

Curlew Conference – talk. 24th Jan 2018

I was fortunate enough to have spent my childhood in central Pembrokeshire with memories of walking in the Preseli hills in the early 1970s and hearing bubbling curlews on their breeding ground. Of course, it is not just me that no longer roams the Welsh hills in the summer – as we have heard, the curlews too have gone.

But this isn't really a talk about curlews. It is a talk about people and controversy. I have been fortunate enough to spend over 30 years working on ecological and conservation conflicts. I am a little bit slow because it took me a while to recognise that these issues are fundamentally about people – about what different people want in the world and how they engage with others to get it.

In this short talk I wanted to reflect on aspects of this work and consider what it means for curlews. I will focus on focus on collaboration and science.

As we have heard, the evidence available to us would suggest that if we want to get curlews back we have to consider two things. First, curlews benefit from the control of generalist predators and this is likely to be especially the case where their habitats are fragmented and of poor quality. Second, in the longer term we need to change the landscape and provide more habitat over a large scale.

Neither large scale predator control nor large scale landscape change is easy. They raise uncomfortable issues of land use, of grazing practices, of cultural and social concerns, of practical challenges, of welfare and of ethics. And it brings us back to the issue of what people want from the uplands and who chooses.

I have worked on a range of issues where people passionately disagree about conservation and management. These positions are often very strongly held and, it seems, difficult to reconcile because of different underlying values and positions. We live in a polarised and adversarial world, where people often seek to impose their world view onto others. There are strong and passionate disagreements around numerous challenges in conservation, whether it is related to rewilding, reintroductions, or raptors.

Adversarial approaches can of course lead to positive change, but they can also prevent meaningful change, be destructive and damaging and prevent those with similar aims from working together.

One of the most crucial aspects in this curlew debate is that (I think) most (if not all) of us are here because we are united by the desire to get curlews back into Wales. This shared goal is very powerful and it is important to always keep that in mind. And bringing curlews back would bring added benefits for other species and landscape character and ecosystem services

The hardest part, of course, is deciding how to bring curlews back. Should we kill lots of predators or change landscapes and habitat or do both (or neither)?

Looking at other systems, I would argue that the most fruitful way forward is likely to be through investing in building collaborative partnerships where you can deliberate and debate with those you disagree with and decide what the priorities and actions should be. Such approaches are not easy – they require energy, time, trust, a willingness to engage and debate with those you disagree with, to listen and to empathise. They also require humility.

The value of collaborative partnerships is that you can bring people with you, you can work at appropriate scales, you are more likely to garner political will, public support and financial support – and all of these are needed to tackle this long-term problem.

As well as partnerships, the other thing we need is **science**. I am a scientist and I love science. It grieves me when science gets maligned and abused because it is this glorious venture that helps us understand how the world works. If we genuinely want to learn how to get curlews back most effectively into Wales, we should be striving for science, for experiments, like we have heard about in Otterburn and the work currently being done by the RSPB. How do curlews respond to different levels of predator control and/or habitat management in different landscape contexts? These are questions that science can address.

Without good science we get caught up in our own biases, our values and our own belief systems. Without good science, we argue that we are right, that what we think should be done is better than what other people believe. Without good science we can look for evidence that supports our preconceptions. Better to rely on objective evidence to inform our position.

However, whilst good science is critical, it is not, in itself, enough. Applied science such as we are thinking of here will be less effective if it is done by aloof boffins or by one organisation doing their research in isolation. Sometimes people don't trust the science or they dismiss or ignore it, or they disagree with the interpretations.

We need to find a way for people to have some psychological ownership of the results – and that means involving them in the science. You are more likely to get curlews back if you work in partnership with scientists, policy makers and the range of interest groups.

A sensible approach that has been effective elsewhere is the idea of adaptive co-management. Adaptive management simply refers to a process of understanding the problem / prioritising management / experimenting / monitoring the results of the experiments / learning and adapting. The CO-management bit refers to doing it together.

A couple of years ago, I was involved in a project where we brought together people from different sectors to talk about the decline of wading birds in Scotland. Again there was strong agreement that something needed to be done – but disagreement about what. The debates were lively and stimulating, but progress has stalled. The current situation is mired in a lack of resources, tokenistic political support and factionalisation. It is not enough to just debate, we have to follow it through to continue the collaboration, to get the resources to act.

It isn't going to be easy getting curlews back, but without building strong collaborations, exposing ourselves to different views, debating and listening, getting political and public support for some difficult choices and funding collaborative science to our advantage I would argue it will be nigh on impossible.

Don't underestimate the challenge created by not moving forward together & don't underestimate the power of moving forward together with a shared goal. Don't underestimate the ability of Mary Colwell to make sure you stay on track.