

Wilderness movement is gathering pace!

Taken from the Guardian, Dec 30th 2005.



Overall, nature reserves probably account for no more than 1% of England's land surface, but figures compiled by the Guardian reveal the movement is gathering pace.

The number of national nature reserves declared by the government agency English Nature has risen rapidly from 164 sites in 1995 to 202 in 2000 and 217 today. They now cover 87,000 hectares - about 340 sq miles.

The 47 local county wildlife trusts have extended their own reserves from 55,000 hectares in 1994 to 82,000 in 2005.. Their membership has also ballooned, more than doubling to 600,000 paying supporters in 10 years. The trusts' combined annual income is now £ 100 m!

The RSPB, with more than a million members, has been one of the largest purchasers of land. It owns or manages 129,000 hectares, turning farmland into more diversified habitats.

N.F.U. says. "With reform of the CAP even more cultivated land is likely to come up for sale," The average age of a farmer in the UK is now 58. As British conservationists make moves to buy up larger areas of the land. The transformation of cultivated land into nature reserves and the reintroduction of vanished native species is gathering pace.

On Manor Farm, near Stonehenge in Wiltshire, the last pheasant will soon be bagged, as fields of wheat and barley revert to chalk down-land. An appeal by the the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to raise £2.5m to transform the land will, if successful, result in much of its 730 acres being seeded with wildflowers to encourage stone curlews and orchids.

The enthusiasm for conservancy schemes is being financed by mass-membership organisations and grants. Meanwhile, the decline in agricultural subsidies for food production and pressure to lower international trade barriers have accelerated the abandonment of marginal farmland.

Private reserves established by people quitting city life have added to the accumulation of wildlife sanctuaries. The metamorphosis is becoming increasingly visible as nature charities buy land next to reserves in the belief that larger uncultivated tracts generate greater biodiversity. The clustering is most visible in places such as the Purbeck peninsula in Dorset, where tended fields are becoming heath and moorland.

In 2005 the Wilderness Foundation, the charity founded by Laurens van der Post, revealed a proposal to gradually replace 800,000 hectares of traditional farmland with reserves, possibly inhabited by vanished species such as elk, moose, beaver and wild horse.

Toby Aykroyd, vice-chairman of the foundation, says piecemeal accumulation of land is laying the foundation for large-scale reclamation. He believes conservationists have lost faith in the government's classification of sites of special scientific interest. "One of the problems of agro-

environmental subsidies is that they are short-lived," he says. "What happens to farms once these financial Incentives cease?"

In the US, "re-wilding" means returning land to its state before settlement by Europeans, but in Britain the landscape has been formed by thousands of years of human occupation. Managed grazing prevents most sites reverting to wild forest. Rare birds, such as the red kite and bustard, have been reintroduced but the emphasis has been less on safari-style tourism. However, plans to reintroduce bears, lynx, wild boar and wolves are under consideration on several Scottish estates.

The loss of cultivated land is becoming more common, the National Farmers Union says. "With reform of the CAP even more is likely to go up for sale," says Fiona Howie, the union's countryside adviser. "Some farmers are deciding it's just not viable to continue; the average age of a farmer in the UK is now 58.

"Large-area conservation is relatively new but it's catching on rapidly. This is the best opportunity since the iron age -when large-scale tree-felling began for smelting - to transform the landscape.

Experts suggest the countryside is going towards being divided into a smaller, intensified agriculture sector, possibly reliant on poly tunnels to extend the growing season, and a vastly expanded network of nature reserves.

There are so many benefits: tourism income, flood mitigation in valleys, carbon sequestration, water purification. Marginal land will be come uneconomic under a reformed Common agricultural policy, its one of those rare situations where conservation and economics are working in the same direction."

Studland Heath, Purbeck Peninsula.

Parcels of land held by the RSPB, Dorset county council, Dorset Wildlife Trust, English Nature and the National Trust adjoin each other, fields have been returned to lowland heath.

The Lizard, Cornwall.

A project coordinated by the RSPB, National Trust, English Nature and the environment department has restored the vegetation for wild choughs to breed for the first time in 50 years.

Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire.

Wild horses have been introduced to graze the newly extended wetlands, and there are plans to expand to 9.000 acres.

Barnes, West London.

The Wildfowl and Wetland Trust have converted old sewage works into reed beds near to the heart of the capital.

Abbots Hall Farm, Essex.

The managed retreat of tidal defences has converted farmland to natural marshes. The project, coordinated by Essex wildlife trust, the world wildlife fund, and the Environment agency, has around 60 acres of salt marsh.