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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Food production and our rural environment – The way ahead

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2 Objectives for the Rural Environment

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The objectives which exist for the development of the rural environment are as diverse as those that have been discussed in relation to food production. The needs of the rambler, amateur naturalist, the farmer, the urban dweller seeking refreshment and enjoyment, the forester, the angler, and the villager are very unlikely to be identical. All of these people, and many others, have an interest in the way our rural environment changes and develops. Whilst their interests may stem from different objectives it is worth examining whether there is a commonality of interest which indicates an order of priorities for the rural environment. If we ask ourselves the question 'what do we expect of the countryside?' our answers are likely to vary and to include some things which are more important than others; we could probably all agree that food production would come near the top of the list but the production of timber, of energy or of fibres might generate more debate.

But what else do we want of the countryside?

What do we want to see?

What do we want to hear?

What do we want to smell?

What do we want to experience?

It is perhaps easier to answer such questions with negatives — to be positive about the things we don't want than it is to list actual requirements.

THE VISUAL ENVIRONMENT

What we see in the countryside is usually determined by where we are. The view

from a cottage window, from a fast-moving car, from the top of a bus or from a bicycle may all be different. What do we expect —

do we want variety?

do we want pattern?

do we want colour?

do we want to see buildings?

do we want to see people?

The landscapes which have been immortalised have frequently contained elements of all of these — but they were blended together in a kind of visual unity which over the years has become more difficult to find. What important features do we see in such landscapes? Colour is certainly something which tends to be valued but it exists in the simplicity of golden corn as much as in a riot of wild flowers. Is there something less than acceptable about a field of flowering oilseed rape, or are we happier with a field strewn with poppies? Does importance lie in having a variety of changing colours which enliven the landscape; a mixture of browns, golds and greens with an occasional splash of colour from a white-washed building or a flowering tree or a brightly painted tractor?

Much of the pattern of the landscape of this country has been created by the hedges which began to be used to enclose our fields from medieval times onwards. Some of these are fine hedges and are a haven of a great variety of wildlife (Streeter and Richardson, 1981). But some of the hedges are much less interesting and probably of little value either agriculturally or aesthetically. Hedges provide valuable shelter (Caborn, 1970) even if their original purpose of keeping stock in has been superseded in most areas. From a distance they do provide a pattern with which most of us are familiar and to which we therefore seem to be attached. However, if you actually want to look at the landscape some hedges do provide a positive barrier to enjoyment. We must ask ourselves whether we want to provide the resources for preserving all hedges — or whether a proportion of really good hedges and clumps of trees in the corners of fields might not be a better compromise. It seems unlikely that many of us would find a landscape without trees or hedges acceptable — yet such landscapes do exist in many parts of the world. Does what we accept depend on what we grew up with? As hedges become less common — and it is estimated that they are being lost at the rate of 4 500 miles per year (Pollard, Hooper and Moore, 1974) will our children and our grandchildren find them less and less desirable as a landscape feature?

The presence of people and buildings in the rural environment lends a reality to the situation; such warmth is unlikely to be perceived in the remote landscapes where no one lives or works. And too many buildings or too many people can quickly destroy the rural characteristic. So where does the optimum lie? Do we want sufficient people living and working in the countryside in order to manage

rural areas in the manner to which we've been accustomed? Can we accept an influx at weekends, in the holidays, so that urban children grow up loving and caring for our rural environment? It has been argued that tourism and conservation by the use of traditional farming practices should become one of the main cash crops of the uplands (Countryside Commission, 1984).

Membership of rural environmental societies is at an all time high (Table 1) so that it may be important to capitalise on people's interest and concern. The members of such societies are likely to have an interest in conserving as many of our native plants and animals as possible. They need to understand more of the constraints on farming which mean that this is not always possible — but sometimes farmers may need to withdraw from some management activity in order to preserve species variety. They may need to console themselves with the public relations value of not doing something (Rigby, 1984) which will affect what is seen in the countryside.

Table 1

Membership of rural environmental societies

County Naturalists Trusts (46 Trusts)	150 000
Scottish Wildlife Trust	8 000
RSPB	361 443
British Trust for Ornithology	7 000–8 000
Young Ornithologists Club	96 000
Woodland Trust	32 690
British Trust for Conservation Volunteers	3 100
Conservation Trust:	
Resource bank user organisations	400
Enquiries for help/information	10 000/annum
British Butterfly Conservation Society	2 750

THE AUDITORY ENVIRONMENT

If you value the rural environment you are unlikely to be very keen to hear the noise of motor cycles, heavy lorries or noisy pumps and motors disturbing your walk through the fields. Curiously, we seem to accept the noise of tractors, of guns on shoots, of the popping of bird scarers and the lowing of cattle. It may be that some sounds are reassuring; the rush of the wind, the movement of water in a stream or the song of the bird all add something to the rural environment; we may value peace and quiet but it is rare for this to mean absolute silence.

Perhaps much depends on whether or not the noise is transitory. The decibels

created by some aircraft can be unbearable but fortunately they fly over fairly quickly. Again, conditioning in childhood may be important so that those who grow up in the city may actually prefer the countryside if it has some background noise accompanying it. The modern tractor driver with his stereo radio headphones seems to be of the same opinion — although it is difficult to judge whether their purpose is to provide a desirable sound or to drown-out the noise of the tractor.

THE OLFACTORY ENVIRONMENT

Many smells are typical of the countryside — fresh-mown hay, flower perfumes and mushrooms trampled underfoot all seem eminently desirable. But we might be much less keen to smell animal manures, some silages or the burning of straw. At what point do smells become obnoxious and therefore undesirable? Clearly the assessment is bound to be subjective particularly at the margins but we could probably all agree on those smells that we would prefer not to experience in the countryside.

THE ENVIRONMENT OF EXPERIENCE

Emotional and intellectual reactions to the countryside are even more difficult to quantify. Do we gain from the rural environment a sense of pleasure, a sense of space, of room to move about, a sense of tranquility; do we want it to have an unchanging quality— a sense of timelessness, a sense of history? Does an unchanging countryside satisfy our need for security amidst a rapidly-changing world; do we want it to allow us to indulge in nostalgia or is it naive to imagine that the countryside has ever in history been an unchanging and static entity?

Certainly it once had a much greater diversity of wildlife than it has today (Table 2) and perhaps, too, there was a greater understanding of its primary role in food production; people were more likely to have a near relative engaged in farming 50 to 100 years ago than they are today.

As the proportion of our population engaged in farming declines (Table 3) so the need for environmental education and understanding will grow. But understanding needs to be a two-way process between urban and rural communities. I should like to suggest a list of primary objectives for the rural environment which could form the basis for the discussion from which such understanding might grow.

Table 2

Post-1930 changes in diversity of wildlife in the British countryside

Butterflies	Large blue extinct 10 species vulnerable to extinction
Dragonflies	3 or 4 have become extinct 6 vulnerable to extinction 5 decreased in numbers
Reptiles and amphibians	4 of the 12 species endangered
Birds	36 species show long term decline
Otter	Become rare
Bats	Declining. Several (including Greater Horseshoe and Mouse-eared) risk extinction Others are becoming rarer
Plants	10 species have become extinct Distribution of 149 species has declined by at least 20%

Source: Nature Conservancy Council (1984) Nature Conservation in Great Britain. Summary of objectives and strategy. NCC Shrewsbury.

Table 3

Percentage of the Working Population engaged in farming in Britain

1966	2.2
1970	1.8
1975	1.5
1981	1.3

Source: CSO Annual Abstract of Statistics, 1976 and 1984. HMSO.

OBJECTIVE 1 The safe and sustainable production of the major part of our food supply.

Our perception of the rural environment is inevitably linked with food production. We could probably all agree that such production needs to continue indefinitely and that we would want the processes involved to be as safe as possible for

- the farmer
- the consumer
- the environment

OBJECTIVE 2 The encouragement of viable human communities in rural areas

Most of us would like to feel that rural communities can continue to flourish – the demand for village property in many areas suggests that society as a whole endorses this view. The provision of many services, like health care, education, libraries and postal services may be more costly in rural areas but this is frequently counterbalanced by lower demand for other types of service, particularly in the social sector.

OBJECTIVE 3 The maintenance of a wide range of natural habitats in order to ensure the survival of the majority of our native flora and fauna species. Over the last 58 years, County Naturalists Trusts throughout England and Wales have worked hard to preserve representative habitats in their own regions. Recent legislation has tried to facilitate this process but there may still be room for improvement. It is notoriously difficult to decide on what ought to be conserved when the resources are not available for every species and habitat. Ought we to conserve those things which are rare or those which may become rare, the species that are attractive or those that are not visible to the naked eye, the species that are useful to mankind or those which are or may become pests? The decisions are difficult to make but they have to be taken if we are to avoid great loss of species diversity in the years ahead.

OBJECTIVE 4 The promotion of interaction between rural and urban dwellers for their mutual benefit.

An understanding, by the urban community, of the need to balance the constraints of profitable farming with the desire to maintain an acceptable rural environment will only come from a willingness, on the part of the rural community to explain/discuss and sometimes to change decisions. At the same time, the rural community needs to appreciate the great need of urban communities for access to a desirable and enjoyable rural environment.

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