

Vision for Wicken is the way ahead

Tackling food waste is the best ways of making sure the nation can feed itself, says leading environmentalist **Tony Juniper**, and nature needs to be given space if we are to protect what remains



Tony Juniper, former Director of Friends of the Earth, is an independent environment adviser, and works as a senior associate with the Cambridge University Program for Industry, and as special adviser with The Prince of Wales' Rainforest Project.

It seems that there is an almost inevitable gloom that accompanies the frequent scientific reports on the state of the natural environment. But behind the terrible truth as to the state of Nature, there are some truly inspirational examples of positive action. One such case is the visionary plan being taken forward by the National Trust to restore a large chunk of East Anglian fenland.

Along with many other conservationists I have spent much of my career making the case for the protection of the finest remaining areas of natural habitat. And it has been quite a successful effort, at least in securing a basic level

of legal protection for the very best remaining areas. It is not enough, however. In lowland Britain in particular the remaining good quality semi-natural habitats are mostly isolated fragments. Many patches of heath, wood, wetland and meadow are surrounded by urban areas, roads and intensive farmland.

These isolated habitats will gradually lose species. This is because they are susceptible to outside impacts such as chemicals drifting in from nearby farms, and as the climate changes they will suffer more rapid local extinctions as plants and animals that can't move die out because conditions have

altered. This is why the restoration of habitats is now such an important task – for not only must we protect what is left, we need to restore large areas of habitat as well.

The emphasis on restoration marks an historic turning point, and the practical effects can be seen at Wicken Fen where the National Trust begins to roll out the ambitious vision to return intensively farmed land back to native wetlands. The Trust has already secured some 750 hectares and in the long term plans to link up patches of land so that one day fenland will extend 20 kilometres south to the edge of Cambridge. As we grapple with the implications

of climate change it is exactly the kind of practical inspiration needed.

The expansion of Wicken Fen is not without controversy, however. A few argue that land should be used for food production rather than wildlife conservation. Perhaps this argument would have some weight if the destruction of Nature was not already so complete in this most comprehensively farmed landscape. And if there is a serious argument to be had about nature versus food, then maybe the best place to begin the campaign is in the kitchen. In the UK we waste about a third of our food. This means that about 30 per cent of the

land growing food for this country is actually feeding bins rather than people.

We might also wish to reflect on the remarkable fact that the point was recently reached whereby the number of obese people in the world reached a roughly similar number to that of those who are malnourished. It is evidently not for want of food production that people are hungry; it has far more to do with how much money they have and how food is distributed around the world.

Nature has been in retreat from peoples' axes, ploughs and flames for millennia. As far as the East Anglian Fens are concerned, only about one

third of one percent of the original area is left in anything resembling a natural state. To survive, nature must be given space and embraced as a top priority in how we decide to meet our needs. This is why I believe the National Trust's efforts at Wicken Fen are so inspiring and so important.

The vision for Wicken signals the way ahead, just as the Trust did in the late 19th century when it bought a last bit of fen that was then still left, turning it into a nature reserve. The National Trust is making history again now, through turning that reserve into one of the most exciting and inspiring examples of large-scale habitat restoration in the UK.

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