

Back to nature

Urban ecologist Professor David Goode looks back at our modern-day connection with the environment, assesses how nature in recent years has become more centre stage, and explains why this is meaningful for the future

Throughout my working life as an ecologist I have been acutely aware of two critical impacts on the global environment. One is the enormous scale and rate of species extinction, the second is climate change. Both have intensified with each passing decade. Both result directly from human activities. From a global perspective it is clear that human actions continue to have a disastrous effect on natural ecosystems. So it will be no surprise to hear that I can become despondent. But I am recently becoming more optimistic.

For several years in the UK we have seen growing concern about environmental matters, with increased recognition of the value of nature to humanity. Creating greater connection between people and nature has become a major feature of the environmental agenda, spawning a wealth of new initiatives from local residents' groups and primary school activities right through to local and national government.

How has this come about? Television documentaries, notably Sir David Attenborough's series *Planet Earth*, no doubt played a part in raising public consciousness of environmental problems. *Blue Planet II* was the most-watched television show in the UK in 2017, with more than 14 million viewers. Any bookseller will tell you there has also been a huge surge in 'nature writing', with a large number of new and distinguished authors involved. They include academics, naturalists, farmers and journalists who have promoted a climate of enthusiasm for nature that is beginning to permeate society across many different fields. The quality of the literature in this genre is a major driving force. There are spellbinding tales for younger readers too, such as local writer David Almond's *Bone Music* which explores long-established deep connections between ourselves and nature.

The value of nature in promoting health and well-being, including mental health, is also well-established. The NHS has links with environmental centres to which patients are referred by their GPs to take part in activities that allow them to 'regain their own health'. The Eden Project in Cornwall is one such centre. Others are specifically designed for people to connect with nature in towns and cities. At a local level there are numerous opportunities for people to connect with nature, such as by joining natural history society field meetings, or joining a group to listen to the dawn chorus. They can even participate in citizen science projects monitoring changes in the distribution of species. Apps can now be used to explore local wildlife sites and grants are available to improve access to nature and encourage people to get involved. Here in Bath we have benefited from grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the Bathscape Project, a major project relating to the landscape of woods and meadows that form part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, also for Sydney Gardens and Smallcombe Cemetery.

The second issue is climate change. I first read about it in the 1960s when it was referred to as the greenhouse effect. Although the issue had

hardly entered the public arena, climate scientists and ecologists were already clear that the earth's atmosphere was getting warmer as a result of the increased concentration of CO₂ due to burning of coal and oil. I predicted in 1982 that there would be severe environmental consequences within the next 50 years. The wider public woke up to the problem in the 1980s and decisions were taken at the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 for countries to limit emission of greenhouse gases. Sadly, emissions have continued to rise over the past 30 years and are still rising. Without immediate action to reduce emissions it will become impossible to prevent an increase in temperature exceeding 1.5°C, a goal that would prevent the most damaging effects of warming.



One of the most profound effects of lockdown has been the realisation by many people that nature is all around us



However, I am heartened by the new awareness that has spread across the world since 2018. Greta Thunberg has had an astonishing impact since she embarked on her school strike for climate outside the Stockholm Parliament in August that year. She mobilised millions of young people to take action to persuade governments to take climate change seriously as a global crisis. In a series of speeches to world leaders she made it clear through plain speaking that they have failed to address the simple truth that use of fossil fuel has to stop. That means now. "If the emissions have to stop, then we must stop the emissions. To me that is black or white. There are no grey areas when it comes to survival. Either we go on as a civilization or we don't" (Thunberg, 2019). Our local Council, B&NES, declared a Climate Crisis in March 2019. This year the new US President Joe Biden has put climate change at the top of his agenda and is already pressing world leaders to take real action. This year is crucial. The UK will chair the UN Climate Summit in November. We have been waiting too long for positive action. This time it has to happen.

Coronavirus struck in January 2020. Can we ever forget the extraordinary effect of the first lockdown in March? My first impression was that air pollution in Bath had suddenly abated, the sky was clear and unusually blue, and at night it was filled with stars. The Milky Way was magnificent. But for me it was the silence that was most profound when we first experienced the lack of background noise. It was eerily quiet with hardly any road traffic, trains or other sounds of the city. The only sounds were the birds. Their songs seemed to be enhanced by the stillness. Many people commented that they had never noticed them before. Others asked why the birds were singing so loudly. Most striking, of course, was the absence of people. The centre of Bath was suddenly deserted and even on our local walks in Widcombe we hardly saw a soul. Everyone was indoors. It seemed at times as if we were living through a science fiction drama.

Animals reacted in different ways. Even in the first days of lockdown there were reports of wildlife taking advantage of the absence of people to invade towns and cities. A herd of feral Kashmiri goats hit the headlines browsing in gardens along streets in the centre of Llandudno, and there were reports of wild boar running amok in several Italian



Bug hunt on Troopers Hill in Bristol, 2009