

**‘Understanding the Benefits of Ecosystems Services’ conference
Brighton University, 24th June 2014.**

Keynote speech by Caroline Lucas, MP for Brighton Pavilion

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this important conference. The programme looks wonderfully informative and inspiring and I wish that I were able to stay beyond this opening session, but sadly I can't, owing to parliamentary business at Westminster.

I'm delighted to be here, not least as it gives me a chance to mention the fantastic news earlier this month that Brighton & Lewes Downs Biosphere has been awarded designation by UNESCO.¹

It's the first completely new Biosphere site in the UK for almost 40 years, the first ever in south-east England, and only one of a handful across over 100 countries that includes a city.

I expect that many of you here today will have worked incredibly hard to make this happen - and will continue to use your expertise and passion to demonstrate how we can all live better by bringing nature and people closer together. So huge congratulations to everyone involved.

I must also tell you how inspiring it's been to read about **the Arun and Rother Connections project**.

¹ <http://biospherehere.org.uk/our-biosphere-is-here/>

The scale of ambition in solving multiple problems from flooding, to habitat fragmentation to soil erosion.

The positive focus of its vision and aims.

And the people centric approach with all the community activities, educational field trips, landowner engagement and volunteering opportunities.

This morning I hope to do three things:

- Firstly, to **set the scene about ecosystems services** and where nature is in the public and political debate, from my perspective as a Member of Parliament
- Secondly, to touch on **why landscape scale conservation is so important**
- And thirdly, to talk about **biodiversity offsetting** and explore the practical and philosophical challenges it presents.

2. SETTING SCENE & ECOSYSTEMS SERVICES FROM PARLIAMENTARY PERSPECTIVE ²

As conservationists, and as citizens, one of the biggest challenges we face is to fundamentally change the way we run our economy – to reflect the

² Organisers suggestion for first part of talk: *Setting the scene about Ecosystem Services “in the real world”*. *Highlighting the benefits outside of environmental context i.e economic, social and health. Is there anything Caroline can say on this from her perspective as an MP/ as a member of the Environmental Audit Committee?*

reality that the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of our environment, not the other way round.

Connecting people with nature and surrounding ecosystems - through projects like ARC – is absolutely crucial if we're serious about that.

Right now, sadly, ecosystems services remain more or less at the periphery of consideration in Whitehall and Westminster.

And I think that could partly be a reflection of public attitudes. MPs aren't exactly under pressure from their constituents about landscape scale conservation.

That's why it's so inspiring to see projects like this that reconnect people with nature and allow them to discover the crucial connections.

Because reconnection with nature is important, not just for its own sake and our own wellbeing as humans, but also because of the potential for a citizen-driven greening of politics and our economy.

As the US writer Alice Walker said: "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any".

Where does the environment feature in public attitudes at the moment?

According to an Ipsos Mori poll in February, following the wettest two months ever recorded for the south of England - and a lot of flooding - one

in ten (10%) people said they were concerned about pollution and the environment.³

That's the highest in in six years.

But it still doesn't feature in people's top 10 concerns.

If we start by recognising that "the environment" isn't what keeps most people up at night – even if that's the case for many of us in this room – then there's a lot riding on notion of ecosystems services.

Ecosystems services⁴ can be a vivid way of bringing to life the fundamental importance of looking after our natural world. Even if I worry that this is yet another technical-sounding term which risks alienating people from the only thing that I believe will create the necessary traction in our minds - the sense of the intimate loss of things we love.

Our reliance on the health of the local, national and global environment for breathable air, clean water, flood protection, fertile soils, a stable climate.

Bees and other insects to pollinate our crops.

³ Perhaps predictably, concern was highest in the South of England excluding London (17%)
<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3346/EconomistIpsos-MORI-February-2014-Issues-Index.aspx>

⁴ •Supporting services: The services that are necessary for the production of all other ecosystem services including soil formation, photosynthesis, primary production, nutrient cycling and water cycling.
•Provisioning services: The products obtained from ecosystems, including food, fibre, fuel, genetic resources, biochemicals, natural medicines, pharmaceuticals, ornamental resources and fresh water;
•Regulating services: The benefits obtained from the regulation of ecosystem processes, including air quality regulation, climate regulation, water regulation, erosion regulation, water purification, disease regulation, pest regulation, pollination, natural hazard regulation;
•Cultural services: The non-material benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation and aesthetic experiences – thereby taking account of landscape values

Green spaces close to home to make us feel good and give us somewhere to exercise, play or simply relax.

Holiday destinations.

Genetic resources for medicines.

Fuel and building materials.

Things that can be taken for granted - but upon which we depend for our health and wellbeing, our prosperity and security.

These aren't just environmental benefits, but social and economic too.

And now we can put a hard monetary value on many of them.

The Commons Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member, carried out an inquiry into Pollinators and Pesticides recently.

The expert evidence we received demonstrated that if farmers had to pollinate fruit and vegetables without the help of insects it would cost around £430 million per year.⁵

As a result, we would all be stung by rising food prices.

Meanwhile, the UK National Ecosystem Assessment found that the health benefits of merely living close to a green space are worth up to £300 per person per year.

⁵ From EAC press release. NEA figure: worth £430million per year to British agriculture.

The benefits that inland wetlands bring to water quality are worth up to £1.5billion per year to the UK.

The amenity benefits of living close to rivers, coasts and other wetlands is worth up to £1.3billion per year.

But - before we get too carried away with the very clear and evidenced economic value of ecosystem services - **let's be careful.**

Oscar Wilde famously spoke of those who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

If valuing nature and ecosystems services in the way suggested will halt the current decline of our precious wildlife and habitats, it is to be welcomed.

But we need very strong safeguards, including in the planning system, to ensure **that putting a pound sign on priceless ecosystems such as ancient woodlands doesn't inadvertently open the door to their destruction.**

That's something I want to come back to shortly, after a quick look at the current priority given to nature and ecosystem services in legislation and policy.

There are **numerous bold commitments, and reams of nature-friendly rhetoric in various government documents and papers.**

The Coalition Agreement itself stated: "we will introduce measures to protect wildlife and promote green spaces and wildlife corridors in order to halt the loss of habitats and restore biodiversity."

Then we had the Natural Environment White Paper and ‘Biodiversity 2020’ - the national strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services.⁶

It sets out the government’s ambition to halt overall loss of England’s biodiversity by 2020, to support healthy well-functioning ecosystems, and to establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people

Local nature partnerships are up and running.

These are all major achievements that conservation organizations can and should be proud of.

They show that Governments do – sometimes - listen when it comes to the state of our wildlife and green spaces.

In the House of Commons there have been 87 mentions of “ecosystems services” in the four years of this parliament. Quite encouraging perhaps!

Although, to put that in context, there have also been 4398 mentions of “economic growth”.

But crucially, it's “deeds not words” that matter the most.

The publication of **Nature Check**, a report from 41 environmental groups on the Government’s progress against its commitments to the natural

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/biodiversity-2020-simple-guide-and-progress-update-july-2013>

environment in England, **makes very clear the gap between the rhetoric and the reality.**⁷

The report identified some positive steps, but not the leadership or delivery demanded by the evidence of nature in crisis.

This evidence shows long and short-term declines in our wildlife and natural places.

According to last year's **State of Nature report** by many of the same leading conservation organisations – many represented here no doubt – **60 per cent of the UK's native species are in decline and 1 in 10 are at risk of extinction.**

This translates into a crisis for people too, because the environment is the foundation of our lives and livelihoods.

So it's deeply worrying that we've got a Government that's good at talking the talk - about how a healthy natural environment underpins the economy and wellbeing.

But when you look at their actions and policies – most of all those outside DEFRA - they tell a different story.

⁷ It looked at Ministers said they will do – not even what they should be doing if they were serious about addressing the biodiversity crisis we face in the UK – and internationally.

Yes, they said, we're completely committed to reforming the CAP so that it boosts environmental schemes - but in fact it has completely failed to maximise the amount of money that it could have invested in wildlife-friendly farming.

Yes, they say, we remain fully committed to an ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas - yet only 27 have so far been designated.

Then we have the new infrastructure Bill with yet more measures to push through new roads and fracking. And not one single mention of green infrastructure.

ROLE OF LANDSCAPE SCALE CONSERVATION⁸

That's one reason why it's both important and inspiring to get out of the Westminster bubble and into the real world where partnerships like the ARC landscape project are walking the talk!

Landscape scale conservation has a crucial role to play in protecting and enhancing ecosystems services.

I know you all understand what that means although it is rather technical sounding!

⁸ From organisers suggestion for second section: *Landscape scale conservation has a significant role to play in terms of enhancing ecosystem services. A range of organisations are now promoting this approach e.g RSPB through their 'Futurescapes' programme (www.rspb.org.uk/futurescapes/) and the Wildlife Trusts through their 'Living Landscapes' programme. (Also see paper extract below).*

I think the Arun and Rother connections strapline “linking landscape and community” explains it well.

Communities of people as well as communities of plants and animals.

Landscape scale conservation is about one of the key ideas in the 2010 Lawton Review – that we needed to expand our horizons beyond nature reserves and protected areas, and look at the needs of nature across whole landscapes, for the benefit of both wildlife and people.

The impacts of climate change further intensifies the need for bigger, buffered protected areas and much better connections between them.

This approach has long been championed by conservation organisations such as the RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts.

It’s only with conservation groups, government agencies, farmers, businesses, local authorities and communities working together that we can ensure these wildlife-rich areas continue to be home to a wide range of species and habitats and protect the vital services they provide to local communities at the same time.

3. VIEWS ON BIODIVERSITY OFFSETTING, RISKS & CONSTRAINTS ⁹

This brings us to the hot topic of biodiversity offsetting.

⁹ From organisers: “We would be keen to hear Caroline’s views about biodiversity offsetting, in light of the Environmental Audit Committee’s response to the Government’s Green Paper. The potential risks and constraints associated with biodiversity offsetting especially if Ecosystem Services are not taken into account. When you start putting a price on things there is a danger of loss of or damage to irreplaceable natural assets. Timescales of planning decisions and delivery of offsetting proposals are often difficult to reconcile. “

It's one of the Government's flagship nature conservation policies, which we are told offers: "a way we can make our planning system even better for the environment and developers."¹⁰

In response to one of my parliamentary questions, George Eustice the Environment Minister, claimed it would:

"contribute to... the Biodiversity 2020 objective to create: 'more, bigger and less fragmented areas for wildlife, with no net loss of priority habitat and an increase in the overall extent of priority habitats by at least 200,000 ha'.

I'm not convinced. There are huge risks to such an approach – especially if ecosystems services are not taken into account.

My concerns are both practical and philosophical.

Many of the practical problems came to light during another Environmental Audit Committee inquiry: into biodiversity offsetting¹¹.

¹⁰ OPatz forward to offsetting consultation 2013 https://consult.defra.gov.uk/biodiversity/biodiversity_offsetting/supporting_documents/20130903Biodiversity%20offsetting%20green%20paper.pdf All manner of other problems in this e.g. "Offsetting is a simple concept. It is a measurable way to ensure we make good any residual damage caused by development which cannot be avoided or mitigated. This guarantees there is no net loss from development and supports our ambition to achieve net gain for nature. For developers it can offer a simpler, faster way through the planning system. It can be quicker and more straightforward to agree a development's impacts and can create a ready market to supply compensation for residual damage to nature."

¹¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/news/biodiversity-offsetting-report-published/>

This in turn informed our wider inquiry into Wellbeing, which concluded earlier this month. It recommended that the 'Natural Capital Committee', set up to check how far the Government bases its policies on the cost and benefits the UK derives from its natural environment — such as clean air, water, food and recreation — be put on a permanent statutory footing.

I won't go through all of our findings and recommendations, but we did identify a serious risk of biodiversity offsetting giving carte blanche to developers to concrete over important habitats.

We were particular concerned about the Secretary of States refusal to rule out the application of offsetting to irreplaceable sites such as ancient woodland¹².

And we were puzzled, to put it mildly, by the Environment Secretary's rose tinted view of how biodiversity offsetting has been working in Australia.

I pressed him for the evidence to back up his claim that it's led to an 80% shift of planning applications away from fragile environments, and to comment on specific reports that it was actually leading to an overall loss of native vegetation.

The answers were worryingly vague, and reinforced another of our committee's headline concerns: the weak evidence base and analysis underpinning the scheme – especially in relation to the proposed 20 minute assessment for calculating biodiversity value at a site.

Now, I expect many of you will be ecologists and experienced in this sort of thing.

I am neither, but the idea of a 20 minute tick box assessment amounting to "job done" is alarming - in itself and because of what it reveals about the

¹² A lot of carefully worded PQ answers but In January, [Owen Paterson told the Times](#) that developers could be allowed to destroy ancient woodland if they agree to plant 100 trees for each one felled, adding that the offset could be as much as an hour's drive away. Mr Paterson admitted that it would be impossible

fundamental disregard of potential complexities of an individual site - let alone the connections of that site to the wider landscape and ecosystem.

Any assessment must include ecosystem services provided – such as pollination and flood prevention - and ‘ecosystem network’ connectivity to reflect the full complexity of habitats.¹³

And the committee concluded that the pilot projects – whilst failing to make the case for going ahead with biodiversity offsetting in the first place – most definitely showed that any scheme must be mandatory rather than voluntary.¹⁴

But the way it’s looking at the moment, the Treasury will veto a mandatory system. A voluntary scheme would be the worst outcome for biodiversity.

There is a serious risk that developers will be able to use the scheme to turn a ‘no’ in to a ‘yes’ - for developments that simply should not be going ahead in the first place.

Of course we need rules to ensure that when develop goes ahead, it is accompanied by the restoration and creation of new green spaces.

to re-create mature habitats in time for them to be enjoyed by present generations but said that the loss could be mitigated by a “huge offset”.

¹³ Govt response makes it clear that it will not consider wider ecosystem benefits like flood prevention and the health benefits of access to green space in its offsetting scheme. Instead, it expects these to be assessed through the existing planning system. (according to FoE)

¹⁴ Also that the ‘mitigation hierarchy’ must be painstakingly upheld – so offsetting would only be even considered after alternative development sites or a means of mitigating the environmental loss in situ had been exhausted.

But if that's the challenge the government had started with, I don't think biodiversity offsetting would have been the solution.¹⁵

4. CONCLUSION: WIDER ISSUES

Even if the Government accepts all the select committee recommendations –which it emphatically didn't – that won't overcome the more fundamental problems with biodiversity offsetting.

a) marketization & why bad

Biodiversity offsetting is marketization.

It's premised on the commodification of natural assets.

By putting a value on trees, butterflies, ponds, parks or scrubland, we are measuring the importance of these things in a very narrow way.

This remains the case, even if we use some of the leading approaches that yield some seriously big numbers – such as the UK national ecosystems assessment or TEEB¹⁶ (The economics of ecosystems and biodiversity)

¹⁵ Alternative is to ensure this happens through land use planning system – much more democratic, easier to take into account long term as well as short term issues. Planning system does need to change too. Right now being skewed in favour growth at any cost rather than sustainability. Need to put precautionary principle and environmental limits back at the heart of planning. Suggestion for presumption against unsustainable development.

¹⁶ I reckon folk prob know what TEEB is, but for elaboration: TEEB stands for the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity, which is a global initiative focused on drawing attention to the economic benefits of biodiversity including the growing cost of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation. TEEB presents an approach that can help decision-makers recognize, demonstrate and capture the values of ecosystem services & biodiversity. Professor Clive Splash, Chair of Public Policy and Governance, at the Vienna University of Economics and Business (was at that Tyndal conference) calls TEEB. ““terrible economics, ecosystems and banking”.”^f

Markets might be an efficient way of meeting short term human preferences for toothpaste or ice cream, but that doesn't mean they're good at determining what is ecologically essential for the maintenance of life support systems.

Commodification ignores issues of power, social justice, inequality, and community control over local ecosystems.

It perpetuates the right to destroy, and lulls onlookers into thinking something good is being done.

It puts us on a path towards dehumanisation of debate and decision making, at the very time where I believe we should be doing everything possible to reconnect people with nature – not least our children – and give people a meaningful say over the future of their local environment.

If there's a price tag on a piece of local woodland, and the developer agrees to spend more than that elsewhere if it's determined that the development will 'unavoidably' trash it, then the arguments over.

b) non market solutions

Saying no to biodiversity offsetting means we have to look for solutions to protect nature and ecosystems services somewhere other than in the market.

That opens the door to solutions that are subject to greater public scrutiny and participation, that are transparent and accountable to local people,

that help reconnect people with nature and all of the 'ecosystems services' that it provides.

The land use planning system has been getting a lot of bashing from the government recently, but it's got a crucial role to play.

We should be reforming the planning system to strengthen it, to give communities an opportunity to engage fully.

We should be strengthening it to ensure that, no matter how much that new bypass might claim to stimulate the economy, it does not justify concreting over acres of ancient woodland and the habitats of rare and protected wildlife species.

We need to create a planning system that is about pro-actively and strategically planning for the future - not just about avoiding the long term consequences of the decisions we make today.

That means protecting the notion of environmental limits and the precautionary principle – both under threat - and making them central to decision making.

Biodiversity offsetting risks sidelining these further too.

c) growth

Most fundamentally, biodiversity offsetting maintains and legitimises the current growth model – the very same one that has led us, our wildlife, and our planet to the current crisis.

The RSPB's conservation director recently wrote:

“Our desire to sustain economic growth does place huge pressures on our finite natural resources.”¹⁷

But growth is not an easy or popular topic to tackle head on.

Indeed, Professor Tim Jackson has warned that this is a dangerous subject:

“Questioning growth is deemed to be the act of lunatics, idealists and revolutionaries. But question it we must.”

There's nothing 'natural' about our current economic arrangements.

They have been consciously designed to achieve a simple objective: growth.

But growth is not making us happier. It's creating dysfunctional and unequal societies, and it's leading to the destruction of wildlife and ecosystems.

If it continues in the same way, it will make large parts of the planet unfit for human habitation.

This obsession with growth is why solutions like biodiversity offsetting are being championed by people on all sides of the political spectrum - instead of better solutions.

¹⁷ <http://www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/b/martinharper/archive/2012/02/28/improving-nature.aspx?Redirected=true> but then goes onto talk about new nature improvement areas which are obviously really important (that's what blog is about).

Solutions based on the fact that happiness and wellbeing do not depend on endless economic growth and material wealth, but rather on contented families, strong communities, meaningful work, and personal freedom.

I've strayed away from biodiversity offsetting and I hope you'll excuse that.

To conclude, I'll come back to the world of factories and trees.

Or at least a fictional one – as set out by Dr Seuss in one of my favourite children's books, *The Lorax*.

In it, a factory owner cuts down trees to make thneeds, regardless of whether anyone needs thneeds.

And he works "to bigger and bigger" his factory, until there are no more trees left, and the countryside is barren and wasted.

Perhaps you'll indulge me while I read a bit out, as our factory owner explains how it happened:

"I meant no harm. I most truly did not.

But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.

I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads.

I biggered my wagons. I biggered the loads

Of the Thneeds I shipped out. I was shipping them forth

To the South! To the East! To the West! To the North!

I went right on biggering....selling more Thneeds.

And I biggered my money, which everyone needs."

For a book written over 40 years ago, it sounds eerily topical.

Its message remains relevant today. If we're going to protect the ecosystems services upon which we all ultimately depend, we need to do things differently – at an economy wide scale - and soon.

So it's wonderful to see that there's so much already happening differently on a big scale locally, through projects like ARC.

I'm sorry that I can't stay for more of the conference to learn about it in more detail and to hear more about all your projects.

But I'm sure Rachel from the RSPB and Tony from Sussex Wildlife Trust will continue to make sure I know about all of the fantastic projects happening on the ground. ARC is a crucial part of that, and please be assured that I'll do what I can at Westminster to speak up for ecosystems services and call for the policies we need to protect nature and facilitate such great work.