

# Flying kites a view from Wales

James Robertson

The autumn rains came with a vengeance when Storm Callum blew into south Wales in October, depositing more than 160mm (5 inches) of rain in the Brecon Beacons, and causing landslides and floods across the region. Since then, over most of Wales, warm, windy and wet has alternated with cold and clear, the mix of weather looking more like a muddle; the fall-out we can expect from climate change. By early November, the autumn colours included a host of reds and golds among the greens. Then winds stripped branches bare and the leaf blizzard settled into a bed of fungal decomposition.

The aftermath of the hot summer left old pastures ripe with field mushrooms. Excited foragers stepped out of an early morning, hunting and gathering pink-gilled breakfast prey. Never underestimate the fun in fungi. Fungal forays across the land attract large audiences and add new species. One near me found a total of 176 different fungi at the end of September. Since the National Botanic Garden of Wales in the Carmarthenshire countryside established its Fungus Day seven years ago, more than 500 people have come to the annual event, enticed by music, dance, cooking, fairies, art, sculpture and crafts, but mostly by fungi. This year, despite the challenging weather, over 100 people joined guided walks on the Garden's estate, which includes a National Nature Reserve. Wales already has a Red Data Book on rusts, but this year it has added one on smuts.

As Bruce Langridge at the Garden puts it, how many countries can boast that?

Nutrient-poor, unimproved pastures are often capped with a kaleidoscope of waxcap pinks, reds, whites, blacks and greens, rare Violet Coral adding a splash of purple. They belong in a farmed landscape, although their presence does not grace the bottom line of Welsh farming's accounts. Perhaps it should. Might waxcap-rich upland pastures help to maintain traditional hill farming and add a more secure income stream than the light lambs which depend on the EU export trade?

It is that kind of aspiration which explains why conservation organisations in Wales have been so keen to engage with farmers and landowners, acutely aware of the uncertainty and genuine anxiety which the proposed changes are causing. The end of the CAP presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring the interests of the environment and of farming into alignment. This is precisely what Environment Minister Lesley Griffiths wants to do. Her proposals for post-CAP agricultural support would end basic farm payments, using the funding to help to make farm businesses more resilient

and to reward farmers and land-managers for delivering public benefits. For my money, old pastures rich in fungi, which raise high-quality, grass-fed animals, deserve to be considered a public good.

It is not surprising that the farming unions have come out in opposition to these proposals, but the language which they have used has been disappointing. Welsh wildlife groups have been accused of pedalling a 'fake dystopia' propagating an 'unrecognisable' picture of wildlife decline. Another claim is that subsidies are to be scrapped in order to cover 1,400 Welsh farms with trees to meet hugely ambitious climate-change targets. Yet, if the proposals survive this fierce rear-guard action, they should win lasting public support for payments at a time when public expenditure is likely to become ever more fiercely contested.

'Summit to Sea' is the most ambitious of a clutch of 'rewilding' projects (although that term is slightly toxic in Wales). It seeks to restore ecosystems and local economies in a swathe of countryside from the Plynlimon plateau in mid-Wales down to the Dyfi estuary and out to sea. In the first five-year phase, ten thousand hectares are earmarked to become a nature-rich landscape, although it will take decades to realise the whole dream. In this Welsh-speaking area, the project will be founded on an appreciation of the local community – the human ecology alongside the natural one. The inclusion of 28,400ha of sea within the project area adds more exciting possibilities.

This is but one of a number of schemes being tried out to see how best to deliver more secure farm incomes alongside environmental benefits. The two main farming unions may not recognise it, but change has got to come to Welsh farming, not least because further growth in the dominant red-meat sector is unhealthy and unsustainable. Now that there is talk of putting a tax on red meat, taxpayers may wonder why they should help to fund Hybu Cig Cymru, the Welsh red-meat marketing organisation.

The rain is falling outside my window. In the distance a tractor connected to a long pipeline is spewing out wastewater slurry from an intensive dairy unit. I know where this will end up – in Anglesey's longest river, which still has a few brown trout in it. No field mushrooms or waxcaps will grace those bright green pastures. Now is the winter of my discomposure. But the day of *Dewi Sant*, of daffodils in buttonholes (and wild ones in hedgerows), and the season of hope and new beginnings, is around the corner.

