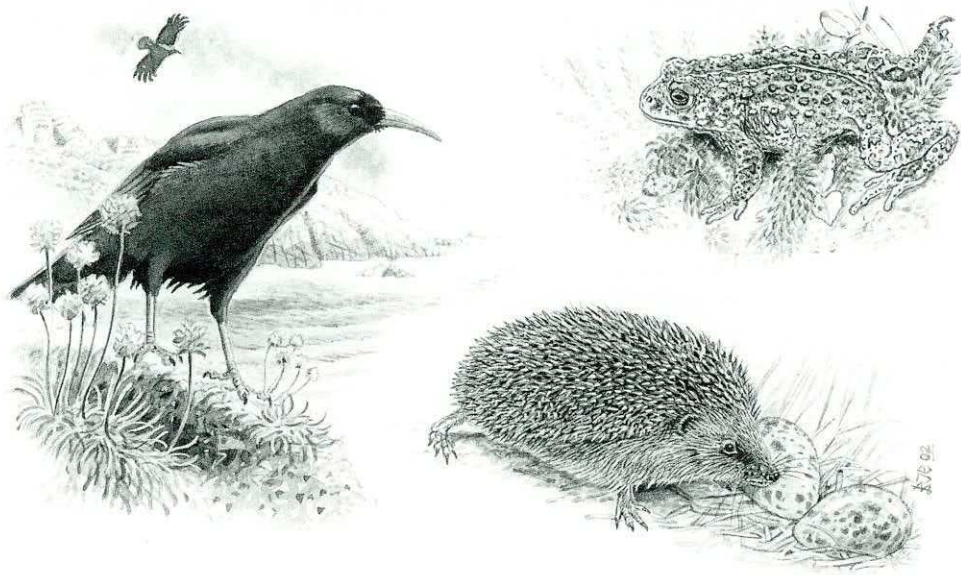


Comment

Introductions – are we conserving species at the expense of nature?



Brin Edwards

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Comic moments in nature conservation are probably not rare, but they are seldom acknowledged. Humour is an individual pleasure, while conservation is, for the most part, for the corporality. A case in point is the recent spat between Cornishmen and Choughs. Last year (2001) was to have been the culmination of a ten-year project to reintroduce the curvy-beaked bird to the cliffs of Cornwall, where it had last nested in 1952. The release of captive-bred Choughs from the aviary at Paradise Park, Hayle, would, it was hoped, result in the establishment of a resident population supported by 'appropriately managed' coastal habitat. However, foot-and-

mouth restrictions placed the project on hold, and in the meantime some wild Choughs turned up out of the blue on The Lizard. Paradise Park's show-piece Choughs, Oggie and Embla, had to be sent back to their cages, whilst the interlopers promptly nested and raised four chicks. To add insult to injury, they even 'chose a site which was not considered ideal' (Ford 2002).

What is required to laugh at the Chough story? A sense of the absurd, that nature can so casually puncture human pretensions? A sense of subversion, that the birds managed to beat the conservationists one-nil? A robust enjoyment of a reminder that 'the best-laid schemes o' mice an' men gang



The emblematic Chough is now breeding once again in Cornwall.
However, all did not go according to plan. Paul Sterry/Nature Photographers

aft a-gley'? Certainly, there was comedy in my efforts to find out more about it. The Chough world seemed to be in a state of denial. One young 'information person' told me with huge authority that the newly arrived Choughs were responding to 'appropriate management'. Leaving aside the implied predestinarian sense imputed to the Choughs, I asked him what kind of management he deemed appropriate: 'It depends' – 'Depends on what?' – 'On what is appropriate (duh!)'. I gather from other sources that the appropriate thing for Cornish Choughs is cattle grazing, especially in winter.

The comedy of the Chough story, I would suggest, is about notions of property and possession. There is more at issue here than simply rebuilding biodiversity and 'enhancing' the survivability of a species. The Chough has long been a symbol of Cornish pride. Key in the Cornish Chough on any internet search engine, and you quickly find yourself embroiled in vigorous correspondence between Cornish nationalists and the EU. The glossy black birds are considered as Cornish as pasties, as emblematic as the bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover. But while the return of the Chough is a cause for celebration, I get the distinct impression that the cheers would have been louder if it had been Oggie and Embla that had hatched the first egg, and not a pair of wild birds from across the seas. Could it be that the satisfaction of bringing back a lost animal by dint of careful planning and preparation is greater than that of merely witnessing a natural event?

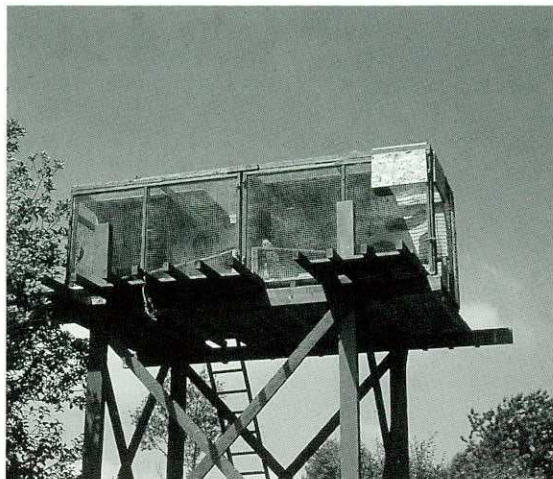
For introductions (or reintroductions) create a synergy between man and bird, between effort and reward. When nature reasserts its 'apartness' with such baffling casualness, those involved in the reintroduction could be forgiven for regarding it as a betrayal. And that makes it even funnier.

Rearing raptors

The coincidences do not end there. What was to have been the year of the Chough was also the year when the Osprey nested in England for the first time in 150 years. In fact, there were

two nests, one of them the result of another carefully planned introduction, the other of a wild pair casually deciding to take advantage of a vacant nesting lot at Bassenthwaite, in the Lake District. The Osprey is slowly returning under its own devices. If biodiversity were the only factor, no further action would be necessary. We would just have to exercise patience, which some, I know, find harder than action. But the site chosen for the introduction is Rutland Water, which, not altogether coincidentally, is the venue of the annual British Birdwatching Fair, and a popular tourist attraction. On the grounds that the reservoir and its surrounding woods could theoretically support a few Ospreys, a full-scale introduction project began there in 1996. Chicks taken from nests in Scotland were cage-reared at Rutland Water in order to imprint the site in their memory. As further attractions, food was left out for them and artificial nest platforms built in suitable-looking locations. After five years of suspense, the first pair nested in 2001 and raised a chick on the 'dozen kinds of fish' found in the reservoir (Taylor 2001). The public are taken on walks at £3 a go to watch the happy pair courting and fishing. Everybody involved, from the sponsors, Anglian Water, to local innkeepers, is very happy.

Another raptor-reintroduction project is underway in Northern Ireland. Glenveagh National Park, in Donegal, is considered to be ideal for Golden Eagles, which, with the exception of a stray pair on the Antrim coast in the 1950s, died out in Ireland a century ago. The project, part-funded by



Osprey introduction at Rutland Water.

Far left **The rearing cage.**

Left **Two of Rutland's Ospreys on show.**

Roger Tidman/
Nature Photographers

the Irish government as part of its National Millennium celebrations, is as busy and intensive as the one at Rutland Water. A dozen eaglets, removed from nests in Scotland, were cage-reared and fed on Rabbit and crow carcasses. They continued to be fed after release, and, like the Rutland Ospreys, carry tiny transmitters so that their every movement can be monitored. The hope is that they will start to breed around 2005, and so form the nucleus of a recolonisation of Ireland.

Projects like these are dividing the natural-history world. They are promoted not only as imaginative conservation ventures, but also as community partnerships with spin-off benefits for tourism and good PR. In the words of the Irish Golden Eagle's website, 'The emphasis of conservation to date has been on stopping habitat and species losses. This project moves beyond this approach and shows nature conservation as *proactive* and *visionary*' (my italics). But visions like these can cost a lot of money, and involve an immense amount of time, which, it could be argued, would be better spent on preserving our vanishing wild countryside. But this misses the point. Money is readily available for introduction or reintroduction schemes because big fierce animals like Golden Eagles and Ospreys, or cuddly ones like European Beavers and Common Dormice, are popular, and stocking them in new places looks like real, hands-on nature conservation. One thinks of Michael Heseltine, who regarded the reintroduction of the White-tailed Eagle (not the Wildlife and Countryside Act) as the crowning achievement of his stint as Environment Secretary in the early 1980s. Projects of this

sort make everyone involved feel good, whether conservation bodies, business sponsors, lottery – sorry, 'lotto' – chiefs, or government ministers. Success not only meets some biodiversity target, it also creates a tourist attraction and supports the local economy. Introductions hit a lot of targets, and so encourage more projects of the same sort. After all, if Ireland would benefit from eagles, why not Ospreys, Marsh Harriers, Red Kites, Goshawks, Honey-buzzards? Did I hear 'Wolves' from the back? How about some Moose for them to feed on?

Well, they may seem modishly visionary and proactive, but as a conservation strategy introductions have much in common with the much-derided Acclimatisation Societies of the 19th century. We are populating the countryside with our favourite animals, regardless of the natural order of things. The kind of mess this can lead to is exemplified by the Hedgehog, introduced (not by conservationists, admittedly) to the Outer Hebrides, where it is now eating its way through the local ground-nesting waders, terns and plovers. Eradicating these Hedgehogs may not be an option, because much popular sentiment is invested in Hedgehogs – they even have their own pressure group – and many consider it a wicked thing to harm them, wherever they live. Judgement in the matter is being left to the Scottish



Hedgehogs might be a welcome addition to gardens in mainland Britain but they are causing a crisis of conscience in the Hebrides. David Element/Natural Image

Executive, which may find votes more important than scientific necessity.

Other doubts have been raised on the grounds that, while reintroductions may (or may not) help a species, they leave very little to nature, that is, to chance. They may be a method of conservation, but is it nature that we are conserving? In a perceptive article on reintroductions in the Welsh magazine *Natur Cymru*, Nigel Ajax-Lewis (2002) asks whether nature conservation is primarily about 'providing an amenity for people, or does it serve some deeper purpose connected with a human need to respect nature and natural processes'. I think that few would deny that the amenity side of things has taken a big step forward in the past decade. The government conservation bodies, especially SNH and CCW, have played up their amenity, 'people-led' role at the expense, some would say, of their fundamental responsibility to safeguard the natural environment. The NGOs, too, seem eager to involve themselves in attention-grabbing projects without asking too many questions. What Ajax-Lewis implies, I think, in his idea of 'respect' for nature is acknowledging its distance from human affairs. We respect nature by affirming its 'apartness', that

is, its independence from the affairs of humankind. The cage-reared Ospreys of Rutland Water may act entirely like wild birds, but they will always be our own creation, bred for a particular purpose, in a particular place. They are part of *our* grand design, not nature's. Hence they lack the essential 'apartness' of the friendliest House Sparrow that shelters and feeds itself, and comes near houses only because of the opportunities that it sees there. The Ospreys of Rutland or the eagles of Glenveagh are birds with a definable use, like pretty Highland cattle, reared for the tourist's cameras more than for their meat. They have become *useful*. They have a job to do.

Diluted fish and naturalised Natterjacks

Usefulness is defined by possession. In the past, useful animals have nearly always been owned. Ownership provides rights of mastery. Wild deer and Atlantic Salmon become an owner's property for as long as they remain on his land. A good example of what happens when a wild animal becomes a possession is found in the story of our freshwater fish, many of which have been introduced so widely and so often that they can no longer be said to have a natural range. Ireland is a naturally fish-poor country, with fascinating local varieties of trout and whitefish that evolved in isolation, and with few coarse fish to compete with them. Most Irish fish are introductions, originally made perhaps to stock monastic fish-ponds (though how they kept the stock fish alive and fresh is a mystery). Introductions have, needless to say, harmed the native Gillaroos and Charr and Pollan, and continue to do so. Quite recently, the large population of Pollan in Lough Neagh was put at risk by the release of Carp to improve the fishing. Carp have a job, Pollan don't.

Brown Trout have been introduced to practically every suitably sized waterbody in Scotland, so that natural genetic populations of trout are now rare and precious, and confined to remote places (see Greenhalgh 2000). An atlas of freshwater fish would be as much a record of man's stocking of ponds and rivers as of biogeography. So the range of Brown Trout, Roach or Pike has little more significance than that of a cow or a sheep. Only 'useless' fish such as Spined Loach or Bleak are still confined to their ancestral waters. But this is not a biodiversity success story. The adaptability of useful fish must have been much eroded, and

their natural genetic patterns have gone for good. What can happen when farmed species meet wild ones is illustrated by the doleful recent history of the Atlantic Salmon, now seemingly threatened by the dilution of genes necessary for survival.

Let us bring in another group of popular, much-introduced animals. Since reptiles and amphibians are so few in Britain, and their supporters so many (and so keen), they receive a lot of attention. Since the 1960s, the range of Natterjack Toads and Sand Lizards has roughly doubled (which does not mean that they are any commoner) – they have each been introduced to five new counties (Beebee & Griffiths 2000). Such introductions, which are generally ‘official’ and therefore well documented, are supposed to be restricted to the animal’s historic range. But that did not prevent enthusiasts from releasing Dorset Sand Lizards on Rum or Cumbrian Natterjacks at a place in the West Midlands where they never lived before.

The satisfaction gained from such projects is considerable, say Beebee and Griffiths. It lies in ‘witnessing the return of a species against all the odds’, though for some naturalists (perhaps those not involved in the project) ‘reintroduced populations have less charisma than native ones’. I think that the fundamental question is not about the degree of ‘charisma’ – that is, of personal delight – but about the limits of intervention. If sufficient funds were available, we might be able to introduce/reintroduce the Natterjack to nearly every county in Britain – a croaking chorus in a pond near you. This would delight a lot of people, but it raises the question of whether we have the right to draw a wild animal so far into our world as to effectively industrialise it. A thorough-going Natterjack naturalisation project would turn on production targets, receptor sites, population models and maybe even cloning. To attract funding, the project would need to take place within an agreed time-frame, reinforcing the production-line aspect (with many go-ahead local BAPs deciding on their own quota of toads). We would make ourselves the complete masters of the animal’s destiny, and in the process effectively destroy its status as a wild animal. Are we so confident in our abilities that we are prepared to go so far, and with complete moral certainty, without questioning our right to do so? I wish I was. But I have seen enough conservation blundering to have acquired a certain built-in doubt.

Gardening the landscape

The number of wild animals and plants that we have appropriated into our world by farming and gardening is already considerable. For example, it is scarcely possible any longer to distinguish between wild-type oak or Beech and continental imports, or between ‘native’ Cornflowers and Corncockles and those originating from a packet. We have, so to speak, brought them into the garden. The same is increasingly true of much-introduced butterflies like the Marsh Fritillary, a problem which the *Millennium Atlas* (Asher *et al.* 2001) dodged by not distinguishing between natural and introduced colonies. Andy Jones (2001) has written of the dangers of bogus ‘wild-flower seed mixes’, which threaten a huge dilution of the wildness of genuine grassland flowers. The most worrying aspect of the whole seed-mix racket is the apparent unwillingness or inability of anyone in authority to do anything about it. No-one in officialdom seems to be energetically pointing out the obvious contradiction of re-creating wild habitats by agricultural methods, that is, of using wild plants as agricultural crops. Rather, the argument is about the respective merits of sowing, drilling or using plant plugs, not about where the plants are coming from, or whether they should be planted at all.

Introductions are driven by passions that may be more complex than promoters claim. If the only motive was to undo some of the damage wrought by previous, less environmentally aware generations, it might be laudable, even if the outcome fell well short of the aim. But behind the protestations lurk more self-interested desires – profit, self-advertisement, will to dominate, and the all-powerful instinct of gardening (much more powerful than ecology, as an inspection of any magazine rack will reveal). Conservationists are no better than anyone else when it comes to basking in public approbation. And if ‘society’ decides that it wants more Beavers and Hedgehogs, can it be denied them? Have our popular animals and plants become a form of social property, like Red Deer or Atlantic Salmon? In a consumer-driven society like ours, can the customer ever be wrong?

Plans and actions – the new conservation

The number of species with whose destiny we are dabbling with ill-deserved confidence is growing at an unprecedented rate. For the most part, the engine



The Osprey in charismatic mode; the very essence of a 'flagship' BAP species.

Neil McIntyre/Woodfall Wild Images

that drives reintroduction projects is the Biodiversity Action Plan, the bulging dossiers of which now cover some 500 species, from Choughs and Ospreys to little-known mosses, lichens and fungi. The BAP takes for granted our right to appropriate any species we choose in our desire to 'enhance' its numbers. In its arid, repetitive formulations, the Plan seems to recognise few limits of intervention. On the contrary, it places extraordinary faith in reintroductions as an instrument to build up biodiversity and avoid extinctions. Its moral and technical certainties should be terrifying. In vain does one search for any admission that complete control may be illusory and perhaps even undesirable. The only limitations on conduct that I can spot are practicalities. Sixty pairs of Bitterns or 4,000 Nightjars may be all that we can manage for now, given the expense and the lack of physical space.

I can claim authority only for the handful of fungi included in the Plan, but there the absurdities are manifest. Cultivated, back-up stock for reintroductions is blithely prescribed for species which have never been cultivated, and without a shred of justification. It is as if the planner, flailing in the dark for facts, has stumbled on a kind of received truth – that reintroductions are good for species (in fairness, I should add that the JNCC is currently reviewing this aspect of the BAP). But, absurd or not, a plan is a plan. The modern world lays great store in plans, even ones that do not distinguish process from product or make only a token effort to gather facts and analyse them.

Because of the beliefs invested in them, plans have great power. They are potentially a force for unlimited intervention. Every species in the BAP is a potential Scottish Brown Trout or Rutland Osprey. Their right to be wild has not been respected. Their 'apartness' has been disregarded. Even their meaning may be threatened.

Bill McKibben, the author of *The End of Nature*, has noted that nature becomes less important for people with each passing generation. Much of the apparent confidence of plans like the BAP stems not from closeness to nature but from distancing ourselves from it. Plans, with their pretended omniscience and avalanche of 'musts', are, in effect, a usurpation of the natural world. I fear for this pseudo-wild Britain that we are starting to create. I think that it may end in tears. But supposing that plans mean what they say, what kind of designer fantasy-land are they conjuring up for us? Surely a new world where nature survives on our terms, often in places specially designed for rare species like Choughs and Ospreys. We shall make a garden for our dispossessed wildlife and call it nature. For my part, I realise that I may have been wrong about nature conservation all these years. It is not the habitats and species that are under threat so much as any meaningful concept of naturalness. The irony is that the more effectively we rebuild biodiversity, the less likely it is that we shall find nature.

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Peter Marren writes regularly for *British Wildlife*. His latest book, *Nature Conservation* (HarperCollins) is still on sale.