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# OUR GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND

Suddenly larks are rare. A fertiliser kills
The reasons for their song. Their landscape fills
With whispers that some sharp-eared god enjoys,
Papery music, low botanical noise.

Friends give each other names of fields not drugged, where birds
Still practise their ascensions on transparent words,
Still disappear in light and silence where
Nobody else can hide: a span of air.

You think of following them. The sound of summer now
Falls only from an aeroplane that echoes somehow
In the soft sky. I'll find and interview
A lark with my machine …
But will that comfort you?

Nature is leaving earth. The species one by one
Withdraw their voices. Soon the creatures shall have gone,
Leaving the subtle horns of rock for nitrogen
And oxygen and noble gas to play upon.

Alistair Elliot, 'Speaking of Larks'

In the opening chapter I highlighted an apparent contradiction between the existence of so many members of conservation organisations in the UK and the verdict of the *State of Nature* report in 2013. There are, we should recall, 8 million members spread across 15 voluntary societies (see also p. 10). Compared with the picture in other European countries, our devotion to the more-than-human parts of nature is remarkable. Only in the USA, a country with five times the population, could you possibly find comparable figures. By this measure, few nations on Earth care as much for their environment as the British.

Yet our attachment to wildlife is starkly at odds with the findings of the *State of Nature* report, to which many of the environmental groups contributed in 2013. Since that time an updated summary has been published entitled *State of Nature 2016*. The later document is more positive in its approach, noting increases as well as declines. Of approximately 4,000 species whose population trends have been measured over the last forty-three years, 56 per cent have incurred losses, but the other 44 per cent have risen in number. It also points out the remarkable human resource provided by the sheer numbers of competent British naturalists, as a result of whose records this country's wildlife is probably better documented than any other flora and fauna on the planet.

One refinement in the later report is the capacity to extrapolate from the disparate figures an overarching unified assessment of how nature fares in any country. This specific metric – called the Biological Intactness Index (BII) – calculates how complete a country's biodiversity is and how much has disappeared as a result of human activities going back centuries. It makes for uncomfortable reading. The index suggests that the UK has experienced a significantly greater long-term loss of nature than the global average. In fact, we are among the world's most nature-depleted countries. If one considers just England the figure is 80.6 per cent. The significance of the number is amplified when you learn how a BII value of less than 90 per cent indicates that national ecosystems may have fallen below a level when they can reliably meet society's needs. On this point one recalls those fenland peat soils blowing away at a rate of over half an inch a year. In a list of the 218 countries on Earth for which BII values have been calculated, England is twenty-eighth from the bottom.[1]

Alas, these grim findings are not the sum of all our environmental news. Dark tidings seem to pour in from all sides on an almost daily basis. Every year the collective human chimney puffs 38 billion tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere, raising atmospheric $CO_2$ to its highest level in 800,000 years. It is now calculated that we have taken over most of the planet's tropical grasslands, cut down half of all the temperate forest and converted a quarter even of the deserts for crop production.[2] In the oceans four-fifths of all fish populations are harvested to, or beyond, their sustainable limits.[3]

Extinction is the eventual fate of all living things, plant or animal, but the present background rate has accelerated to 1,000 times the Earth's average as revealed by the fossil record. Nor is it just loss of diversity that is intensifying. Decline of simple abundance in the last four decades is at unprecedented levels. In 2016 the Zoological Society of London published the *Living Planet Assessment*, which claimed that without radical intervention nearly two-thirds of global populations of animals will have gone by the year 2020.

All the time the drip-feed of doom is accompanied by an ever-growing population of one species – *Homo sapiens*. If you have an especially strong constitution you can call up the world clock (at http://www.census.gov/popclock) that shows you the moment-by-moment increase in human mouths and human souls. Given that each click of the rotating wheel signifies the same joyous moment which is etched into the heart of every parent, me included, it is very strange to see these births reduced to an accelerating mind-numbing number. As I type these very words it reveals a world human population of 7,343,514,500. At the end of day it will have gone up by 205,479. In a year the increase will be 75 million people.

Our species' success is so relentless, and the resulting diminution of all the other parts of life so inexorable, that some have switched attention away from ecological loss and towards its impact upon us. They have now given it a name: environmental melancholia. The overwhelming question assailing us all is: how do we remain optimistic for the future? Where is hope to be found? And what is there to feel good about so that we can be motivated to try to turn things around? For without encouragement won't we succumb to despair and give up?

I suspect something of this psychological malaise was implicated in the suicide of Tony Hare. When I see pictures of him before he died, campaigning against climate change at the Copenhagen summit in late 2009, standing there with fellow protesters, placards and banners in hand, smiling for the cameras, I can see the exhaustion in his face, sense the hollowness of his smile. Tone, who had devoted his life to living things, was overwhelmed by it all. It is a major problem, and the environmental community has been anxious for decades not to just be a source of bad tidings, lest it be accused of merely indulging in doom or, alternatively, of crying wolf. It has developed a range of strategies to stiffen the public's resolve and to encourage support.

The most frequent is to focus on a part of the story, so an organisation extrapolates from the big bad picture the single positive nugget. A heading from an article in *BTO News* (a publication of the British Trust for Ornithology) summarises the approach perfectly: 'Tree Sparrows in trouble? A local success story'.[4]* Another tale that has been the focus of frequent positive spin involves the water vole. The rodent is one of the most popular recipients of conservation effort in Britain, partly because of its characterisation as the loveable 'Ratty' in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Water voles were so much a part of my Derbyshire childhood that I find it painful now to recall, given their catastrophic decline, with what indifference I once viewed them.

We would stop at almost any point along the River Wye – to scrutinise a dabchick, dipper or grey wagtail – and there overlooked at the edge of the tableau were the birds' gentle riverine neighbours. The creatures were supremely rotund, and invariably the jowls bulged and the jaws, with those extraordinary orange incisors, were grinding nonchalantly on some waterside vegetation. The voles' insouciance and our mutual disregard seemed to be rooted in an assumption that things would always be so. Alas, not.

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* The tree sparrow is one of the species in the Farmland Bird Index, and has one of the most miserable stories to tell us about British agriculture. Since 1967 it has declined by 97 per cent, as the article, with its standard upbeat subtitle, goes on to tell us.

In 1990 our mainland vole population was estimated at 7.25 million (and in the Iron Age it was an astonishing 6.7 billion).[5] Within eight years it had declined by 80 per cent, a loss of 6,419,000, largely as a consequence of predation by American mink, which have escaped and spread from fur farms. The solution to the problem is easy to write – rid our country of the offending mustelid – but complicated, relatively expensive and time-consuming to implement. Occasionally wildlife groups score big local successes, when they carry out relentless campaigns. In 2013 the author and *Guardian* journalist Patrick Barkham reported on just such a programme on the River Chess in the Chilterns.[6]

With some habitat restoration and by trapping and shooting the non-native predators, the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust saw the River Chess vole population return to almost 100 per cent of its pre-mink peak. The problem is that the background picture is not quite so rosy. Nationwide surveys completed in the last decade suggest that, regardless of local successes, we have lost a further fifth of our water voles this century.*

Another common strategy is to sound hopeful in the further hope that it will inspire affirmative action. Butterfly Conservation frequently resorts to this particular tone. One can understand why, given that the butterflies in this country have had an especially torrid time in the last century. Half of all species have undergone major losses and five have become extinct. What we have, as a result of the remarkable dedication of staff for Butterfly Conservation, is far fewer butterflies, but a lot of expertise and practical experience in helping them. It is this aspect that the associated new stories tend to emphasise:

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* There may yet be a happy ending to this particular tale from the riverbank because, while mink eat voles, otters probably kill and certainly displace mink, and otter numbers are now on the rise after decades of decline. The result of the otter's nationwide resurrection may, like some stirring chapter from *The Wind in The Willows*, herald Ratty's eventual restoration. The key background to this success is the banning of otter hunting and improvement in water quality over several decades. It is one of the major environmental achievements of the last thirty years.

> It gives me great heart to know that just when butterflies and moths are at their most threatened, interest has never been higher (editorial in *Butterfly*, the magazine of Butterfly Conservation).[7]

Or (in the *State of the Nation's Butterflies* report) this:

> Conserving butterflies is undoubtedly a large and difficult task, but we have never been better equipped to face the challenge.[8]

There is another element manifest in these examples that is a wider feature of conservation rhetoric. It is to salt the good news with the bad and vice versa, so that you get across the awkward truths while making them palatable with a spoonful of optimism.

Sometimes it extends to the use of what one might call white lies. A good example is the BBC television series entitled *Britain's Big Wildlife Revival*. For all the fabulous achievements of conservation, there is one acid test that measures the limits of its capacity and attainments. Not a single formerly abundant species – plant or animal – that has suffered major decline in this country as a consequence of habitat loss has yet been restored to its former status. The closest we have come are probably grey and common seals and several species of bird of prey, such as the common buzzard, red kite and peregrine. Yet all these were threatened not by habitat loss, but by direct persecution, or inadvertent poisoning from agrochemicals. A truer test would be the restoration of fortunes in the kestrel, which the common buzzard has now replaced as our most abundant raptor. Kestrels, by contrast, once numbered 100,000 pairs and are now down to 36,800.

The larger point to make is that to date there has been no big wildlife revival. The programme's title is untrue. There are episodes of wonderful achievement. And these stand in for and justify the programmer makers' initial dishonesty. Through the title, the viewer is enticed to watch and thereby absorb all the evidence of the problems, with the occasional good-news stories as moral fortification. In the end the hope is that the viewer will overlook the fact that the 'big revival' is merely hypothetical or, perhaps, an illusion.

Personally, I have a problem with hope, not because I don't feel it, but because it steadily becomes an objective in its own right, a distraction confusing and diluting the real issues. It also draws an imaginary line between those who are assumed to be able to face the truth and those for whom it must be replaced with calming reassurance. Ultimately a tissue of half-truths meshes with something far more powerful and potentially destructive – myth. Recall the words of the cleric Richard Holloway quoted in Chapter 7, who suggested that the importance of a myth was not whether it is true or false, but whether it still carries existential meaning for us in our time.

The myth that has so much content for us is the idea that the British countryside is in ineradicable good health: that in the now-clichéd words of William Blake's poem, this is still 'a green and pleasant land'. That axiomatic assumption is even now a reflex in public discourse about our countryside. It is almost impossible for a radio or television journalist to be located in a green setting, talking about countryside, without the phrase tumbling effortlessly from their lips.

We seem to need that myth because one of the stock purposes of nature, one of the values which we have long attributed to it, is its powers of restoration. As Richard Mabey argued in the passage quoted in this book's frontispiece, the fundamental goal of environmentalism is 'to renew the living fabric of the land so that it also replenishes the spirits of its human inhabitants'.

Replenishing our collective spirit involves our immersion in nature's unfathomable and obliterating otherness, so that it can purge the travails and toxins of our own making. Nature's great and irreversible continuities – the passage of the clouds, the turning of the seasons – measure all our smallnesses. They put things in perspective. They render us humble. Nature is the go-to place when life seems too full of self-generated woe – ISIS, bank bail-outs, recession, Brexit, terrorism, war. The case was made at the other end of the twentieth century by Thomas

Hardy in a poem called 'The Darkling Thrush'.* In a final verse, as the poet stood in awe at the song, as the season reaches its dead end, and when the whole century seems to be laid out before him like a corpse, he asks of the creature:

> So little cause for carolings
>    Of such ecstatic sound
> Was written on terrestrial things
>    Afar or nigh around,
> That I could think there trembled through
>    His happy good-night air
> Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
>    And I was unaware.

Hope is written into all our connections with the rest of nature, and it is a two-way process. The other parts of life are our deepest sources of hope; and hope is part of the very fabric of our encounters. It begins the moment you open the door to go outside. You have only to have the sun on your back, the wind in your face and birdsong in your heart to know their rivet-bursting powers of liberation. It is perhaps partly what Henry Thoreau was tilting at when he wrote the words for which he is most famous and which are among his most ambiguous: 'In Wildness is the preservation of the world.'

It explains why we cling so tenaciously to the myth that this country continues inviolate. We don't want to hear that our final redoubt, the place where we go when our human condition is overwhelming, is itself in need. Alas, it is. In the twentieth century, the British drained their landscape of wildlife, otherness, meaning, cultural riches and hope. Yet because it is central to our purposes and to our relationships with each other, we continue in denial. And what we have done to our country becomes the truth that dare not speak its name. However, hope lies, surely, not in perpetuating any myth, not in doctoring the facts, but in owning them squarely and with the whole of ourselves.

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* Hardy claimed that it was written on 31 December 1900. A remaining mystery of the poem concerns the species of thrush that he heard. The mistle thrush more commonly sings in late winter, but has a joyously melancholy song. By contrast the song thrush is a follower of Professor Pangloss and a believer that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Its own song has the power to awaken a dead season and give hope to a new century. But which bird did Hardy hear?

I list here ten interlocking Truths that are fundamental to the story of British nature in the twentieth century. They help to explain what happened, why it happened and, as far as possible, what needs to be done. They bear equally on the agents of destruction and those who oppose it. They are arranged, with a single exception, in a kind of chromatic scale from dark to light. They are, in my opinion, the antithesis of all the platitudes about a green and pleasant land.

1. In the twentieth century the British people devastated large areas of their environment, largely through the instrument of farming and forestry policies. Not only have the citizens of this country had to witness the processes, they also paid for them through subsidies. The losses took place largely over two generations, from 1940 to 1985, though their full effects span a century from 1920 to 2018. In that time 99 per cent of 4 million acres of flower-rich meadow were destroyed and 44 million breeding birds vanished from the countryside.

The loss is not evenly distributed. Our coastlines are still relatively intact, partly because of the National Trust's extraordinary Operation Neptune. Also parts of what Oliver Rackham called the 'Ancient Countryside', which includes a swathe from south Norfolk to Kent and westwards through Sussex and Hampshire, and then due north from Dorset to south Lancashire, have escaped some of the worst effects. Surrey and Kent, despite the large human population of the south-east, retain some of the highest levels of woodland, and Kent has more ancient woodland than any other county.[9]

Density of occupation is a significant factor, and since England holds all but 11 million of Britain's population, it has borne the brunt. Loss of landscape, however, is not necessarily always about human numbers. One need only drive through the sparsely occupied Borders areas from Alnwick in Northumberland to Lockerbie in Dumfriesshire to see a hill country burnt out and minimised to a continuous, sheep-grazed grass monoculture punctuated with conifer plantations. Yet to see in full the twenty-eighth most denatured landscape on Earth one should take the M6 or the A1 south of Cumbria and Northumberland. Then you can really bear witness to the hollow heart of this country, pretty much all the way south to Bristol or London. The arable areas are stripped bare of wildlife. In fact, it is now commonplace for bumblebee numbers and species diversity to be much greater in suburban and urban areas than in the countryside. So much so that it is almost meaningless to talk of it as *countryside*, and one recalls Tony Hare's prophetic words: 'Whenever people talk to me about the British countryside, I ask, "What countryside?"'

Finally, we must acknowledge that some of our agriculture landscapes – south Lincolnshire and south-west Essex spring instantly to mind – offer a vision of what the entire country will look like if the processes of intensification continue undiminished. It brings me to the next Truth.

2. Things are bad, but there is very little in present public life to suggest that they will not get worse. As a society, so far, we have done too little to turn the environmental ship around. The fundamental drivers of further loss are all intact. The fragmentation will continue: the implications of island biogeography, as outlined in Chapter 15, are still in train. No single generation since the First World War has bequeathed a healthier British countryside than the one they inherited. What special efforts have we made in recent years for us to assume that things are different today? They are not. As I noted in Chapter 1, the *State of Nature* report indicates a direction of travel, not a final location.

It is not just that the same forces are in play and bearing down on what remains of our wildlife. It is that we are facing new pressures, not least the need to build a million new houses to accommodate the large population increases mainly since the beginning of the millennium. The scale of demand has led to a loosening of planning regulations, so that new developments contest with the old environmental protections.

One of the most telling is a plan of Medway Council and Britain's biggest property developer, Land Securities, to erect 5,000 homes on the outskirts of Rochester, Kent, in an area called Lodge Hill. The site is Ministry of Defence land, long neglected and in transition from scrub to full-canopied woodland and perfect, it would appear, for nightingales. Today it holds 84 singing males and Britain's largest single population of the species, which since 1970 has declined by 90 per cent.

Each side is claiming that their need for the place is of overriding significance: 5,000 homes as opposed to one per cent of the British nightingale population. It is in many ways a rerun of the Cow Green reservoir debate about industrial water versus wild flowers. One precise difference, however, is the intervening precedent that involves a half-century of destruction that has brought the nightingale to its present plight.

Each side has supplementary arguments. The developers, who have cross-party support in the local council, point out that there are 20,000 local people on the housing waiting list in the Medway area. Lodge Hill is, according to them, the only large site where infrastructure can also be created, including three primary schools, a nursing home and a hotel, creating 5,000 jobs.[10]

The RSPB staff who are leading the challenge point out, meanwhile, that it is not just about nightingales. The place has 19 bat roosts as well as significant scarce reptile and plant communities and rare breeding butterflies, all of which are strong indicators of its wider importance for biodiversity (this MOD location is so little known because access has been highly restricted for a century). Most significant is that it is already an SSSI and thus, theoretically, protected by legislation. The developers, however, are claiming that they must build there and nowhere else and its legal status should be overridden in the national interest. For those championing wildlife in this dispute, Lodge Hill is an acid test of the very framework on which conservation has been based since the Second World War.

Regardless of the eventual outcome at Lodge Hill, which is only a trifling part of the full national impact, when all these fresh inroads into surviving biodiversity are audited in a generation's time they will reveal nature's inexorable decline.*

3. The third Truth is about understanding nature. Ecology as a formal scientific discipline has only been in existence for about 150 years. That is a short time for it to have influenced the ways in which we think and function. What ecology tries to bring into focus is the dynamic structures of natural systems – habitats, biomes etc. – which are infinitely complex. Essentially, ecology exposes how everything in an ecosystem impacts upon everything else. The usual form invoked to illustrate this level of interconnectedness is a sphere, rendered at its most simple in the 'circle of life' in *The Lion King*, which, for all its Disneyfied triviality, is still an ecological parable.

A circle may be an inadequate representation of ecological complexities, but the real issue for the British environment is that the dominant pattern in our thought processes is not a circle, but a straight line. Look at the page you are reading to appreciate the fundamental line-mindedness of our species. Recall the plough lines running through the Flow Country that Magnus Magnusson likened to claw marks made by an angry god. Recall Vermuyden's dead-straight ditch from Earith to Salter's Lode right through the middle of the Fen. Recall those machine-drilled GPS-spaced regiments of daffodils at Gedney.

Among our various capacities to express ourselves, only music, and possibly painting and poetry, come close to the complex interconnectedness of an ecosystem. *The Lark Ascending* or the song of a blackbird say more about the British landscape than any words ever written. Yet what we need to acquire is something that might be called 'ecological thinking': an ability to approximate, through our imaginations, to the processes of a real ecosystem. We need a way of thinking that apprehends the rhizome-like multiplicity of impacts that work through and upon land and nature. Farmers used to practise it because they managed a complex ecosystem – a blend of multiple, fluctuating, simultaneous harvests including hens, cattle, sheep, root crops, vegetables, fruit, pasture, hay and cereals – in one land unit. For four generations they have been urged to abandon complexity and ecological thinking in favour of the 'logical' straight line.

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* To give a small sample sense of developments that typify the ongoing erosion of remaining wildlife areas, there are proposed motorway developments in the Gwent Levels, where a road would cut through five protected areas (see Chapter 5, pp. 78–9), and across Lough Beg in Northern Ireland, one of the region's most important wetlands. Phase one of the HS2 rail link between Birmingham and London will pass through fifty ancient woodlands, four Wildlife Trust reserves and ten SSSIs, as well as numerous local wildlife sites. Since this chapter was written, one positive development has been the withdrawal of the planning application at Lodge Hill in Kent. Environmentalists now hope that the original scheme to build 5,000 new homes will be permanently dropped. However, they expect at the least that smaller applications will be submitted in the future that will affect parts of the site.

Straight-line thinking connects too few truths to be of value in appreciating ecological processes. The spraying of pesticides and the use of nitrate fertilisers are linear approaches to ecological issues. The assumption is that once the chemicals have fulfilled the single intention of a user – once they have gone 'away' – they will cease to operate within the ecosystem to which they were introduced. As Clark Gregory argues in William Bryant Logan's masterful book *Dirt*, 'There's no such place as "*away*" [my italics].'[11] We, the chemicals, the land, are part of a single system. The fertilisers continue journeying through the physical environment interacting in complex ways, fulfilling their unleashed ecological destinies.

While they boost crop production they also accumulate in the aquifers and must be stripped at high cost from our drinking water. They convert to nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas 200 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Ecological thinking, as expressed by the European report discussed in Chapter 15, tells us that the true costs of that 'logical' and linear application of nitrogen is a downstream bill of between €70 and €320 billion per annum, double the value of the original boost to crops. The damage that we have inflicted on the land of this country in the name of logic requires that all of us acquire a capacity for ecological thinking.

Ecological thinking entails that we see ourselves *within* nature, and that we understand how everything we do has ecological consequences. We can, in truth, *never* escape nature. A convicted murderer, held in a concrete-and-steel cell in solitary confinement in the bowels of the most secure prison, encircled by nothing but razor-wire and linear arrangements of man-made material, who barely has the opportunity over several decades to see a square of natural daylight, let alone walk upon the soil and enjoy all its manifold bounties, still lives within nature. Everything that he eats and breathes, all that he evacuates, everything about him, is part of an ecosystem. Ecology requires that all of us understand the privileges and blessings of those unending connections and the remorseless, possibly terrifying, scale of our responsibilities.

As our material and interior lives become supercharged with new sources of stimulation we have compensated by succumbing to another linear simplification. Our entire value system, the ways in which we think and talk about life, society, morality, etc., in any public and most especially in any political forum, have been rendered subservient to a single dominant scale as the capitalist model intensifies its hold on all parts of ourselves. It is as if the only qualitative measure of human happiness and experience is money. The entire national political conversation has been canalised into one debate. Yet the economy of a country is nothing but a way of disguising or, rather, one should say, a way of talking about, ecology – since all money comes *only* from nature. It is just ecology entirely devoid of responsibility for the rest of the living system.

We need somehow to recover a sense of responsibility for the non-linear structures of real life. We live on a planet where life is only to be found in about a fifteen-mile-deep veneer that is wrapped around the surface of the Earth. As far as we have been able to establish in the last 4,000 years, this is the only planet that bears life. We spend our days among the greatest event in all the galaxies; but many people would seem to prefer to play with their iPhones. Isn't it time that we built an appreciation of life into the very foundations of who we are?

4. The fourth horseman of the environmental apocalypse in our island is something identified in Oliver Rackham's *The History of the British Countryside*, where he wrote of 'all the little, often unconscious vandalisms that hate what is tangled and unpredictable but create nothing.' Among the list of hateful measures, he included the destruction of ivy-tods or 'misshapen trees', the annual cutting of hedges down to the ground, the levelling of churchyards – and here I cannot help but recall the regime at St Mary Magdalene's in Gedney – and what he described

as 'pottering with paraquat'.[12] The real problem is that an ever-expanding arsenal of chemicals and equipment allows us all – not just farmers – to intervene almost to the point of nature's annihilation. In short, we are, as an entire people, guilty of excessive tidiness.

It is this that drives much of the sterilisation of Britain's public space, because what it aspires to is uniformity and, invariably, uniform lifelessness. The classic location is not farmland, but our gardens. The signature sound is the seemingly innocuous drone of the Sunday-morning mower, whose use is ritualised almost to the point of piety. Recall the sit-on mower near Gedney reducing ten acres to a short-back-and-sides of rye-grass monoculture. Ten acres could, correctly managed, support thousands of species of organism, in an explosive mix of colour and texture, across the full spectrum of life.

However, it must be added that lawnmowers are now possibly at risk, because the latest must-have of the tidy-minded is plastic grass, which is spreading with viral intensity. In London, where 3.6 million domestic gardens occupy about a quarter of the entire city area, an estimated third are already obliterated under concrete or other synthetic surfaces. And what happens in the capital happens everywhere. I have relatives who have just laid plastic grass.

If plastic grass is not ubiquitous already, then it soon will be, judging from the state of so many of our civic and public spaces – road verges, roundabouts, the curtilage to municipal institutions such as schools, offices, hospitals, churches and sometimes even our recreational parks, which all obey the same deep concern for rectilinear design and abiotic uniformity.* It is not uncommon to see, in such places, maintenance staff in white space suits, chemical drums upon their backs, spraying herbicides on the minute creases of green life that dare extrude from the cracks between concrete slabs. The closest thing that these outdoor spaces resemble is not anything in nature, but the interiors of buildings, which is presumably the largely unconscious intention.

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* But not, it must be added, the sides of many modern roads and motorways, which have been planted with rich varieties of perennials and now represent some of our most visible and even most beautiful flower-rich environments. There are glorious examples around Norwich and on the A11 through south Norfolk, which point to a brighter, more colourful, more nature-tolerant future. Such measures should be fast-tracked in all civic spaces.

As a result of the broad interpretations placed upon the word 'environment', which is taken to mean anything and everything connected to our surroundings, it is often assumed that tidiness is an important *environmental* goal in its own right. It finds expression in the mania for litter-picking and keeping Britain tidy, etc. Not that anyone should condone thoughtless litter; it is not just illegal, it is morally disgraceful, especially fly-tipping. Yet in a list of ten important environmental issues, litter would be tenth and in a list of twenty it would be twentieth. The perfect cure for this 'environmental' concern would be a visit to West Thurrock Lagoons and Canvey Wick nature reserves in Essex. They are two of Britain's most famous biodiverse brownfield sites, which are smothered in flowers and packed with rare bumblebees and beetles, but which are also described in Dave Goulson's recent book as a paradise of 'dog faeces, graffiti, discarded beer cans and broken bottles'.[13]

Litter may be a social problem, but it is seldom a real enemy of biodiversity. Excessive tidiness, however, entails a massive loss of potential wildlife. If we could free ourselves as a society from this neurosis then it offers an extraordinary and, as yet, barely tapped dividend for nature. We may have destroyed 4 million acres of flower-rich meadow. We could recover at least half that figure if only our gardens, both civic and private, were freed from chemical interventions and turned back primarily to native flowers and shrubs. Instead of the work-intensive grass monoculture, we could have virtually labour-free pocket-sized meadows that require only a single cut in late summer. Instead of fitted grass carpets we could have zones of colour and diversity, rich in pollinating insects such as bumblebees, butterflies and hoverflies.

One final observation is that our reluctance to live with nature's creative disorder is an attempt not just to subordinate the life around us, but also to control something within ourselves. This moral imperative is present on the first page of the Old Testament:

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the

> fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

As troubling in its way, for me, is that these issues play out even in the branding of the RSPB, which illuminates how human dominion over nature is, in the words of John Livingston, concreted into 'the very foundations of western thought'.[14] The organisation's present strapline is 'Giving Nature a Home'. One can understand the very positive intent. Permitting presence may be the absolute inverse of enforcing absence, but both rely on the same basic solipsism that we are the agents and nature is the passive external recipient of our agency. We cannot *give* nature a home: nature is a home – *ours*. We live within it. As long as we see ourselves as outside it, then in those powerful words of John Fowles, cited in my frontispiece, 'it is lost both to us and in us'.

5. Environmentalism is part of what you might call soft politics in Britain. Even writing this line of words is a form of political activity. But hard politics in this country converges in a very specific form of psychological architecture, which we know as the Houses of Parliament. Those structures were designed to fulfil an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century process, whereby two relatively similar landed communities exercised power in their own interests. These tribal groupings were known as the Whigs and the Tories, or the Liberals and the Conservatives. Much later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a process of displacement as the Labour Party supplanted the Liberals as the broadly progressive grouping in parliament. The pattern has obtained until today.

Its fundamentally binary structure is indisputable. The very vocabulary of our system – both sides of the House, yah-boo politics, the benches opposite, upper and lower chamber, Her Majesty's Opposition and Her Majesty's Government, divisions, the ayes to the left and the noes to the right, the contents and the not contents, the two-horse race – reinforces the essential kinesis of our public life. If you cannot hear the central dialectic in those words then conjure its physical analogue: two rows of raked wooden benches in diametrical opposition.

At the heart of the process is a winner-takes-all, first-past-the-post arrangement. It squeezes the body politic of a twenty-first-century nation into an eighteenth-century whalebone corset. Some say this is beneficial since it delivers strong, disciplined government and has avoided internal civil conflict for the last 330 years (if one discounts the 'Jacobite' uprisings of the eighteenth century). And we had a chance to change it by referendum in 2011. By more than two to one we rejected the most basic form of proportional representation. Yet no one can doubt that our peculiar political dispensation acts as a powerful drag upon change in Britain.* Recall how it took 114 years and more than twenty separate submitted bills before people acquired a legal right simply to walk on non-productive land. Should we really believe that this legislative entanglement was a clear expression of the will of the nation?

The same restrictive process acts as an immense, regressive filter upon our entire imaginative life. It is very difficult to find ways to talk about environmental issues except outside the main architecture of hard politics because of the binary clamp that the system places over us. For 150 years 'green' politics have remained in the margins of our national conversation or have tried to adapt to the prevailing conditions. As one small illustration of the contortion that this entails, at the 2015 election it took 34,343 votes to elect each Conservative MP and 40,290 votes for each Labour MP, but 1,157,613 votes to elect a single Green MP. And spare a thought for the United Kingdom Independence Party, which needed 3,881,099 votes for its solitary representative.

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* One cannot help noticing in a post-Brexit, post-Trump age a profound sense of broken politics among the English-speaking communities on both sides of the Atlantic. One can also see a shared trend towards increasing voter apathy. In the six US elections from 1896 to 1916 the average turnout was 67.25 per cent, compared with 53 per cent in the six elections since 1996. In Britain, the average voter turnout in the six general elections between 1951 and 1970 was 77.1 per cent, but 66.85 per cent in the six between 1992 and 2015. Does the downward pattern in each country – and in the USA only a little over half those eligible now bother to vote – indicate a pervasive sense that binary two-party politics changes nothing? And if it does, is it time that we addressed how the deepest reflex patterns in Anglo-Saxon thought, which seem rooted in the idea of an eternal antinomy between two equal forces, and which is perhaps also manifest in the dominance of the iambic poetic metre, are blocking modern politics?

6. This political system dovetails with another part of the country's political mindset, which we can call 'land-blindness'. As we have seen, the British, more than almost any other country in Europe, are a landless people. In excess of 53 million of us possess an average of just seven one-hundredths of an acre. In 1072, at the drawing up of the Domesday Book, 4.9 per cent of England's eleventh-century population controlled 99 per cent of the land. Today just 0.3 per cent of Britain's 65 million own 69 per cent of it all. In Scotland, which has the most concentrated pattern of land ownership in Europe, three-quarters of the entire country is held in estates of 1,000 acres or more.[15]

Land is the business of a tiny minority, and because it has been outside the mental horizon of so many people for so long, it seems not to register with the British public. How else can we explain the inertia and lack of a sense of injustice that for the last seventy years we have had, in the form of farm subsidies, a feudal system of transfer from the poor to the wealthy? At its worst this process delivers huge amounts of taxpayers' money to millionaire landowners for no other reason than the fact that they are millionaire landowners. In the twelve years to 2011 just fifty Scottish farmers received £230.6 million in subsidy between them, an annual average of £383,000.[16] Should we not even ask why?

It is odd that in all the brouhaha about Brexit, neither from the remainers nor the leave campaign has there been much if any discussion of the 40 per cent of the EU budget which still goes in these feudal payments. As we noted in Chapter 16, Kevin Cahill, in *Who Owns the World*, pointed out that at the heart of the annual giveaway of €46 billion are the 77,000 landowners in the EU area, who own 112 million acres and receive an annual €12 billion of taxpayers' money.[17] Nor is the CAP the only measure of our land-blindness. As Andy Wightman observes, 'Rural landowners have successfully secured the abolition of all taxes on land and, despite professing to be rural businesses, still enjoy exemption from business rates.'[18]

We have somehow contrived to discount land as a significant subject for public debate, yet continued to view land ownership as an instinctive measure of social and cultural merit. The landed lord it over us still. As I observed in Chapter 16, until the early part of this century, 750 hereditary peers sustained a central place in Britain's political life. Even now ninety-two of them – unelected and unrepresentative, except perhaps of the peculiar interests of their community – retain this same inexplicable privilege. Yet we seem embarrassed to talk about it.

Our land-blindness meshes perfectly with a peculiar characteristic of the landed themselves. It is their land secrecy. They, by contrast, jealously guard the precise details of their territorial possessions just as they might resist public knowledge of their private incomes or their personal sex lives. Recall the shadow Conservative minister who observed that the tax scam at the heart of forestry might attract the attentions of 'the *envious* and *malevolent*'. Recall also how the Forestry Commission, unlike comparable institutions in other European countries, publishes nothing and collects minimal information on the ownership structure of private forestry in Britain. Kevin Cahill has pointed out how, in a manner very similar to the latter agency, the UK government refused to reveal the names of those getting public farm subsidies from the public purse, despite being in breach of the EU's own Constitutional Convention.[19] Today one-third and possibly as much as half the acreage of England and Wales is still not recorded in the Land Registry. One estimate in 1999 suggested that just 25,000 acres of the 11.2 million acres that are unregistered, when they were released as building plots to the construction industry, were worth £40,000 an acre, with a total value of £10–17 billion.[20]

We need as a nation to end the bizarre taboo that nourishes our land-blindness. We should challenge the vested interests who would wish us *not* to be aware or to understand the uses and abuses of our countryside.

7. The discipline that has revealed the inner workings of the more-than-human parts of life is science. Ecologists and biologists were also the community who devised the system of land assessment that is at the very foundations of British conservation and which is elegantly articulated in the *Nature Conservation Review*.

None of this should change. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the only meaningful designations about land quality should be those rooted in an appreciation of biodiversity, and all others that rely upon aesthetic ideas about landscape – the designation of Area of Outstanding

Natural Beauty springs to mind – should be scrapped or radically reorganised. But these issues belong under Truth 8.*

Unfortunately, however, the dominant roles accorded to science and scientists in the ways that society ascribes importance to nature have led to a major undervaluing of nature's multiplicity of roles. For scientists have constructed all the arguments for nature in their own image. The Site of Special Scientific Interest is the classic motif of their mindset. The process was writ large in the battle to stop Cow Green Reservoir, as described in Chapter 12.

Setting aside that the other parts of marine and terrestrial life are the source of all the air we breathe and all the food we eat, nature is the regulator of human health. Recently the Wildlife Trusts have expressed these ideas through its Nature and Well Being Act, a proposed piece of legislation that places nature at the heart of the planning process and which takes account of the increasing evidence that access to nature is a crucial element of much preventative and treatment-based healthcare. Yet that ascription of central importance to nature says nothing about its fundamental place in all cultural activity.

What has also been overlooked is the way that diversity in nature is a primary driver for our creativity. Our relationship to the rest of life nourishes the sciences, the visual arts, sculpture, photography, poetry – indeed, all forms of literature, dance, music and cinematography. We are accustomed to the physical connections that flow through the web of life, but sometimes its impacts are immaterial. Our imaginations are, in part, a result of ecological processes. Soul and soil are genuinely and fundamentally interconnected.

Recall George Trevelyan's words that are cited in the frontispiece: 'By the side of religion, by the side of science, by the side of poetry and art stands natural beauty, not as a rival to these, but as the common inspirer and nourisher of them all.' The only thing I would change would be to substitute *nature* for 'natural beauty'. 'Beauty' is unnecessary. The wings of a house fly, the eyes of an adder and the carapace of an edible crab are beautiful if you look at them for long enough.

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* I will add, however, that I once spoke with a Nebraskan farmer, whose 500-acre farm of GM corn was one continuous monoculture, on which, in 2008, he sprayed an estimated $500,000-worth of chemical fertilisers and pesticides annually. The farmer also thought his farm was beautiful, although he could not explain why. The point I would make is that 'beauty', while profound and real to its beholders, is a near-worthless measure of landscape quality. Recall also the imaginary couple described in Chapter 12 who professed how much they loved Cow Green Reservoir.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote of Amerindians that they found birds not only good to eat but also good to think with.[21] The same principle should be extended to include all nature and all peoples. Other life forms supply the basic fabric of our inner worlds. It is evident in the earliest human forays into what we now call art, especially the spectacular Palaeolithic cave frescoes involving images of aurochs, reindeer, horses, rhinoceros, bears, lions and owls.

Aldous Huxley once suggested that if you took birds out of English poetry you would have to dispose of half the nation's verse canon. I would go so far as to suggest that the single most important natural motif in all world poetry, yielding deeper and more profound insights into the quality of human experience, is the nightingale (see *Birds and People*, pp. 476–9). Tim Dee, chair of the judges for the Forward Prize for Poetry in 2005, noted how there were far more poems on blackbirds in that year than there were on the Iraq War or the 9/11 bombings of the Twin Towers.[22] Nature matters perennially. And these examples merely glance at the totality of our cultural indebtedness.

Go into any British village hall to look at any local art exhibition and you will find a very high percentage of the works depict the other parts of life. At the other end of the artistic continuum, if one had to redact the references to nature from William Shakespeare's collective canon, then one would have to disfigure virtually every single page he wrote and ruin whole plays.

What happens when a country destroys the very basis of its creative responses? We may well find out. But I suggest that, along with the biological deficits inflicted by the self-destruction of our land, we will incur systemic cultural loss. Go to South Lincolnshire if you want to experience what denatured landscapes do to the human spirit.

At present, there is a vector in our cultural life that seems to contradict this statement. It is the massive growth in what one might call environmental art, of which nature writing is a component. Never has the field been richer. Yet we must be careful not to assume that this upsurge of creative responses to our vanishing natural environment is an organic part of some societal awakening and perhaps the vanguard of corrective action. The danger is that it is a compensatory, nostalgic and internalised re-creation of what was once our birthright and is no more: the nature that we knew and are trying to retain through cultural re-imaginings. Ultimately, without the thing itself, without the underlying biodiversity, these responses will be like the light from a dead star: they will persist for a while, may be even decades, but they will travel onwards into the darkness that will eventually consume them.

8. In the sections on north Norfolk (see Chapter 5) and Kinder Scout (Chapter 8) I discussed at length the confusing multiplicity of landscape designations that have grown up in a thicket around the enterprise of environmental thought. Not only have we gone on adding additional layers as each new initiative sweeps us briefly away, but British environmentalism has also been dogged by what is called 'the Great Divide', which was instituted with the establishment of the national parks in 1950.

Essentially it turned on a particular question about nature. Do we cherish it for its manifest beauties measured by some arbitrary aesthetic code? Or do we value and protect wildlife diversity? At that time, we allowed two fundamentally separate systems to grow up. National parks were an answer to the first question, and SSSIs and national nature reserves were intended as the answer to the second. Recall the words of historian Michael Winter when he suggested that the division was intellectually flawed and 'a debilitating feature of the British arrangements'.

At present in the British landscape, places are classified as national parks, national nature reserves, areas of outstanding natural beauty, Ramsar sites, biosphere reserves, special protection areas, special areas of conservation, sites of special scientific interest, local nature reserves, county wildlife sites and so on. The truth is, it is maddeningly complicated.

And is it really necessary? Could we not call them just one name, from the most important to the least, from the World Heritage Site or biosphere reserve as designated by the UNESCO programmes, to the county wildlife site like my own Blackwater?

My version of that name would be 'special places for all nature' (merely as a token to allow discussion of this issue), with an acronym SPAN that recalls for us in perpetuity that the location's importance *spans* what it does both for the more-than-human parts of nature and for us. It would remind us that the process is a dual one: for people and for the other parts of life. And all constitute one thing. So, Blackwater would be a SPAN site. But anywhere that was previously an SSSI would become a SPAN1 site. If a place were an SSSI, but also an SAC and an SPA it would be SPAN3. And if it were additionally a Ramsar Site and a Biosphere Reserve it could be SPAN5. But there would be only one designation for all places important for nature.

Whatever anyone thinks of this idea, the underlying truth is incontrovertible: environmentalists have constructed a barrier to the general public's understanding of nature and of environmental activity. It should be pulled down to make life simpler. Naturalists and environmentalists need to recover the art of speaking plainly.

One other classic expression of the way in which environmentalists have functioned like the legal profession or a medieval priesthood – using language to ring-fence their profession – is in the matter of scientific nomenclature. Scientific Greek and Latin and the nomenclatural system originally devised by Linnaeus in the eighteenth century are undisputed cornerstones of all natural history. Unfortunately, many organisms are still unknown outside this complex vocabulary, and it inserts a major obstacle between the layperson and the other parts of life. British spiders (650 species), flies (>7,000 species) and lichens (>1,600 species) are especially shut out from our ken, partly because of this issue.

Just to give another small example, until very recently it was difficult to find any publications that use common English names for the 10+ British species of sphagnum moss, whose effects are discussed in detail in Chapter 17. They are still invariably referred to with titles such as *Sphagnum capillifolium* subsp *capillifolium*, or *Sphagnum denticulatum* or *Spahgnum fimbriatum*.* Yet they are, arguably, among the most important wild plants in all of British nature.

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* There are mercifully common names for these species. The three listed are acute-leaved, cow-horn and fringed bogmosses.

Not all life forms can be incorporated into public knowledge. Some groups are just too complex, and reference to them only in scientific nomenclature is an unavoidable technical necessity. Massive strides have also been taken to introduce accessible names for all sorts of organisms that were previously behind the Latin wall. Fungi and moths, especially micro-moths, are two such large groups that have been rescued from oblivion. Both are now mainstream parts of British natural history activity. There is no more communal, nor more enjoyable wildlife excursion than a foray in search of mushrooms. I have been party to outings that comfortably accommodate scores of people. They are caravans of sharing and laughter and learning and intimacy with the October landscape.

On the other hand, there is a section of the community that wishes to cleave to the old ways. So often it is a matter of pride. It arises out of a mindset which insists that 'since I have mastered these complexities, so must you, in order to join the club.' I once attended an excellent entomological course focused on hoverflies, one of the most beautiful and important insect groups, which plays a fundamental role in pollination. When I suggested that common names should be devised and promulgated for the 280+ British species there were unanimous howls of opposition. How could they possibly function without the primacy of *Sphaerophoria scripta* or *Helophilus pendulus*? Both these species, which are in their ways as attractive, engaging and harmless as butterflies, probably occur commonly in your garden. I am guessing, however, that many will never have even heard of them.

9. The creation of common names for all parts of nature is probably the biggest low-cost change that environmentalists could implement. The most important single measure to improve all environmental effort would be to forge genuine systemic unity among all parts. All too often there is discussion of the 'environmental movement' or the 'green lobby', as if there were harmony and accord among its various constituents. The ninth Truth is that there is not.

The inability to combine over the course of the twentieth century and until today, is the cardinal failure of environmentalists in this sense: all parts of its resolution are in the hands of those who are all apparently on one side. There needs to be an NEU – a National Environmentalists' Union. The present government talks about our generation leaving a countryside richer than the one it inherited. If it is serious then the NEU needs representation at the highest levels equal to that of the NFU (National Farmers' Union).

The environmental campaigner George Monbiot has pointed out in his book *Captive State* that almost all the major industries that have impact upon the British environment employ sector-wide lobby institutions to fight their case in parliament and beyond. These collectives have names like the Construction Clients Forum, the Construction Industry Council, the Construction Confederation, the British Quarry Products Association and the National Council of Building Materials Producers.[23] Is it not odd that environmental organisations have no such voice?

There are indisputable alliances that have been long established and which yield major dividends. The organisation Wildlife and Countryside Link has provided a platform for collaboration in key campaigns. The ability of the different organisations to act in concert is seen by environmentalists elsewhere in Europe as a distinguishing feature of the British scene.[24] Equally, the *State of Nature* reports show an increased recognition of the need for collective impact and offer in themselves a vision of a more united future.

Yet it is not enough. There is no round table that regulates and intensifies the collective impact of the nature lobby. There is no evolving blueprint that sets out a common policy. There is no social forum that allows for the parts to mingle, to appreciate shared values, to forge common bonds. On the contrary, sometimes, as shown in Chapter 5, there is a sense of go-it-alone individualism and even competition.

Sometimes one sees how separate parts of the 'movement' function in ways that even look contradictory. A longstanding initiative for the Campaign to Protect Rural England is to safeguard the Green Belt, the encircling boundary between town and country that has curtailed the outward sprawl of development for decades. Dogged resistance to building on the outer green spaces has been a central plank of CPRE work almost since its foundation. The question that now hangs over this old fixture is what exactly is being safeguarded in the process, and where is the development directed if not into the countryside?

Alternative sites for development are commonly found in what are known as brownfield sites, the pockets of unused or under-used land lying within the urban boundary. These are part of the CPRE's answer to safeguarding the Green Belt. Such places, however, have often been shown to be rich in wildlife, and occasionally very rich. In 2008 BugLife, Britain's leading conservation charity for invertebrates, surveyed no fewer than 576 such places in the London and Thames Gateway region and found that half held significant biodiversity. A few, including the West Thurrock Lagoons in Essex, may be, proportionate to area, among the most biodiverse places in the entire country. Some environmentalists now question the value of kneejerk defence of Green Belt when such intensively managed agricultural land, which is what Green Belt land often is, can be nearly worthless for wildlife, irrespective of its greenness or its open character.[25] Protecting Green Belt only adds to the pressure on brownfield areas.

The two parts of this environmental conundrum should speak to one another and harmonise a common position.* A perennially attended round table of the NEU would allow this to happen.

The other loss incurred because of a divided house is well illustrated by the present efforts to halt a six-lane, 22,000-cars-a-day highway across one side of the marshes at Lough Beg, County Derry, which is a reserve protected not only as an ASSI (the Northern Ireland equivalent of a SSSI), but also as an SAC, a Ramsar site and a Natura 2000 site. It is, incidentally, at the heart of the bog landscapes that inspired Seamus Heaney's poetry discussed in Chapter 17.

A remarkable couple, Chris and Doris Murphy, at their own expense and initiative, are seeking to overturn the decision in the courts after all the major NGOs have failed to contest the construction. What the Murphys want is not to prevent the road, which all agree is necessary, but to re-route it in a way that accords with the long-established environmental legislation. It is as much a test of the principles governing the development of the British countryside as the other 'hot issue' at Lodge Hill in Kent, discussed in Truth 2. Yet the RSPB, along with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust, Birdwatch Ireland, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and Ulster Wildlife (a Wildlife Trust affiliate) have offered no visible public support for the Lough Beg campaign.

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* This division in opinion over Green Belt versus brownfield biodiversity is, incidentally, a classic expression of the 'Great Divide' in British environmental thought. The healing of this split between those concerned with landscape beauty and those prioritising biodiversity would be a primary goal for any round table.

In short, the Murphys are pretty much alone, although they have received backing from musicians and from poets and writers outraged at the idea of Heaney's poetic landscape being violated. One of the central functions of an NEU round table would be to ensure that each campaign could be eligible for support from the collective 7 million members of conservation groups.

10. The American farmer and writer Wendell Berry, in an essay from 1969 entitled 'Think Little', suggested that in matters of wildlife loss none of us is innocent. 'A protest meeting on the issue of environmental abuse', he wrote,

> is not a convocation of accusers, it is a convocation of the guilty. That realization ought to clear the smog of self-righteousness ... and let us see the work that is to be done.

Every one of us is to blame. And there are no exemptions; not even Sir David Attenborough. Britain's contemporary capitalist society, from which it is impossible to disconnect, is a shared enterprise. It implicates us all. We *are* the problem. 'Nearly every one of us, nearly every day of his life,' according to Berry, 'is contributing *directly* to the ruin of this planet.'[26] No amount of opposition to it in our heads or on our Facebook pages will change those basic facts.

Berry's larger point is that, while we may be responsible, every one of us is, therefore, potentially part of the solution. We *merely* have to act to make a difference. It returns us nicely to the matter of hope, with which I began the chapter, because its supply is in direct proportion to the individual efforts made by any person. To have real hope is not to smear over the facts a higher gloss of optimism, as if the problems can be resolved merely by thinking about them in a particular way. The measures we take have to be ecological in nature; that is, they must travel from the head and heart to the hand. In Matt Howard's magnificently simple line of poetry quoted in Chapter 1, each one of us has 'to act with the whole body and mean it'.

The answer to our environmental problems may be societal in nature, but the solutions will not come if we wait until all of us resolve to act together. Change happens when individuals have the courage to do something independently, regardless of the opponents and even the indifference of supposed colleagues. We have only to contemplate the example set by Chris and Doris Murphy in their attempts to halt a motorway across Lough Beg to realise this. Octavia Hill was another such individual. Think also on Benny Rothman (see Chapter 6), or Margaretta Louisa Lemon (see Chapter 3) or Jake Fiennes (see Chapter 17). In truth there are thousands, if not tens of thousands of individuals acting as well as thinking in ways that can change the world by changing one small part of it.

Yet it is not all about founding momentous societies or attending dramatic court appearances. Most of the key decisions in matters of the environment are literally kitchen-sink choices: they are about which washing-up liquid we use, which shampoo, which detergent, what transport we employ, what food we eat, what pension fund we have, which energy source we pick and the level of acquisitiveness of our lifestyles. Wendell Berry further points out that most of the vegetables needed for a family of four can be grown on a plot measuring 40 × 60 feet. Our gardens are potential sources of high-quality food and of diverse habitat. How we manage them, he argues, can change 'a piece of the world'.

We all need to do more. For my tenth Truth is not really a truth at all, but a question. If the British – with all the privileges of our technology and our historical wealth, with our traditions of democratic government but also our long intricate attachments to nature and our self-proclaimed love for a green and pleasant land – if we cannot sustain a country equal to the love we bear it, then who on Earth can?