Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Public perception of the countryside

Edited by F A Miller & R B Tranter

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1 The countryside: some facts, concerns and perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

The Countryside Foundation commissioned CAS to undertake a study of the UK countryside chiefly to:

(i) establish what is already known about the pattern of land use (and how this has changed over recent years); how the countryside is managed for the various purposes for which it is used; how many people are involved in countryside activities;

(ii) establish which countryside or related organisations exist and which reports have recently covered different aspects of the subject;

(iii) identify important gaps in our knowledge;

(iv) consider public concerns about countryside issues and what chiefly influences public perception of them and their relative importance.

The study was commissioned in May 1987, and completed by a Report in September 1987. There was thus too little time to explore (iv) in detail and, in any case, information was scarce. The task of obtaining new data would be a large and expensive one and it was decided to hold a major Conference to hear the views of others on the importance of the topic and what needs to be done about it.

Before coming to this, however, it is proposed to summarise briefly the factual findings of the study.

THE COUNTRYSIDE: SOME FACTUAL FINDINGS

Problems in establishing the facts

It sounds fairly straightforward to establish what is already known about land use and what is not.

As might be expected, the distinction turns out not to be quite so clear cut. Whilst it is possible to say that nothing is known about 'x' or that 'y' is not known, it is less easy to be specific about what is known. The main difficulties are not generally finding out what has been done although the literature is voluminous and only a fraction of the information available was reviewed in the study, but in assessing the information available. The problems chiefly relate to:

(i) the date when information was collected,
(ii) the size and representativeness of the sample used and
(iii) interpretation of statistics.

(i) Surveys are time-consuming and publication involves delay: results tend to be somewhat out-of-date therefore. The best answer to this is for surveys to be regularly repeated, so that trends can be established. Trend lines are, in general, more useful than 'snapshots' but they still need to be quantified.

For example, it is no use getting excited about an issue (eg hedge-removal or coniferous afforestation) if whatever was being done has ceased. Equally, an increasing or decreasing trend may be of little consequence if it is quantitatively very small. This is well illustrated by the removal of hedgerows: the picture looks different according to how it is presented (see Figure 1).

(ii) It is rarely possible to measure everything, whether it be trees felled or planted, or number of people visiting the countryside, unless national statistics are systematically collected, either by Government or a Society. Where statistics are not routinely collected, there is usually heavy dependence on surveys and samples.

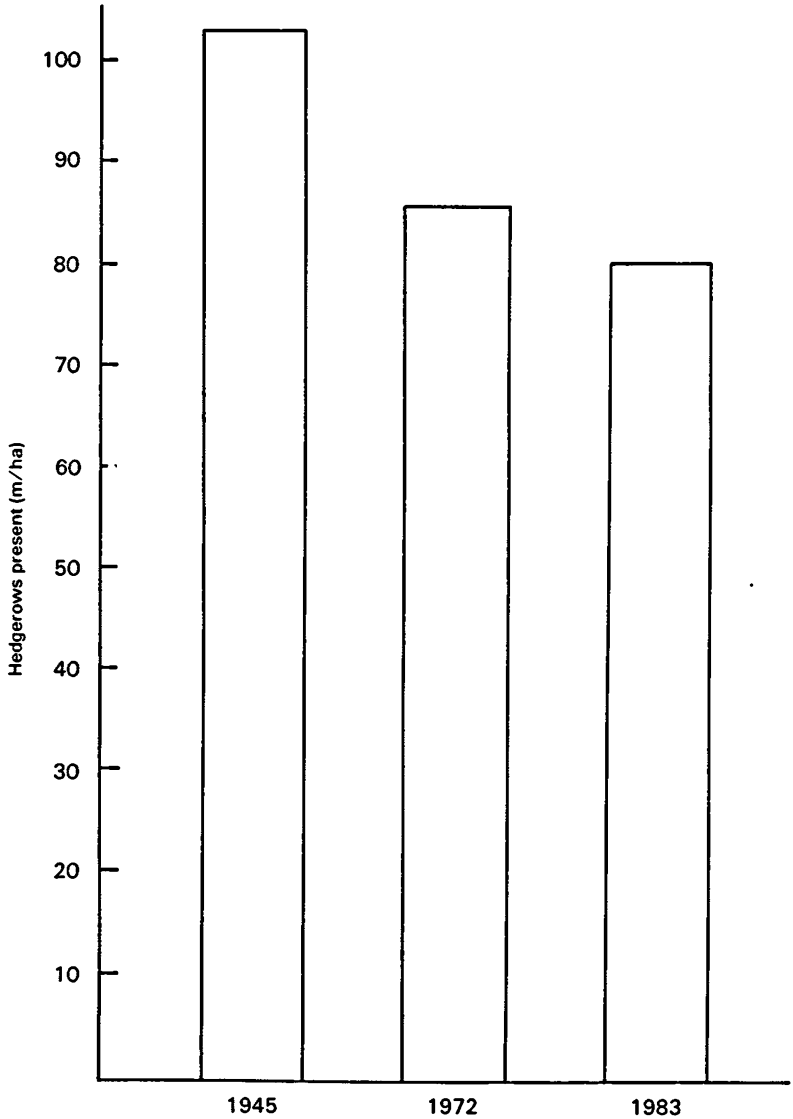
What we know about an issue is often therefore based on quite a small sample and it is not always easy to be sure whether the sample is big enough or representative of the country as a whole.

There is thus a case for systematic collation, if not collection, of adequate statistics, preferably by an independent body or by checkable methods, *on all the issues regarded as of importance.*

(iii) The interpretation of the statistics can be a complex matter, obviously affected by judgements about sample size and representativeness already mentioned.

But there are also less obvious factors, some of them concerned with distribution and dispersion. For example, accurate statistics about the

Figure 1
Hedgerow removal, 1945-83



Source: Derived from Westmacott & Worthington (1984).

number of people visiting the countryside do not necessarily reveal how far people penetrate. It is well known that most people tend to cluster round facilities for car parking, eating, toilets etc and only a few travel any distance from them. This is as well for those who like solitude but it puts a slightly different meaning on 'visits to the countryside'. Similarly the large numbers of anglers are not distributed evenly about our rivers. Of course, all who travel may react to the countryside through which they pass but the views from travel routes are still often limited.

Many of these differences and difficulties show up very clearly in the useful distinction between Land use and Countryside use.

Land use

The land is the basis of the countryside but its use is determined primarily by those who own it (see Table 1).

Table 1
Agricultural land ownership in Great Britain, 1978

Category of owner	Area owned (M ha)	Proportion of total (%)
Public and semi-public bodies and traditional institutions	1.5	8.5
Financial institutions	0.2	1.2
Private individuals, companies and trusts	16.0	90.3
All owners	17.7	100.0

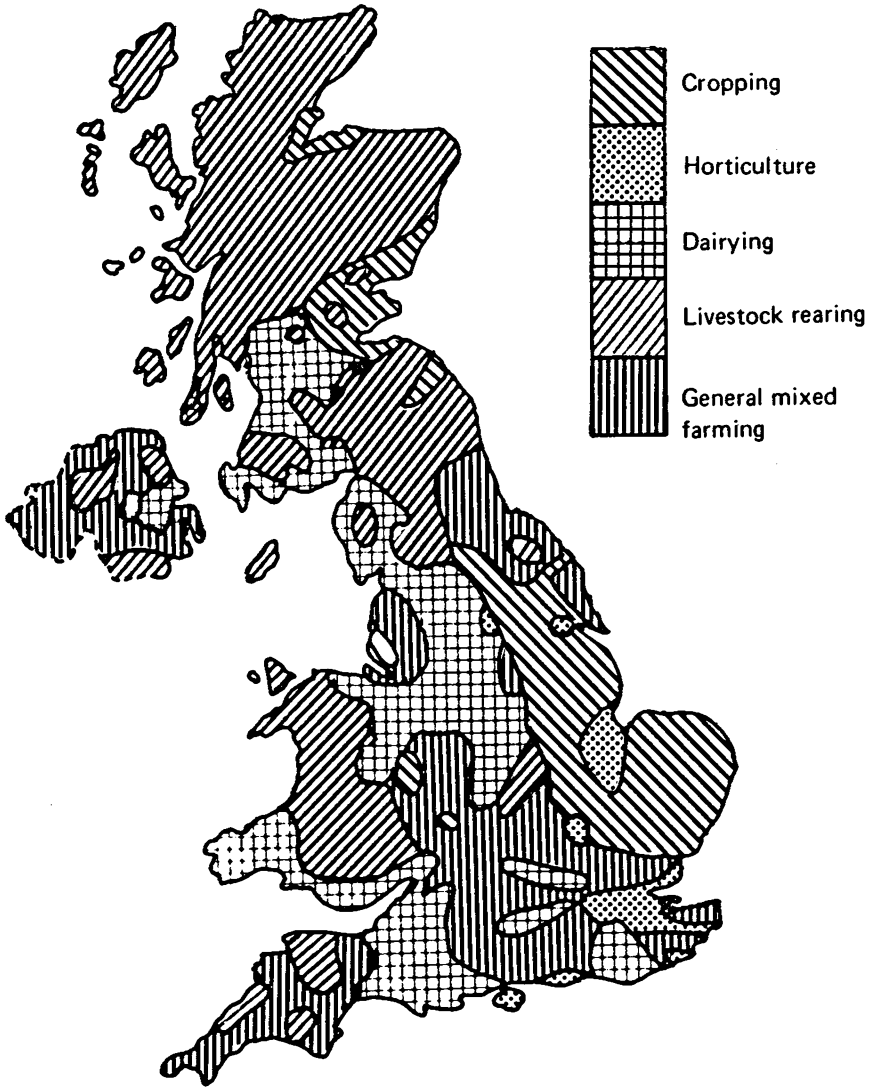
Source: MAFF (1979).

Agriculture is the dominant land-user (75-80%), with Forestry (10%) in second place.

In both cases, the available information is good, accurate and reasonably up-to-date. In the case of Agriculture, MAFF collects statistics annually from virtually all farmers and in some detail. As a result, it is relatively easy to construct the kind of land-use maps illustrated in Figure 2. Similarly, the Forestry Commission has accurate information about its own forestry plantations and the data do not change all that rapidly. Information about private forestry is not as good. There is also reasonably good data about ownership of the land.

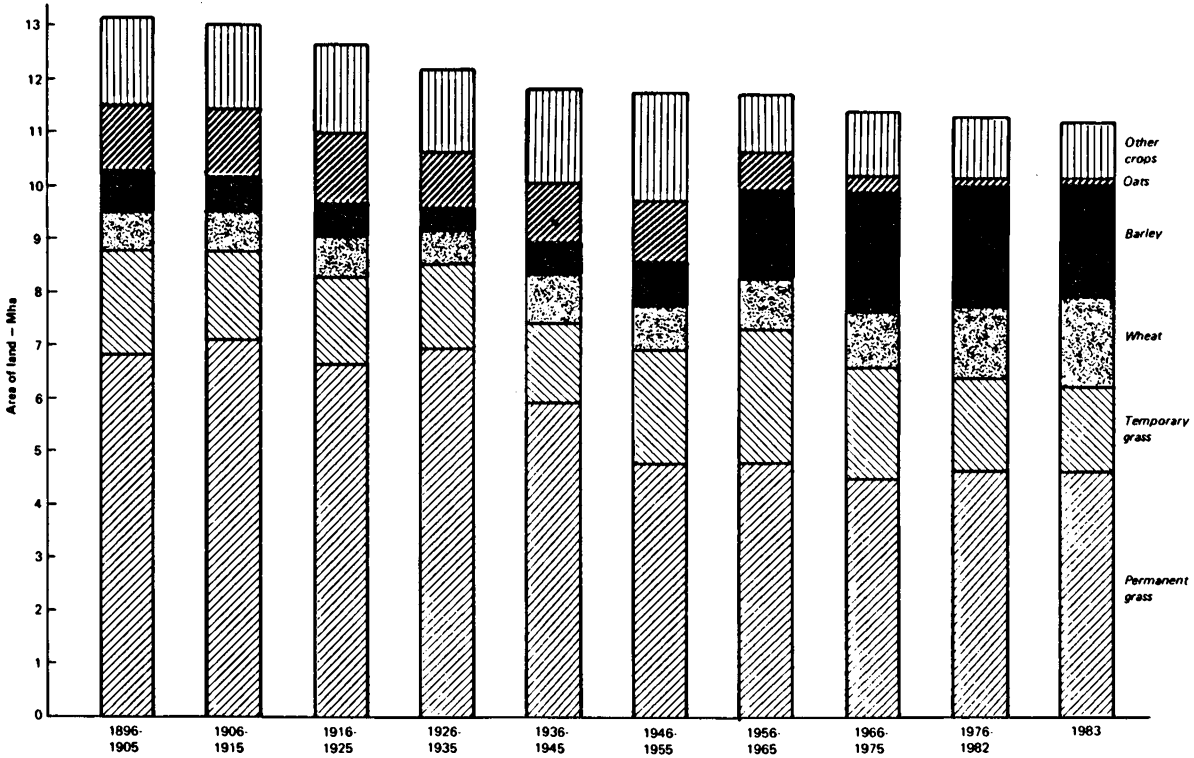
Since change of land use on a macro-scale has not been great over the years (see Figure 3), it is often with the micro-scale that the public is concerned.

Figure 2
A broad impression of the present distribution of the main farming systems



Source: Reproduced from CEC (1980).

Figure 3
The changing pattern of cultivated land use in Great Britain, 1896-1983



Source: Reproduced from Craig, Jollans & Korbey (1986).

Land ownership

In Great Britain, the proportion of owner-occupiers has risen from 13% in 1914 to 69% in 1983. In Northern Ireland virtually all farmers are owner-occupiers.

In Great Britain the proportion of land owned by public and semi-public bodies and traditional institutions is about 8.5% and that owned by financial institutions amounted to only 3.2% (in 1982). The majority of owners (c90%) are therefore private individuals, companies and trusts.

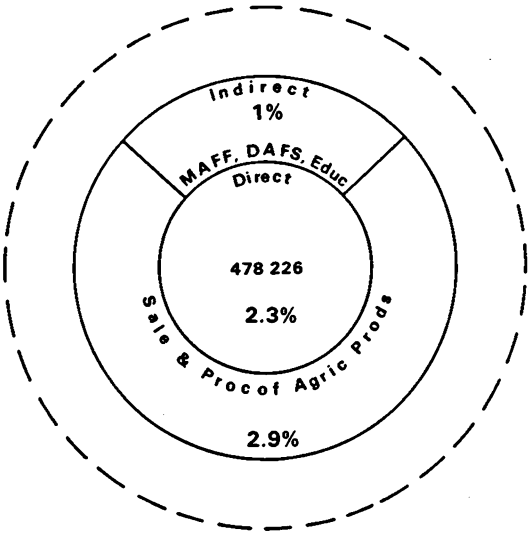
The number of agricultural holdings in the UK has fallen steadily this century. By 1980, the total was about 243 500 (5% fewer than in 1975). The average full-time holding was 116 ha in 1980, compared with 111 ha in 1975, but this is not a very meaningful figure.

The use of the countryside

People involved in the countryside may live there, work there, find recreation and sport there, or visit for varying periods of time.

Employment in Agriculture (see Figure 4) has been falling steadily (Figure 5) but is distributed very unevenly over the UK (see Figure 6). The number of farmers has also declined (Figure 7).

Figure 4
Employment in UK agriculture, 1981

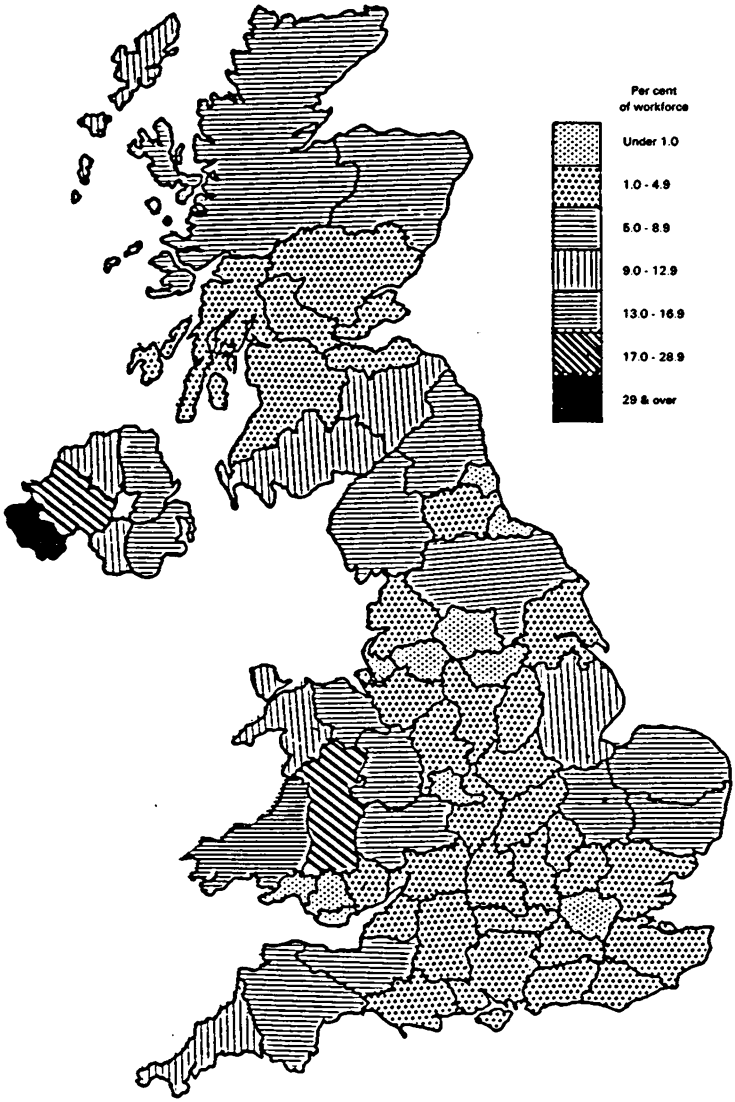


Source: Derived from Craig, Jollans & Korbey (1986).

Figure 5
Employment in agriculture, England and Wales, 1940-1985

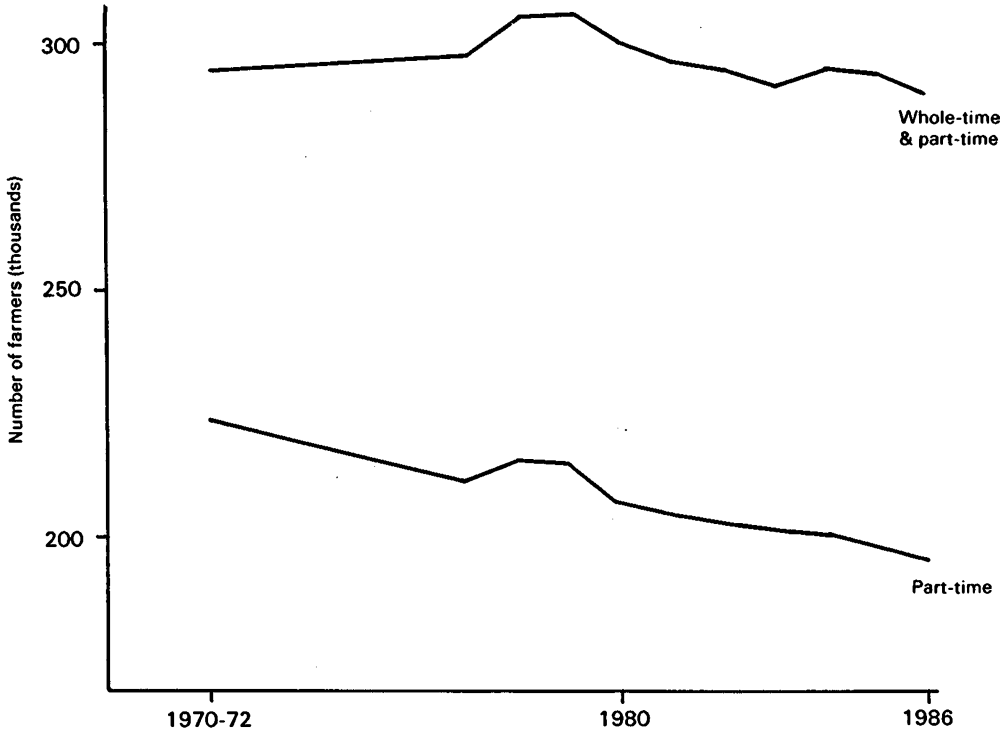
Source: Derived from MAFF (1977); MAFF & DAFS (1968); MAFF *et al* (1984 & 1986).

Figure 6
Distribution of direct employment on farms as a percentage of the total workforce (whole time equivalents), 1981



Source: Reproduced from Craig, Jollans & Korbey (1986).

Figure 7
Number of farmers, UK, 1970-1986



Source: Derived from MAFF (1982 & 1987).

Table 2
Total employment[1] generated by country sports in Great Britain

Sport	Direct employment		Indirect employment	Total employment
Fishing	28 800	(19 800)	28 980	57 780
Shooting/Stalking	11 760	(14 500)	9 050	20 810
Hunting	4 430	(4 000)	4 780	9 210
Total	44 990	(39 300)	42 810	87 800

[1] The bracketed figures refer to the direct employment derived from the CRC surveys and their total includes 1 000 jobs in general trades and services.

Source: Derived from Cobham Resource Consultants (1983).

Table 3
Number of people visiting National Trust Country Houses

1984	3 600 410
1985	3 990 095
1986	4 285 610

Source: Unpublished National Trust statistics.

Employment in Forestry is small (c17 000) but, as in all countryside activities, indirect employment has to be added (see Table 2 for an example related to country sports).

However, many more people visit the countryside (see Table 3 for an example) and large numbers participate in country sports (see Table 4).

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Table 4
Participation in country sports in Great Britain

Sport	GB	England & Wales	Scotland
Fishing			
Coarse	2 035 750	2 028 000	5 750
Sea	1 865 500	1 791 000	72 500
Game	947 750	676 000	271 250
Total fishing[1]	3 730 000	3 380 000	350 000
Shooting and Stalking			
Game, wildfowl and rough shooting[2]	575 000	521 400	53 600
Deer stalking	4 000	3 100	900
Total shooting and stalking	579 000	524 500	54 500
Hunting			
Fox and deer	197 500	189 250	8 250
Hare	12 900	12 700	200
Various	3 800	3 700	100
Total hunting	214 200	205 650	8 550

[1]These totals have been adjusted to allow for multiple-participation which emerged in the various surveys from which these summaries were derived.

[2]The number of people who shoot only clay pigeons has been excluded from this figure.

Source: Derived from Cobham Resource Consultants (1983).

Table 5 shows the most popular countryside activities. Interestingly, the wider countryside accounted for three times as many trips spent in the countryside as the managed sites. The contribution made by visits to historic buildings and country parks, and the number of those who participate in fishing and riding are small. The Countryside Commission (1985a) has stated: 'The scale of use of the wider countryside for walking and other informal uses requires that greater consideration be given to it as a recreational resource'. Furthermore, 'people tend to be general countryside goers rather than specialists concerning themselves with just one or two activities'. In relation to what countryside recreation users did on their last trip, it was found that 80% stopped for at least 15 minutes, usually in the unmanaged countryside and over 20% went for a walk of over 2 miles. The

most popular walks were on paths and through woodlands and farmland. This demonstrates the significance of the farmed countryside; and the fact that more than two thirds of all trips started from the home means that every part of the countryside is visited, not just the well-known holiday areas. The local countryside generally is important for recreation because the distance people travel is small and what might be regarded as the classic recreation areas of heathland and moors make up a small proportion of the land walked over. The emphasis on local, and therefore generally the countryside around towns, and on woodland and farmland perhaps indicates that there is little deferred demand. Few people are not visiting the countryside because of the absence of the facilities that one would expect to find in rural areas.

Table 5
Relative importance of countryside recreation activities

Activity	Proportion (%) of total number of trips
Drives, outings, picnics	19
Long walks	18
Visiting friends, relatives	14
Sea coast	8
Informal sport	12
Organised sport	7
Pick-your-own	4
Historic buildings	4
Country parks	4
Watched sport	3
Others	7

Source: Derived from Countryside Commission (1985a).

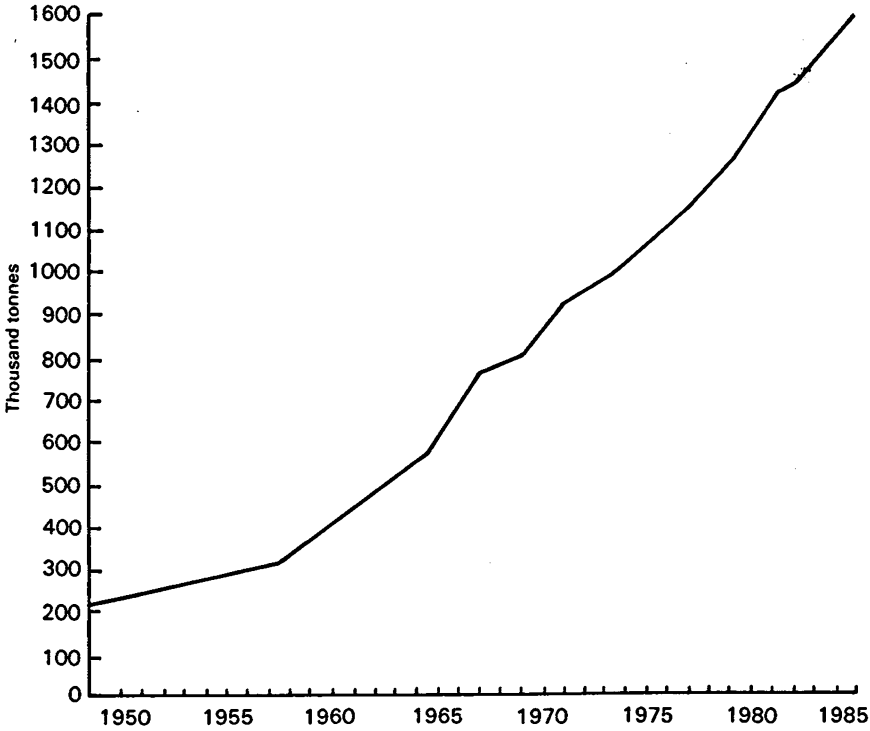
All the data so far referred to represent 'snapshots' at particular times, very often some time ago because of the difficulty in obtaining up-to-date figures. But, as has been mentioned, the countryside is not static and most 'snapshots' will represent one point on a trend line. There is, of course, no guarantee that any trend line will necessarily continue in the same way but it is part of the picture to know how the 'snapshot' has been arrived at.

Change in the countryside

Over a long period of time, change has been enormous in the countryside and even over quite short periods noticeable changes have taken place. Some of these have been gradual (eg the substitution of tractors for horses and, before that, horses for oxen), some rather abrupt (eg the death of elm trees as a result of Dutch Elm disease): some have altered the appearance of the countryside (eg the change in cattle breeds or numbers of tower silos) and some have not (eg changes in ownership).

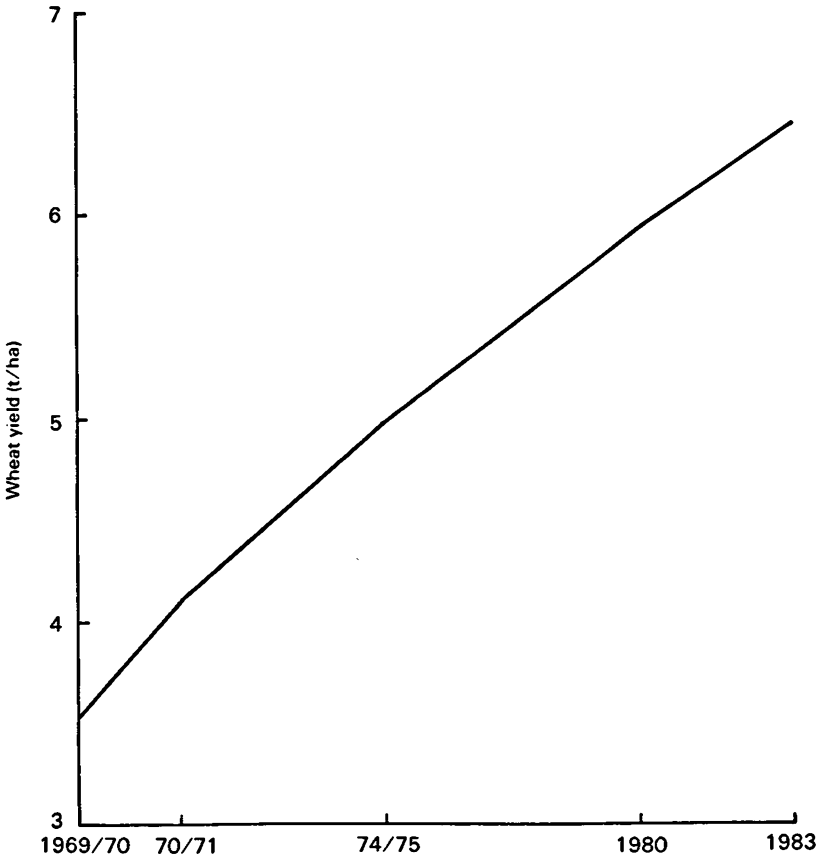
Dramatic changes have included fertilizer use (Figure 8), wheat yields per ha (Figure 9) and the area devoted to conservation (Figures 10, 11 & 12).

Figure 8
Annual use of nitrogen fertilizer in the UK, 1950-1985



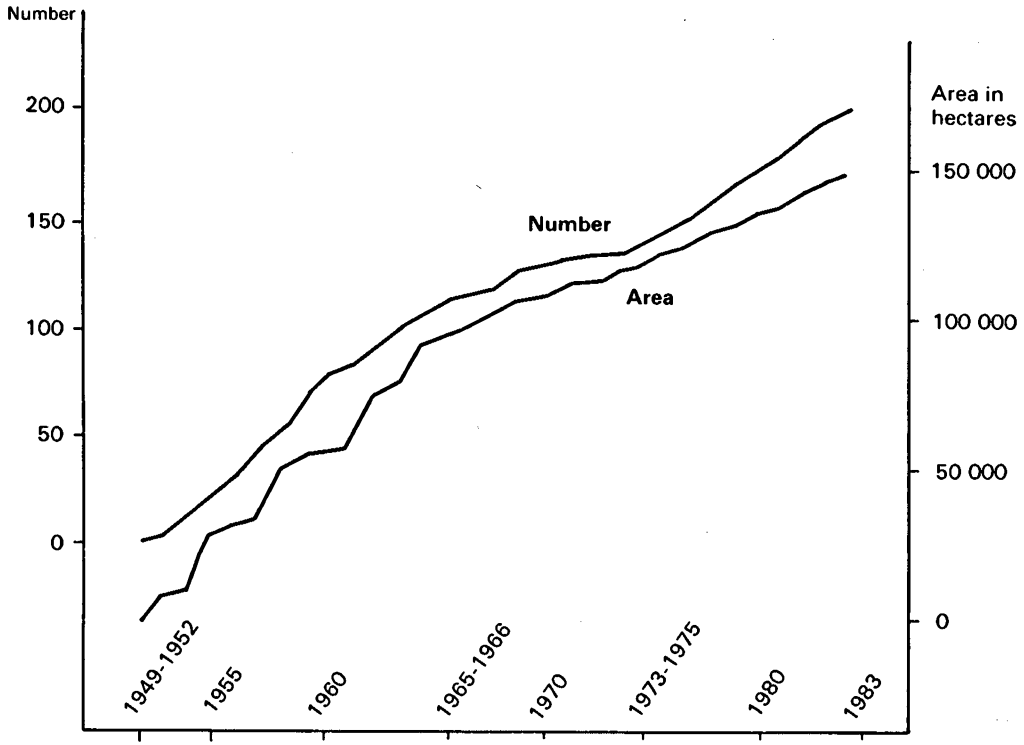
Source: Derived from Craig, Jollans & Korbey (1986).

Figure 9
Wheat yield per ha, UK, 1969-1983



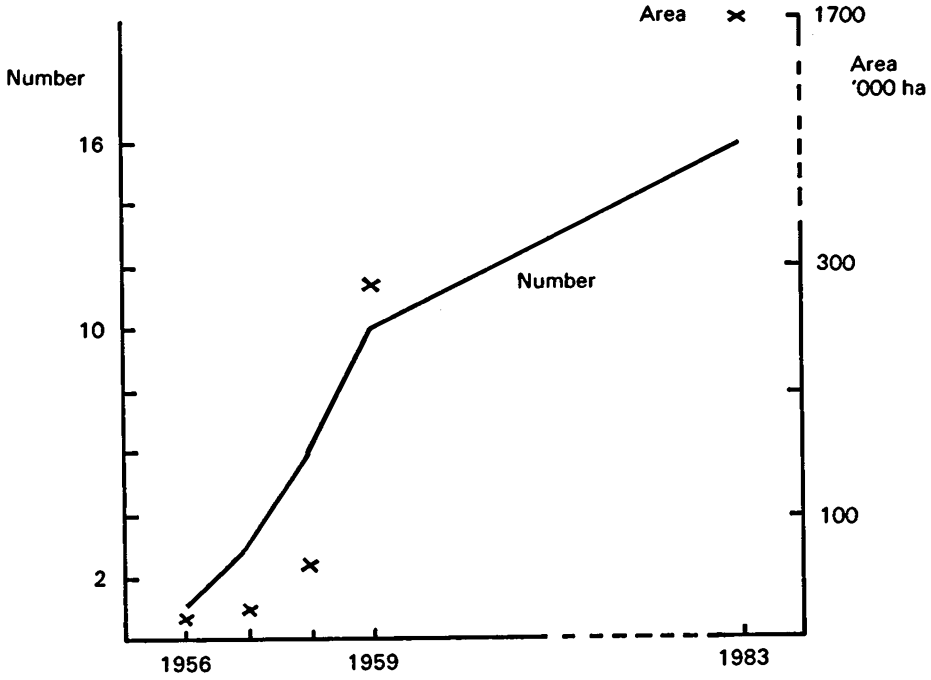
Source: Derived from MAFF (1976 & 1984).

Figure 10
Number of National Nature Reserves, 1949-1983



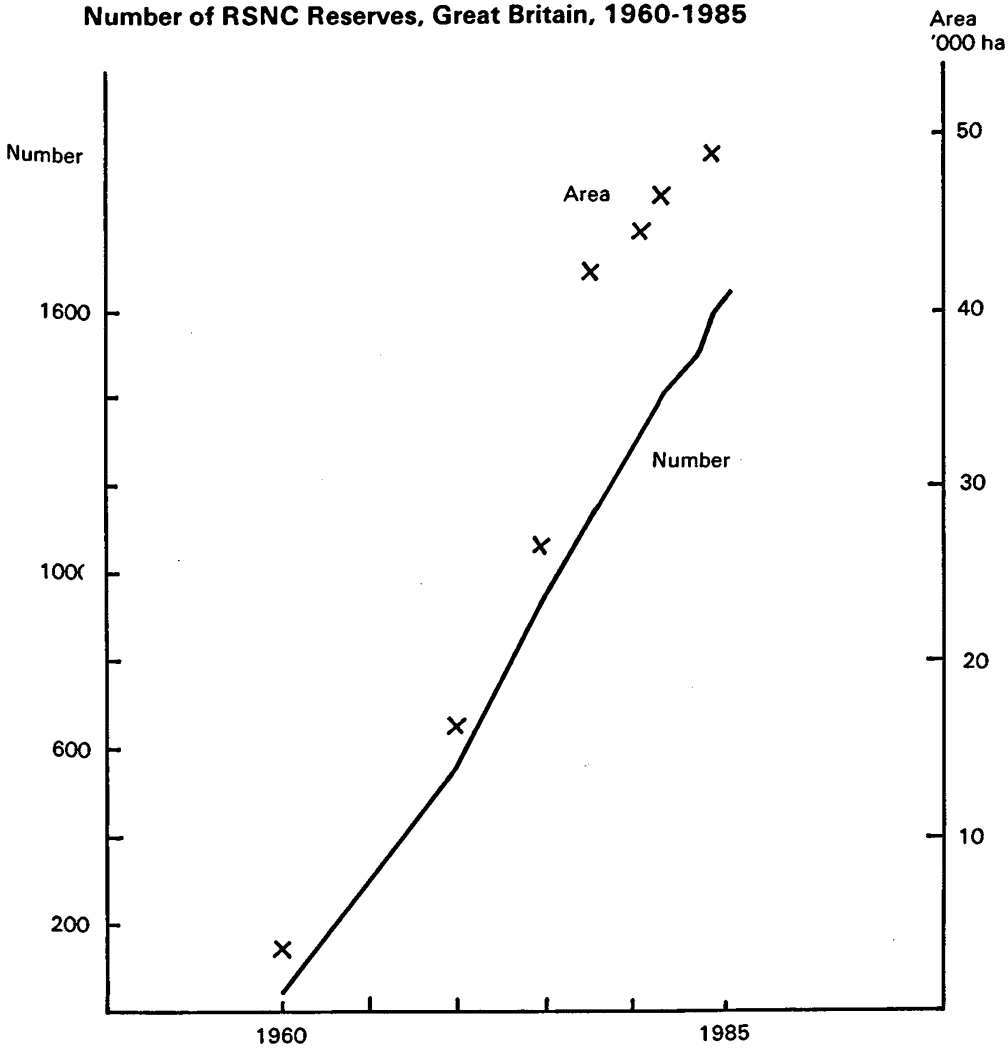
Source: Reproduced from NCC (1984).

Figure 11
Number of AONB's, England & Wales, 1956-1983



Source: Derived from Countryside Commission (1985b).

Figure 12
Number of RSNC Reserves, Great Britain, 1960-1985



Source: RSNC (1983, 1984 & 1985).

Most people do not think clearly about change in the countryside. It sometimes seems as though all change is regarded as bad, at the same time as change is sought. This is rationalised as not really change but a reversion to what was there earlier (eg before farming became intensive). There is little recognition that even this depends upon how much earlier one should go or that this would itself make a great deal of difference. The dynamic nature of the countryside is sometimes ignored because some changes are very slow.

Thus the attitude to mature trees hardly recognises that they must have started life as saplings and may have been planted (representing an earlier change that would not have immediately represented mature trees): thus the conservation of trees requires renewal and it cannot always be done as a gradual process. It cannot be done at all by trying to 'preserve' what is currently present.

Very often there is an appeal to what is regarded as 'natural' without recognising (i) that the countryside is, and has been for a long time, man-made and is maintained in its present- or, indeed, almost any-state by human activity, and (ii) that the natural vegetation of most of the UK is scrub or woodland.

Because so much (two-thirds) of the land is covered in grassland and grass seems to grow so well in this country, it is commonly thought to be the 'natural' vegetation. This is rarely the case, however, and most grassland only remains in that state if it is regularly defoliated, either by cutting or grazing. Wild grassland was sometimes maintained by the grazing of rabbits but without heavy populations of such small herbivores, tree seedlings rapidly appear and bushes, such as blackberry or gorse, spread rapidly.

Householders with lawns recognise that they have to be cut frequently in order to maintain the preferred short-grass vegetation, but rarely see the consequences to flora and fauna of leaving the grass uncut, even though this would lead to a greater variety of species and the encouragement of flowers and insects, such as butterflies, which are felt to be reduced by modern farming activities. Similarly, the very presence of visitors to some wild areas actually destroys vegetation and even soil in some cases.

Attitudes to gardens are often quite at odds with what people consider others should do with their land (ie the countryside). Gardeners use large quantities of agro-chemicals, take a pride in the removal of weeds and maintain a marked degree of artificiality, often changing the pH of the soil in order to grow plant species they find interesting or attractive. In fact, most gardening is based on artificial changes to the landscape and little thought has usually been given to the encouragement of wildlife, especially if it is classed as weeds or pests. Indeed, attitudes to wildlife tend to involve a good deal of rather hypocritical thinking.

Another problem about change is that most people are bound to concentrate on the change that they feel strongly about and try to bring it about. Unfortunately, change in one component of the countryside may bring many other consequences, not always foreseen and sometimes not foreseeable, because components are linked in complex webs of organisms and their environments.

Oddly enough, this is the very criticism that is levelled by ecologists against farmers, that in making changes for farming (ie economic) reasons they are setting in train ecological changes that result in a reduction of flora and fauna that are valued. Thus destruction of stinging nettles removes the food plants on which the caterpillars of butterflies feed and on which these species depend for their survival.

Destruction of hedgerows, headlands, copses, wetlands and trees, similarly reduces the numbers and variety of birds, insects, mammals, flowers, amphibians etc. that feed and breed within them. Paradoxically, this ecological inter-linking has two opposite consequences.

The fortunate one is that it *is* generally possible to preserve (or conserve) both the predator and its prey, since the former depends upon the latter for survival. Thus action which preserves woodmice helps to preserve owls and an environment that preserves kestrels has, at the same time, to preserve short-tailed voles or whatever other prey they are living on.

The unfortunate consequence is that some changes thought desirable by one section of the community may be intensely disliked by others. Those whose main interest is birdlife (eg the RSPB) may wish to preserve breeding areas free from public access or open on only a very controlled basis. Those whose main interest is in rambling may resent such control.

The obvious clashes of interest between farmers, foresters, ramblers, bird-watchers, motor cycle enthusiasts, picnickers and a host of other groups, hardly need rehearsing. None of these interest-groups may be much interested in the interests of others, partly because it is difficult for any one to work out the likely consequences to others of what it is demanding.

There are a great many of these interest-groups, represented by numerous organisations and even where their interests appear to be different but not in conflict, it may often be the case that satisfying one actually damages the interests of another.

Indeed, it is only possible to determine this by understanding both interests and the consequences of satisfying each. This in turn requires a fairly comprehensive picture of the Countryside and how it functions so that the complex result of changes to one part or another can be predicted.

One major need is to construct such a picture to which each interest-group can relate.

THE COUNTRYSIDE: CONCERNS AND PERCEPTIONS

What sort of a countryside do we want?

The answer to this question is far from clear and it might be suggested that a reasonably complete answer should be obtained before policies are crystallised. Presumably the answer depends on a wide range of factors, such as where do you live, what do you do and how often do you visit the countryside?

We can usually accept the authority of biologists and ecologists when they are expressing views about unstable ecosystems or species at risk, but beauty is generally regarded as being in the eye of the beholder. In the country noted for its wide variety of landscape, and thereby its appeal to a wide variety of people, it is difficult to know who shall be the arbiters of landscape beauty. At present we doubt whether a sufficiently broad assessment of public opinion has even been attempted and must therefore doubt whether anyone is competent to express a view on behalf of the nation.

The policy of giving special protection to the most beautiful and sensitive areas does not appear to have been critically reviewed and no organisation expresses a special interest in the 'rest of the county'. Yet, for most people, it is the 'rest of the country' which represents the countryside, for most, if not all, of the time.

Many of the issues of concern have been reflected in the reports of major countryside organisations.

Many of these reports, however, arise from the interests of pressure groups of one kind or another, and, whilst such groups are perfectly legitimate, it does not follow that they necessarily reflect *public* concern. The numbers of members of the organisations that have commissioned reports on areas that they believe to be important are a guide to the degree of concern and many represent a very substantial sector of public opinion.

On the other hand, Reports from CAS (eg *Fertilisers in UK farming* (Jollans, 1985)) and from the House of Commons Select Committee on Agriculture (eg their most recent report on *The Effects of Pesticides on Human Health* (House of Commons Select Committee on Agriculture, In press)), whilst aiming to be objective and authoritative, cannot be said to be representative of anyone else. Such reports are based on evidence and consultation but they have to be the views of the authors. A number of relevant polls and surveys, however, have attempted to identify the main issues.

One such was an NOP Survey commissioned by the DOE in 1986, (NOP, 1987). Its findings can be summarised in terms of the main countryside issues identified and listed in order of concern as follows:

(i) Chemicals put into rivers and the sea (only partly a countryside issue) (54% of people very worried, and 32% quite worried)

(ii) Insecticides, fertilisers and chemical sprays (39% very worried, 35% quite worried)
(iii) Destruction of wildlife (between 30% and 50% very worried and 35-44% quite worried about (ii) and (iii)
(iv) Losing 'green belt' land (26% and 40% very worried and quite worried)
(v) Loss of hedgerows (17% and 36% very and quite worried)
(vi) Lack of access to open spaces and countryside (c39% very and quite worried)

This list does not include *all* countryside issues. Animal welfare is one of the countryside issues that do not feature as 'environmental' concerns.

Some of them, however, constitute a worry about modern methods of farming and an additional question was asked about this. The results (Table 6) show that such concern is by no means confined to urban dwellers and, in fact, the highest percentage (68%) of those who felt that farmers should avoid modern methods were in rural areas.

Table 6
Public views on avoidance of modern methods of farming

	All	Metropolitan	Urban	Mixed	Rural
Farmers should avoid using them and be compensated financially	58	55	59	54	68
Farmers should be paid to avoid using them	28	31	28	29	22
Neither	6	5	7	8	3
Don't know	8	9	6	9	6

Source: NOP (1987).

In 1987, MORI conducted a survey of 1 965 adults throughout Great Britain. The aim was to establish public attitudes to a variety of environmental issues and the main findings (MORI, 1987) were as follows:

(i) A very high proportion consider that protecting the environment matters (85% felt that Government should fix maximum levels of pesticides and residues in food and drinking water);
(ii) Pollution, especially acid-rain, was a major issue;
(iii) Conservation of natural resources (eg forests) was considered important;
(iv) 67% felt that the Government's recent decision to allow development on farming land is a serious threat to traditional landscapes and wildlife in Britain;
(v) More than half favoured controls on the use of fertilisers.

Many of these issues are highlighted in reports of interest groups.

The Vegetarian Society, for example, produced a *Green Line Manifesto* for the recent general election. (In fact, it had originally been produced for the 1979 election.) It recommended: a shift from intensive food production to the development of woodlands and recreational areas; the preservation of sites of special interest; and the conservation of wildlife.

In parenthesis, here one needs to question, for example, whether *all* wildlife is to be conserved. The fact is that most people are illogical and somewhat hypocritical in these matters. They are in favour of red squirrels but not grey ones, in favour of dormice but not housemice (and certainly not rats), in favour of other people's stinging nettles but less so of their own, in favour of geese, unless they are in very large numbers, in favour of owls *and* voles (though the one lives on the other), in favour of orchids even if this means that no-one ever sees them, in favour of butterflies but not mosquitoes, and so on – the list is endless.

It is not possible to conserve *all* wildlife, except in terms of species, and one then needs to specify how many of a species is enough. And since this has nothing to do with the preservation of individuals – however attractive and furry – not everyone finishes up very satisfied with the concept.

Disciplined thinking about such concepts needs to be encouraged.

To return to the *Green Line Manifesto,* the Vegetarian Society (1979) also recommends:

low-input cultivation;
ornamental farming in inner cities;
greater emphasis on animal welfare;
reduction in animal experiments;
an environment of school conditions and syllabuses with more consideration to food, health and well-being.

Some of these ideas may strike many people as desirable but feasibility is another matter. The last one is a good example. There is no shortage of attractive ideas for putting extra material into school syllabuses but the reality is that syllabuses may be quite full enough once the essentials are well-represented. It is not that these things cannot be done but that just stating that they should be has not actually got us very far.

There is a great deal of hard and disciplined work that has then to be done before further progress can be made. It is true that this will not happen by itself and that some organisation may have to take responsibility for ensuring that the feasibility of pressure group ideas is adequately tested.

Many of the issues identified have been, and are being, subjected to research and feasibility studies.

It is clear from the foregoing that it is hardly possible to list all the issues that concern the public. Nevertheless, it is desirable to structure thinking about such matters as systematically as possible.

Table 7 represents an analysis of public concerns related to Agriculture, most of which can also be regarded as countryside issues. But there are additional concerns about the countryside that have little to do with Agriculture.

Table 7
Public concerns about agriculture

Farming Methods	
(i)	Animal Welfare
(ii)	High Inputs of Fertiliser
(iii)	Use of Agro-chemicals
(iv)	Destruction of Hedges
(v)	Felling of Trees
(vi)	Drainage of Wetlands
(vii)	Monoculture
(viii)	Straw Burning
(ix)	Offensive Smells and Sounds
Agricultural Products	
(i)	Nature of the Produce re health, diet etc
(ii)	Residues of Chemicals
(iii)	Additives
Economic	
(i)	Costs of Agricultural Support
(ii)	Prices of Food

Countryside issues are often rather negative – people are against things – or positive in favour of the opposite of what they are against. And they are qualitative rather than quantitative. Thus they are in favour of more trees (except in rectangular plantations) with no limits stated or envisaged.

There are some positive views but they tend to relate only to one sector or one interest and the implications for other sectors are rarely considered.

Curiously enough, lists of concerns rather give the impression that very few of the human senses matter and that what is seen is of most moment.

Clearly, this is not really so and great exception is taken to offensive smells and noises. The reason may be that there are few of these problems and they tend to be local, particularly if they are generated by countryside activities. However, aircraft noise and industrial odours may well affect the countryside so it would be misleading to regard these as, in some way, non-countryside problems.

When considering what is seen, and concern about the appearance of the landscape, it becomes evident that a number of issues are not generally perceived in this way.

Thus, the preservation and conservation of fauna and flora concern many people who will rarely, if ever, actually see the species involved. Nor is the effect of agrochemicals on wildlife necessarily observed, except by taking special measures.

Public Perception of the Countryside

Why does public perception matter?

There really is no homogenous 'public' with *a* view of the countryside and, indeed, there is no homogenous countryside either, since this includes upland and lowland, mountains, lakes, farmland, coastal areas and so on.

Why, then, does the public perception of the Countryside matter?

It is precisely because so many different people are concerned, that the state of the Countryside is of national importance but it is important in a great many different ways. The needs, wishes and desires of these different people have to be accommodated and degrees of control have therefore to be exercised by legislation, local regulation, planning control, custom and the pressure of public opinion.

All such controls, and the pressure for them, ought to be based on a reasonably accurate perception of the current state of the Countryside and how it is changing.

Before we press for controls on hedge removal, for example, we really do need accurate information on the number and age of hedges, how many are being planted and how many removed, what proportion these are of the total stock, where they are, why they are being changed, what are the

consequences of such changes and, perhaps, how all this appears in a longer historical perspective.

For the Countryside always has changed and some change may be inevitable.

Furthermore, although there is a tendency to focus attention on changes one dislikes, there are many good and valuable attributes that need to be identified and encouraged and some changes are to be welcomed.

However, most of us are extremely ignorant of the relevant facts and not all of these are known and it is really quite difficult to be sure what people actually do prefer.

It is important, as far as possible, that our perceptions of the Countryside and of Countryside issues are accurate and well-founded but little is known about what our perceptions are, how accurate they are or how they are formed.

It is obvious that, even for the same individual, perceptions about one aspect (eg footpaths and access) may be formed by direct experience, others (eg field size on farms) by what is seen when travelling, some (eg extent of fertiliser usage) by reading newspapers and magazines (perhaps only headlines), many (eg farming methods) by television and radio, and some by talking to other people.

The first need is to create an analytical framework for thinking about the whole question.

Analysis of perception

It is possible to classify people, for a variety of purposes but it seems unlikely that there is any one satisfactory classification that will serve for all countryside issues. It may be necessary, therefore, to group people in relation to their perceptions of each issue.

It is also possible to classify the Countryside, but, again, it is unlikely that this will be helpful since many different activities and uses may occur within the same area.

More useful may be a classification of the main ways in which perceptions are formed, altered, reinforced or influenced. This is attempted in Table 8.

But, of course, the influences on particular perceptions interact with each other and the resulting networks may be very complex. Thus, a schoolteacher may be influenced by a television programme based on a newspaper article and tell the children about it: the children may talk to each other and to their parents and so on.

Nor can we suppose that the facts – even if accurate at the outset – will remain unchanged as they are passed on, or that their recounting actually has the intended result.

Table 8
Determinants of perceptions about the Countryside

Direct Experience			Indirect Means	
Participation in Countryside Activities (1)	Observation (2)	Education (3)	The Media (4)	Conversation (5)
Work Farming Forestry	**Activities in the Countryside** [see (1)]	**Full-time** School College Polytechnic University	**TV** **Radio** National Local	with: **Family** **Friends** **Colleagues**
Recreation Sport Holidays Leisure activities **Residence**	**Travelling through the countryside** by: Car Train Bicycle Plane Walking Running	**Part-time** Distance learning (eg the Open University) Evening and day-release classes Correspondence courses	**Books** **Press** National Local Magazines Specialist journals	

Notes: (1) and to a lesser extent (2), allow experience of sounds and smells as well as by sight; (5) must depend, at some point, on (1) and (4).

Very few people are, or can expect to be, well informed on all the matters about which they may hold strong views. So there are problems related to the spread of information – as opposed to slogans and headlines – that will always make it difficult to stimulate informed debate about even important issues.

Sometimes this may not matter too much. For some purposes it may be sufficient to influence decision-takers and opinion-formers.

But if arguments are deployed about 'what the public wants' or 'what sort of a countryside we want', it is necessary to take a wider view and it may be necessary to improve the level of information that the public have, on which to base their views. This requires a great deal of thought (i) about how to establish what the public think and (ii) about how they can be given an opportunity to base their perceptions on sound information.

What the public think

The usual way to establish the public view on any issue is by opinion polls based on carefully (ie professionally) constructed questions or questionnaires.

Some relevant polls have been carried out quite recently. For example, a MORI (1987) survey (Table 9) assessed where the general public finds out about environmental problems and found that television played a dominant role.

Table 9

The general public's source of information on environmental[1] problems

	Proportion of those questioned (%)
TV	68
Newspapers	43
Radio	11
Magazines	10
Schools/Universities	2
Specialist Societies	2
Pressure/Campaign Groups	2
Other Sources	9

[1]Environmental problems are not, of course, synonymous with countryside problems.

Source: MORI (1987b).

Opinion polls either aim to represent the views of a cross-section or to be able to associate particular views with different groups of people. The second requires much greater numbers of respondents and much greater resources.

An alternative is to conduct surveys deliberately aimed at accessible sections of the population, such as listeners to radio, television viewers or readers of a particular paper or magazine.

Lacking the time and resources to conduct either polls or surveys ourselves, we invited a wide range of agencies to help us. Since it is very hard to interpret such results, they must be regarded as purely illustrative of the range of responses. One difficulty is to know whether the response is

true or not. This does not imply deliberate lying but the respondent may not have had an opinion on an issue until asked and the reply may not be well-founded.

For this reason, we suggested to the agencies invited to help, that a sequence of 3 questions might be helpful:

(i) What do you think are the (1-3) most important Countryside Issues?
(ii) What view do you hold about these issues?
(iii) How did you arrive at this view (or, why do you hold it, or, who or what, influenced your view)?

The idea was that Question 3 only made sense in relation to Question 2 and Question 2 follows from Question 1. In other words, if a respondent *chooses* the issues that he/she judges most important, it is more likely that Question 2 can be answered honestly and clearly. Similarly, if able to answer Question 2, it is more likely that Question 3 can also be answered.

We could not, of course, determine exactly how the agencies then went about their surveys and, indeed, only one progressed that far.

The results are summarised below.

Six journals *(Farmers' Weekly, Farming News, BBC Wildlife, Country Landowner, Home & Country* and *YHA Magazine)* invited their readers to write directly to us: this resulted in many letters, some of which made interesting points. Amongst these were:

(i) Since our ability to predict the future is so poor, we should do nothing irreversible in the countryside.
(ii) The majority of people do not belong to pressure groups, yet it is these that apparently have the greater influence.

The Ramblers' Association sent a statement with which they believed their members would all agree, as follows:

> 'Their perception of what is going on in the countryside is very much based on their own personal experience when walking in the countryside. They see hedgerows disappearing, footpaths obstructed, rights of way ploughed up; they are attacked by bulls, farm dogs and stallions; they see vast areas of land closed to public access for grouse shooting, pheasant shooting, defence training etc. What they then read in books and newspapers often tends to reinforce the views which they have formed while visiting the countryside, but such reading is of secondary importance.'

Finally, the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs actually designed forms (based on our 3 questions) and carried out a survey of their members. They had 35 responses and these are analysed in Table 10.

Table 10
Some details of a survey carried out by the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs

Occupation of respondents	
Farmer/related	17
Clerical (rural)	7
Engineer/craftsman	3
Scientist	3
Computer programmer/Consultant	2
Chartered surveyor/land agent	2
Schoolteacher	1
	35
Main influences[1] on their views	
Direct experience/observation	22
Conversation	12
Reading	12
Media	11
Meetings	5
Rational thinking (!)	1
The main issues[2]	
Land Use/Overproduction/Diversification	16
Conservation	15
Unemployment (rural)	8
Rural depopulation	8
Access[3]	7
Influx of Townsfolk to rural areas	7
Pollution	6
[Nitrate (specifically)	2]
Need for rural housing	5
Destruction of Green Belt by housing	5
Tree planting	3
Education of urban-dwellers	3
Declining farm incomes	3
Planning	2
Rural Transport	1

[1]Several respondents attributed their views to more than one influence.

[2]Obviously these numbers are very dependent upon the way issues have been grouped.

[3]More were concerned about the need to rationalise footpaths than about their destruction.

CONCLUSION

It was acccepted at the outset of our study that we had neither the time nor the resources to conduct statistically-sound surveys ourselves.

Those who helped – and many of those who were unable to do so or could not do so in time – believed that the project was of great importance.

The responses that we received illustrate the range and flavour of views but we still have no idea as to how widespread particular views are.

These limited exercises have helped in our thinking about how such information might be obtained but it would be a very large undertaking. Some findings stand out. It seems extremely probable, for example, that those who live in the country are more likely to have their views formed by direct experience and see the media as reinforcing these views. Those who live in large towns obviously have less opportunity for direct experience. Although there appear to be many common concerns, those who engage in a particular activity naturally feel more strongly about anything that interferes with it.

The subject remains an important one and the territory little explored.

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Part II
Perception of the countryside: views of users