

Care for your area

Overview

The local environment is a major factor in people's quality of life, and the ability to enjoy nature and green space is shown to affect mental and physical wellbeing. Richer parts of cities are usually defined by more trees and greenery. On the other hand, dog fouling is one of the commonest causes of complaints, and poorer areas, in particular, are marred by flytipping, rubbish and graffiti. However, these issues can bring people together in community projects which have a real impact on quality of life, as well as enabling people to learn new skills and confidence.

Wildlife has declined over the past 60 years, with once common birds like song thrushes now rare, and 98% of wildflower meadows lost. This is largely due to more intensive farming and development, but climate change poses an even greater threat. As temperatures rise, wildlife will need to move. We need larger areas with a variety of habitats, as well as green corridors to link them. Gardens can provide an important refuge for wildlife, as well as a lot of enjoyment. This is where most people first encounter wildlife, and events like the RSPB Great Garden Birdwatch are very popular.

Our surroundings have also lost much of their local distinctiveness, as traditional names, landmarks and customs are lost. Local businesses too have often been replaced with standard chains of shops, which sometimes put little back into their communities.

However, more people are actively taking part in their community, with nearly half volunteering at least once a year, and over a quarter once a month or more. There are also more opportunities to feed into local policies, through community planning, for example.

National framework

Our richest wildlife areas are safeguarded in a system of protected areas, including publicly owned national and local nature reserves, sites of special scientific interest (usually privately owned) and national parks. Many charities also own nature reserves. These oases amid the destruction of the last decades are an inspiration and havens from which wildlife might spread out to the wider countryside once more. Government also provides support for farmers to support nature conservation through the Environmental Stewardship scheme, with advice to landowners available from charities such as the Wildlife Trusts.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan was drawn up to protect and enhance the nation's wildlife following the international Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992. Similar plans have been developed at county and regional level. Key to their implementation is the network of County Records Centres, which work with volunteers to monitor wildlife.

Nature, landscape, the countryside and rural issues have too often been seen as separate concerns. The recent creation of the government body Natural England brings them all together for a more effective approach.

Key players and programmes

There are many organisations covering all sorts of aspects of nature conservation and the local environment. The following are a starting point to follow up particular interests or find out what is happening in your area.

British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV): Environmental volunteering charity, with particular focus on practical community conservation. Their work also links in with broader issues of social exclusion, regeneration, and health, with projects such as "green gyms" and training for under 25s. <http://www2.btcv.org.uk>

Common Ground: Small charity working to link the environment, culture and the arts and promote “local distinctiveness”. Initiatives such as Apple Day, community orchards and parish maps, have taken off throughout the country. <http://www.commonground.org.uk/>

Encams: Charity which runs the Keep Britain Tidy anti-littering campaign, as well as initiatives on graffiti, fly tipping, chewing gum and dog mess. <http://www.encams.org>

Groundwork: The Groundwork Trusts are public, private and voluntary sector partnerships working in environmental regeneration. Projects include community development, business advice, youth work, skills and education. <http://www.groundwork.org.uk>

Landfill operators: Funding for environmental projects, including public parks, biodiversity and buildings of historic or architectural interest, is provided via the landfill tax credit scheme. <http://www.ltcs.org.uk>

Local authorities: Both district and county councils manage country parks and nature reserves, sometimes employing wildlife rangers or an ecologist.

National Federation of Biological Recording: Local county records centres (LRCs) bring together scientific data on local wildlife. They rely on volunteers for data collection, and draw on the expertise of amateur naturalists. This is where to find out about <http://www.nfbr.org.uk>

Natural England: Government funded body covering biodiversity, landscape and rural development. <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk>

RSPB: The largest conservation charity in Europe, with over a million members. While the main focus is birds, it also covers other wildlife as well as issues such as climate change. Regional offices, nature reserves and volunteer groups. <http://www.rspb.org.uk>

The Wildlife Trusts: There are 47 Wildlife Trusts throughout the UK, with 670,000 members and activities ranging from management of nature reserves, advice to landowners, and work with communities, schools and young people. Most are based at a county level, and have local volunteer groups. Good place to find out what is happening locally. <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/>

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan: The website gives details of the national Biodiversity Partnership and plan, with links to regional and local plans. This is where you can find out what's special about wildlife in your area. <http://www.ukbap.org.uk>

Priorities for action

Individual

Find out what's special about wildlife and the environment in your area. What you take for granted may be rare elsewhere. Find out where the nature reserves and protected areas are, and why they're protected. Your county Biological Records Centre should be able to help, or you can look up your local Biodiversity Action Plan.

Then think how you could contribute to enhancing what's there already. Start in your own garden. Even a tiny pond will attract wildlife. You can also grow plants with berries, seeds or nectar rich flowers. Or you might like to get involved in recording wildlife. The local records centres welcome enthusiastic beginners, and there are also national initiatives, such as the RSPB's Garden Birdwatch.

Natural England (formerly English Nature) provides a range of leaflets on gardening for wildlife. <http://www.english-nature.org.uk/pubs/publication/PDF/Wildlifegardening2.pdf>

Community

There is almost certainly already a practical local conservation group near you, sometimes centred on a nearby nature reserve: check with your local Wildlife Trust or BTCV. These offer an opportunity to learn new skills and get involved in all sorts of activities, such as clearing out ponds, planting trees, hedgelaying, and coppicing.