeding and management are critical. Hay meadows were created for, and by, livestock. The hay provided the means of keeping the animals through the winter and the aftermath provided useful autumn grazing. Hay meadows were not created for their biodiversity: farm animals are the *raison d'être* of hay meadows. Unless that link is restored some of the economic benefits of hay meadows will be lost.

Optimal meadow management for economic reasons, using collected forage and aftermath grazing, relies on traditional, hardy breeds of livestock that can flourish on relatively low-quality diets rather than the high input-high output cereal and silage diets on which most of our livestock are now fed.

There are still meadows being 'discovered' - discovered by nature conservation professionals, that is, for their owners will have known that they existed! Some of these newly discovered sites and also some existing ones are worthy candidates for legal protection through SSSI notification. Natural England, Natural Resources Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage should be encouraged and resourced by the country administrations to notify such sites as being part of a suite of nationally important meadows. This would not only protect the sites from development, but would also enable targeting of ever-limited agri-environment resources to pay farmers for their ongoing management.

In a similar vein, the form of protection provided by the existing Environmental Impact Assessment regulations could be strengthened, better enforced and made more relevant to meadows. Equally the planning system could be used more effectively to protect the 3% that remain. Because they are undesignated, both planners and councillors undervalue them.

All measures aimed to protect existing meadows would benefit from perfect knowledge of their state and location. An inventory of meadows is long overdue, and is needed for the UK to assess its progress towards meeting 2020 biodiversity commitments. It should be the responsibility of the statutory agencies, to be supported, respected and used by them and by the UK governments. An inventory would aid the targeting of meadow restoration to link those that survive.

However, we have to return to those landowners, mostly farmers, mostly quite modest enterprises, who currently have meadows within their landholdings and who may have a variety of feelings about them. Some may see their meadows as an asset, others as a block to their aspirations and some may fear the "threat" of designation. Maybe conservationists should talk more to these crucial people, about their hopes and fears for their meadows (which we tend to think of as our meadows too).



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The bottom line

At the conference, many talked of giving land managers more support and influencing their bottom line to support their meadow ownership. This is easier said than done, given that 97% of meadows have been lost in the last century and we are left with the last 3%.

Support to farmers need not necessarily be direct financial support - moral support can go a long way. Praise from the local community or from the wider public can help individuals and small businesses. A greater profile for wildlife-friendly farmers from their peers, from the Soil Association, Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF), Central Land Association (CLA) and National Farmers Union (NFU) would not go amiss. Should there be a meadow-friendly farmer roll of honour on which the names of the managers of the finest meadows would appear?

As well as that important sense of pride this could also lay the foundations for the currently elusive demand for specialist products - from flower-rich hay for pampered pets to artistic holidays, as well as cheese, lamb and honey. Some saw this as essential and achievable - others as impractical and over-aspirational. We see success in selling pasture-fed meat as desirable and healthy - is it just a small step to develop a "meadow sweet" brand?



If we are thinking of contributing to the economic wealth of farmers so that they maintain their meadows then there are a few options. Meadow-managing farmers could be helped by their businesses (their accommodation, their meat, their cheese, etc.) being promoted to the wider public by conservation organisations - *'Buy Farmer Giles's beef - it's reared on a wildlife-rich meadow!'* or *'Stay at Farmer Giles's B&B and see his wonderful meadow!'*



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National help, local action

Practical help can also be given to land managers: information on management methods, breeds of animal appropriate for grazing, machinery swaps and voluntary labour might make a big difference to the busy lives of some farmers. Is more advice on best practice, appropriate breeds of animal, grazing regimes, cutting dates, etc needed? What is the best way to promulgate best practice? What role for colleges, for apprenticeships or mentors or discussion groups to provide access to experience and expertise? Or for local meadow management groups where the machinery or livestock needed can be shared? For smallholders the cost of machinery needed for cutting, tedding and baling hay is prohibitive, and contractors not available. Co-operative ownership and operation may provide the solution.

Rare meadows are a little like rare birds, except they don't move about so much. Experience with restricted-range farmland species, such as Corncrake, Stone Curlew and Cirl Bunting, has been more positive, overall, than attempts to stem the decline of widespread species such as Skylark and Grey Partridge. This may be because conservationists have been able to tailor advice, money and time to a geographically restricted rural audience and speak directly to the people that matter rather than through the more scatter-gun media of national grant schemes, farming unions or the farming press.



If there are lessons to be learned from previous farmland conservation success stories they might be: knowing a lot about the thing you want to conserve, knowing quite a lot about the farming system but seeking solutions from the practitioners and offering financial help as a stop-gap until government grants can take up the slack. This would necessitate a team of excellent meadow advisors with empathy for farmers and a bit of cash in their back pockets, something that appears unlikely given the shift to “on line” agri-environment schemes.



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If, as a nation, we want meadows to be maintained for ever, and we recognise that it is not necessarily in the individual farmer's interests to do so, then the taxpayer should be prepared to contribute to the cost of maintenance of meadows provided that ensures their long-term protection. Agri-environment schemes must be designed to work for ancient habitats such as meadows and must be well-enough funded to ensure long-term security of these habitats. Administrators must be broad minded enough in the application of the rules to enable the very small, very rare and very isolated to benefit. And schemes must work for native breeds suited to meadows - livestock are an integral part of biodiversity too!

There may also be a role for local action and community level activists, in tandem with the larger scale policies and practices. There was talk of a sense of "outrage" about the plight of meadows amongst many present and examples of that same outrage being harnessed as a force for good by communities who saw local meadows being threatened or neglected. We can show farmers how much we value their meadows, and support them in their efforts to sustain them, including by what we buy. Or we can take direct action by adopting or acquiring meadows - perhaps as a very special form of village green, but even better perhaps as a very special form of community enterprise, which covers its costs by producing goods which are sold locally (perhaps in the community shop) and provides experiences which are now lost to many - a village "hay making day" instead of a village fete, anyone? Vibrant examples of this approach can be found - ranging from the Parish Grasslands Project in St. Briavels at the parish scale, to the Monmouthshire Meadows Group at the county scale.

Making New Meadows

Reversing the trend on meadow loss will necessitate re-creating meadows at a rate fast enough to counterbalance any ongoing losses and to link sites to create a critical mass of habitats and managers.



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Much is being done, and much is being learned in this area, particularly through the Coronation Meadows project. Green hay from high quality meadows is being matched with nearby 'receptor sites' (almost always former meadows themselves where soil and climate are suitable). Such projects are practical examples of responding to the Lawton report of more, bigger, better and more joined up patches of nature-rich habitats. Funding and implementing such projects is a priority - at present government funding is not forthcoming. But it's not easy - or at least not easy to do it right.

Scattering seeds on any bare earth is not the right answer, despite the growing market for packets of generic mixes. To spread success we need to evaluate and learn from experience and share knowledge formally and informally, as well as matching the right hay/seed to the right local opportunity.

What next?

Meadow loss is a microcosm of much of the angst about the rest of nature conservation in the UK. We have lost so much and we need to do something urgently or the game is over. How do we influence a host of individual decisions made by private individuals? What are the roles of the individuals, communities, NGOs and government and its agencies? What are the priorities for action? Do we have the money and the will to make a real difference? Will we all work together to achieve a common goal?



Here is a list of ten priorities for action if meadows are to be valued, protected, managed well, recreated and enjoyed - all essential if their demise is to be reversed. Not all have obvious owners or actors - but somebody needs to do each of them.



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Action for meadows

1. Raise the public profile of the value of meadows so that they and their owners receive greater support.
2. Research the services and benefits of meadows so that the evidence is even more convincing: for example in flood prevention or nutritional value of meadow-fed meat.
3. Transfer more meadows into conservation stewardship - by communities, skilled farmers or conservation bodies - and where necessary into conservation ownership.
4. Notify all high-quality meadows under existing legislation to protect them and enable public funding and use the planning system better to protect undesignated sites.
5. Capture and record meadow history, including losses, to know more about what and why we have and could restore.
6. Talk to farmers who own meadows and manage traditional stock to understand their needs and aspirations and to learn and share their knowledge.
7. Promote the businesses of meadow-conserving farmers and the use of native breeds of livestock and buy the products they make.
8. Increase direct payments to those farmers who protect meadows in the long term.
9. Re-create new meadows on former sites the "right way" and where they link with existing meadows and share skills in this specialist undertaking.
10. Establish an inventory of meadows as a means of focusing efforts and to record our successes and failures.

'I hope that in time this ambition might grow, perhaps to create a meadow in every parish'

- HRH The Prince of Wales

This paper was written by Dr Mark Avery. It is based on the proceedings of a conference held on 18 July 2014 at Wiston House in West Sussex, organised by the three charities: Plantlife, Rare Breeds Survival Trust and The Wildlife Trusts.

