

Twitcheer in the swamp

Long ago I was in a job where I used to meet farmers from time to time. To a man, they were proud of their acres, whether they were fields of swaying barley without so much as a sparrow in sight, or sodden yards littered with empty fertiliser bags and rusting machinery. Possibly they were prouder of their new tractors than of the land itself. But the point is that they were proud people, lords of the open land, whether prosperous and humming with machines, or stocked with old-fashioned animals and swarming with officials in protective clothing.

Perhaps we should see the debate over the 'farmland index' in that light. Back in 2001, you'll remember the Government pledged to 'halt biodiversity loss' on farmland by 2010. It decided to measure biodiversity by the fortunes of a handful of birds, ignoring the 99%+ of life that does not happen to be a bird. Now it has been told by its own audit committee that, in defiance of Gordon Brown's wishes, the birds have gone on declining and that the Government's ambitious target will not be met.

Farmers do not like being told that their land might be a tad low on wildlife, for it makes it sound as though they are not very good at their job. The industry's response has been to suggest that the Government has been counting the wrong birds. Instead of useless species such as lapwings, skylarks, grey partridges and corn buntings, it should have chosen crows, magpies, pheasants and gulls, perhaps throwing in the odd rat or grey squirrel, as environmental indicators.

'Many farmers are angered and rightly so', fumed the Countryside Alliance. 'If farmers feel their conservation efforts are not acknowledged, or that species they see every day on their farms are not measured, it is inevitable many will become disillusioned with the conservation agenda and environmental schemes', warned Guy Smith in the *Farmers Guardian*.

Perhaps Brown's response will be a massive injection of bird food to stimulate the ecology, and bring the skylarks back into line with Government avian

projections. But would that really make the farmers any happier? These are hard times. If the world economic meltdown is ever solved, there is still good old climate change to contend with. Not to mention overpopulation, terrorism and nuclear proliferation. If ever there was a time to sink one's head into a bucket and whistle a happy tune it is now.

So, Twitcheer is fully behind the campaign to change the goalposts down on the farm. Let pheasants and crows be the new 'index', and if they die out there will always be some worm that will do instead, doubtless with an encouraging Darwinian homily behind it. Recently, some nematodes survived a trip into space. They should be able to hang in there on the farms of the future. The point is that, as Guy Smith says, farmers' 'efforts' should be 'acknowledged'. We all need a little pat on the head from time to time.

Meanwhile, what on earth is going on at Natural England? Once in a while, I have had to remind readers, as well as myself, of the existence of this mighty quango, whose budget last year was £176 million and among whose six-figure-salaried directors the bonus culture still reigns. For what seems like years we have heard nary a squeak from them except for tame, self-regarding press releases or incomprehensible management waffle. Now, all of a sudden, its 'chief executive', someone called Phillips, is shouting from the roof tops. According to her, Britain is becoming an 'ecological desert'. As for the sea, the scallop industry has conducted a trashing of the sea bed which she characterises as 'pillage and rape'.

Never mind that talk of deserts and nautical rape implies that Natural England has been napping on the job. If she had asked me, I would have warned her of the dangers of the misuse of technical ecological terms by lay-persons. Those who were flooded out of their homes last year (and the year before) would probably be surprised to learn that Britain was turning into a desert. And while I do not suppose that anyone would assume from Phillips's words that the fishermen are actually conducting violent sexual assaults on the scallops, 'rape' is an emotive term that, understandably, has got their backs up.

At the root of the problem, it seems to me, is the Government's insistence on placing young people in responsible positions before they are ready for them (I am thinking of the Blair Babes on the Labour front bench, for instance). Encouraged by everyone from Government down to say that they believe 'passionately' in whatever they do, the result is often a display of shouting and arm-waving which is distressing to slightly older members of the community.

The solution, so far as Natural England is concerned, is to stick to science. That way no-one understands a word, but it sounds authoritative, and you can often squeeze in some arcane but highly satisfying insults without anyone noticing.

