

Dear Mark

Why should anyone who cares about nature become a member of the National Trust?

Thanks for your stimulating challenge and apologies for not getting back to you sooner. I am responding as Executive lead for the Trust's work on nature, climate, environmental footprint and urban greenspace. You probably know I have worked for the Trust for 14 years in various roles. We know each other from my 10 years at RSPB which was preceded by 13 years at Norfolk Wildlife Trust. The issues you raise are of acute interest and concern to us as a nature conservation charity with a long history in taking action for nature. We are peculiar institution within the environmental NGO sector; we were founded by act of Parliament and have a purpose which is broader than nature – “for the purposes of **promoting** the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of **lands** and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest and as regards lands for the preservation (so far as practicable) of their **natural aspect features and animal and plant life**”. Our C21st definition of nature extends to the health of soils, the functioning of rivers, the abundance of insects as well as individual habitats and species.

Over our 129 history we have primarily extended our purpose through the acquisition of land, buildings and objects and given “the nation” access to them. Over this time, we have acquired some simply stunning nature sites that have been managed along nature reserve lines – Wicken Fen (you mention), the oldest nature reserve in Britain, Blakeney Point, Purbeck, Sandscale Haws and the Farnes are some of the jewels. Some such land is leased to other NGOs, for example some of the Cley / Salthouse Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve and Scolt Head Island National Nature Reserve. We also have a suite of places that have been acquired historically for landscape quality and access reasons that are of profound importance for nature – the Kinder massif, Snowdonia, Long Mynd and 780 miles of coastline are obvious examples. If you had written your blog 15 years ago and asked me to scale our work on nature, I might have given us a 5/10. Some really good, cutting-edge work such as the Wicken Vision and our work on large blue butterfly, worthy of investment, but no overarching strategy and only place specific action that didn't connect with others.

The Trust has had a history of responding to challenges of the day in a series of chapters. Chapter 1 saw a response to the challenge to large, cherished landscapes in the form of industrialisation – our early work in the Lake District set the stage for the formation of national parks and our land holding in those Parks is as a direct consequence of this. Chapter 2 was a response to the destruction of a country house every week and we secured the Country House scheme that allowed us to steward those places that are now enjoyed by 50m visitors a year. Chapter 3 involved the mapping of the entire coastline and the launch of Operation Neptune to acquire beautiful beaches, cliff tops, dunes and maritime scrub for the public. Chapter 4 really focussed our efforts on welcoming more people, especially families to enjoy incredible places. The Trust hosts about ¼ billion visits to our properties, the vast majority of which are free to access.

10 years ago, the first State of Nature report coincided with the formation of the Trust's Playing Our Part Strategy ([link](#)). This led for the first time to the formation of nature targets – specifically, the restoration or creation of 25,000ha of priority habitat (10% of NT owned land). We are in the last year of this strategy period, and we are accelerating past this target. This is comprised of a massive array of brilliant work; the first stage zero river restoration in the UK, blanket bog restoration at scale in the Peak, Lakes and Wales, orchards, saltmarsh, meadows, wet woodland, wood pasture, coastal grassland – work is happening across every region and country. We have changed our acquisition approach and are actively acquiring land to enable nature recovery. Last year, for example, we acquired a further 2,000ha of land

primarily for this purpose. We are using our voice to stand up for nature; and have stood firmly with RSPB, WWF, Wildlife Trusts and Woodland Trust at key points over the last 2 years. We have collaborated with RSPB and WWF and co-funded the Save Our Wild Isles Campaign. And lastly, we have invested jointly with the National Heritage Lottery Fund in a programme to work with 8 urban local authorities to find new ways to fund nature rich greenspace in places of nature deprivation. This is currently being scaled to be a £20m programme over the next 3 years.

But we are very aware this is not enough, and that a step change in action is required both on our land, and by acting in partnership with others.

You asked some specific questions:

1. How much of my £91 per annum membership subscription would be spent on wildlife conservation? How do you come to that figure and how can I check it in your annual reports and accounts?
2. Does NT really spend over £910,000 per annum on 'governance' – click here? How is that sum spent?
3. The NT is a large landowner, and much of that land holding is farmland of one sort or another. What have been the population trends of farmland birds on NT land over the last 20 years since farmland birds were introduced as a sustainability measure by the last Labour government? Are you doing better or worse than ordinary farmland? Do you know? If not, why not?
4. Why is your High Peak Vision taking so long to deliver? I praised it back in 2013 – click here – and it is still miles away from fruition. It always feels to me as though the NT announces everything several times and does them very, very slowly. You might say it was supposed to take 50 years but that is to completion and that involved trees growing to maturity etc. system.
5. How have you promoted the #Nature2030 campaign and how many signatures has the NT managed to add to the campaign from its 5+million?
6. What are your priorities for wildlife for the next 12 months, or next 5 years? And what will be your key actions?
7. What are the best three things that you have done for wildlife conservation in the past three years?:
8. What are you going to do to mobilise your enormous membership to make a difference for wildlife? What is the key change in government policy that you would wish to be able to say that you, and your 5 million members, helped to achieve?
9. Would you say that the NT is a leader or a follower when it comes to UK wildlife conservation? Please give examples.
10. I was pleased to see your account of carbon emissions (p42 of your last Annual Report) and your target of 'working towards' carbon net zero by 2030. 'Working towards' is good but I wonder whether you could comment on the main challenges which might stop you getting there – or are you confident of success? Do you feel that the NT is a leader or a follower in this regard, being an exemplar of a large complex business which others might look to for inspiration?

Question 1

We don't account in a way that can answer that question with the specificity that you probably seek. The reason for this is that our work is broader than some of the other NGO and work on land can be a blend of nature recovery, landscape, gardens, parkland, archaeology or enhancing visitor experience. We split our account ([Financial review - Annual Report 2023 \(nationaltrust.org.uk\)](#)) into operating (day to day running – for example our c.1000 strong team of rangers, nature advisors, policy team, farm advisors), maintenance

need and projects (capital projects or programmes). We do split out our capital spend by strategic theme and in 2023/24 this amounted to £42.5m on nature recovery and urban greenspace – about 19% of our capital spend.

Question 2

The Trust is the largest membership charity in Europe, has a constitution which, unlike other charities, has a scheme of governance that is subject to Parliament and has a two-tier governance arrangement (like the BBC). This means that our governance is more complex than other eNGOs and requires a small, dedicated team of staff to oversee it.

Apart from staff the costs are made up of:

- The vast majority of the cost is in hosting our AGM, which gives democratic voting rights on governance nominations and member resolutions, to our 5.5m members. This is both in person (requiring venue hire) and livestreamed.
- The associated print and mailing of papers
- Trustee meetings
- Council meetings
- Supporting our network of volunteer advisors

As a percentage of our turnover, we feel it is proportionate, is a fundamental part of our engagement with our members and makes sure that we are making decisions which are sound and in the best interests of the institution.

Question 3

We care for 260,000ha land and most of it is farmed in some way. 138,000ha is let to tenants (Agricultural Holdings Act or Farm Business Tenancies) and 55,000ha is Registered Common Land, largely managed by graziers exercising their commons rights. The remaining area is managed either in-hand by our teams or is let to farmers under annual grazing licences. The collection of systemic and long-term nature data across an estate of this size and complexity is a huge task that we are currently in the process of designing.

Working with BTO we undertook a comprehensive analysis of wild birds in 2015 with follow up work in 2018 before recording was significantly impacted by Covid restriction.

We are currently reviewing the state of wild birds to coincide with the end of our 10yr strategy period and will publish the results next year. The emerging results show a varied picture across countries and regions. English data dominates the trends across the farmland (14 spp) woodland (25 spp) and wetland (19 spp) indicator groups. We will publish the counterfactual analysis in due course.

We will continue working with research, NGO and statutory partners to monitor and track the status and trends of biodiversity across our estate and in support of the Government's Natural Capital & Ecosystem Assessment including birds.

We recognise the challenge of delivering such an ambitious monitoring programme and encourage the public to sign up to national monitoring schemes such as BBS, UKBMS and NPMS to help us in this endeavour and provide a building evidence base to inform our delivery.

Question 4

Ten years ago, the National Trust launched the High Peak Moors Vision:

To take the best from our shared inheritance, understanding and skills to create an inspirational 21st-century moorland landscape of restored and healthy natural habitats.

The area will be a model for future upland moorland and moorland fringe management that delivers excellent landscape scale conservation and restoration; is rich in wildlife and cultural heritage; and provides excellent access, sustainable livelihoods and wider public benefits.

Management of the area will be based on constructive, forward-looking partnerships with tenants, communities, organisations and users.

Since publishing our 50-year Vision we have undertaken a suite of restoration and conservation projects – with to date over £6million spent on restoring 1,006ha of peatland and planting 250,000 trees over 250 hectares. Both key actions for achieving our vision and meeting our nature and climate targets. There has been action to manage moorland to support the vision for more birds of prey in the area including working with the RSPB and Peak District Raptor Group to protect birds currently living there, and creating rich feeding and nesting grounds through actions including cutting heather to allow a more diverse range of moorland plants such as sphagnum moss, bilberry and cotton grass to grow, and helping the insects and small mammals which the birds rely upon for food. Seven hen harriers successfully fledged from multiple nests in the High Peak, making 2022 the most successful year for hen harrier breeding on land in the Peak District for over a decade, despite two nest failures earlier in the year.

While these projects represent a significant gain, we know there is so much more left to be done. We have refreshed our vision and are developing project pipelines to scale up the pace needed. We aim to have roughly 3,500 hectares moorland under restoration by 2030, requiring a financial investment in the region of £35m. We also plan to expand woodland, scrub and dwarf shrubs in the cloughs, or valleys, of the moorland landscape and we expect circa £16m to be needed to establish, through natural regeneration or planting, 2m new trees.

Partnership has and will continue to be a vital part of delivering the Vision – whether its working with research and delivery partners to deliver best practice in peatland restoration ecology such as the IUCN Peatland Programme, Moors for the Future, Natural England and Manchester University or with farmers who need support to transition towards thriving, resilient and sustainable businesses that put nature at the heart of managing the land, while also producing great food.

Our restoration is on track and matches published recovery trajectories. I am not sure why you think we have made little progress and would like to reiterate my invitation to come and have a look at some of it on the ground.

Question 5

The National Trust takes part in a whole range of campaigning and advocacy action for nature recovery. For example, we lobbied Government intensively 18 months ago when it threatened to remove protections for nature (through the REUL Bill), we have assiduously campaigned to Save Our Wild Isles over the last year – which has included e-petitions to Government – and are participating in the Restore Nature Now march on 22 June. It's impossible to know how many of our members have participated in these campaigns, which almost always involve coalition-working other eNGOs.

Question 6

Our 2014-24 strategy has been to deliver against the Lawton Principles of 'better, bigger, more and joined up' across our estate. In the final months of our strategy, we remain focused on delivering against these ambitions and will report progress later this year.

These Lawton principles remain relevant for the next strategy period with an increased focus on climate mitigation and adaptation. We will continue working in partnership with both our tenant farmers and neighbouring land managers to achieve the necessary land use/management change. Examples include establishing 20,000ha of woodland and restoring 13,300ha of peatland in support of our 2030 NetZero target. Other priorities include accelerating nature recovery in key areas through the expansion and buffering of existing habitats at a scale sufficient to restore ecological functioning and new partnerships to conserve our most threatened species.

Question 7

We have hosted a £10M partnership to restore more Dynamic Dunescapes across England and Wales at some of the UK's most important designated sites to recreate vitally important dynamic, bare sand habitat, restoring coastal wetlands and reintroduce naturalistic grazing whilst engaging over 86,000 people in our brilliant sand dune wildlife.

Our award winning (UK River Prize) programme of river restoration that has delivered the UK's first Stage Zero restoration at Holnicote ([Project to liberate part of Somerset river hailed as 'squelchy' success | Rivers | The Guardian](#)) in Somerset (plus half dozen major projects across England & Wales, reintroduced beavers, protected our native crayfish and secured the only native site for Starfruit whilst playing a crucial role in championing and advocating hydrological restoration from 'Source to Sea' working with farmers, local communities, and statutory agencies.

Worked in partnership to secure over £18million funding resulting in restoration of over 2,500ha of peatland to lock away our greatest carbon stocks, and a further 3,000ha of conservation getting under way to recover some of our wildest protected areas. From farmer led restoration in Eryri that has seen the return of breeding curlew and golden plover to innovative scallop bunding at Holcombe Moor in Lancashire whose impact is monitored with academic partners and citizen scientists, our work is benefiting people and nature across our nations.

Question 8

See 5 above. We are part of a broad coalition of NGOs, some of which are wired to be campaigning organisations.

Question 9

Some of both and I am not convinced that the framing of the question is one that I recognise.

Leading:

Our work on stage zero river restoration

Our work with National Heritage Lottery Fund to find new ways to look after and create nature rich greenspace in urban areas ([Future Parks Accelerator](#))

Following

The majority of our habitat restoration work is following established best practice. We share learning with other eNGOs and land managers and are keen to help individual nature entrepreneurs scale their impact.

Question 10

Our net zero target is made up of two parts. The first is reducing emissions aligned with the formal Science Based Targets Initiative's pathway (the international standard). The second is to sequester an equivalent amount from nature-based solutions.

We are currently on track to reduce our Scope 1 and 2 emissions as per the pathway. Our Annual Report forthcoming will confirm this and report a 20% reduction on our 2019/20 baseline.

Our largest categories of emissions in Scope 3 are from agriculture and degraded peatland. The challenges are first, the estimated/modelled nature of our land-based data (this is not unique to NT); and second and linked to this is our inability to track the positive changes we are making. To tackle this, we have completed a pilot of Agrecalc, which we reckon is the strongest agricultural emissions baselining and tracking tool, and this is now rolling out more widely.

On peatland, we are awaiting new England peat maps, which could have significant impacts on the size of our peatland emissions. This is likely to add a further challenge. However, we are all the time improving our knowledge of our peatland condition and have a solid and costed plan to restore much of our blanket bog (which extends to over 20,000ha). We can point to real successes already in places like the Migneint in Wales, or the Peak District where we have extensive partnership restoration projects now well established.

Including but also mainly beyond land use we - like most other organisations and businesses - have made assumptions on how our supply chain emissions (from the things we buy) will reduce due to others' efforts. After all, our Scope 3 emissions are someone else's Scope 1. We are dependent on that shift happening, but of course we are exerting pressure on these supply chains by aiming to influence their goods and services and, if necessary, find new and lower carbon suppliers.

I realise that is a long set of answers, many of which you will find incomplete. We are proud of our achievements but realise there is much to do. If I have done enough to encourage you to find out more, let me know and we can meet somewhere where we can show you some work on the ground and exchange ideas about how we might do more.

Best wishes

Harry

Harry Howell

Executive Director of Land and Nature