

## Monbiot.com

Tell people something they know already and they will thank you for it.  
Tell them something new and they will hate you for it.

### The Naming of Things

Posted March 15, 2010

Here's one small way in which the collapse of biodiversity could be slowed

By George Monbiot. Published in the Guardian 15th March 2010

The names alone should cause anyone whose heart still beats to stop and look again. Blotched woodwax. Pashford pot beetle. Scarce black arches. Mallow skipper. Marsh dagger. Each is a locket in which hundreds of years of history and thousands of years of evolution have been packed. Here nature and culture intersect. All are species that have recently become extinct in England.

I cannot claim that I've been materially damaged by their loss, any more than the razing of the Prado would deprive me of food or shelter. But the global collapse of biodiversity hurts almost beyond endurance. The sense that the world is greying, its wealth of colour and surprise and wonder fading, is so painful that I can scarcely bear to write about it. Human welfare, as measured by gross domestic product, is doubtless enhanced by the processes which drive extinction. Human welfare, as measured by the heart and the senses, is diminished. We have no use for most of the world's natural exuberance; it cannot be commodified or reproduced. Biodiversity does not belong to us: that is why it is worth preserving.

In Doha today, governments are engaged in their annual festival of frustration: the endless arguments over the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species(1). They are struggling against what often looks like an inexorable assault by technology, economic growth and sheer bloody idiocy. The latter is exemplified by the battle over the Atlantic bluefin tuna. Many governments want to ban the trade in this species for several years, but Japan is resisting furiously. Whether or not a ban is imposed, the effect on Japanese industry will be roughly the same, as the species is likely to become commercially extinct next year if current fishing levels continue(2). But the government would prefer one more year of raw exploitation to indefinite supplies in the future. There is no reasoning with this madness.

But it's the new report by Natural England which hit me hardest(3). English plant and animal species are still disappearing at the rate of two a year. All the goodwill, the billions of pounds and millions of hours poured into conservation work, the global treaties and concordats seem to be no match for the amplification of our presence on earth. If we can't even get this right in England, where the two biggest membership organisations are both conservation groups, where does hope lie?

There were several shocks in the report, but it was a different set of names that hammered into my mind. Some of the most endangered species have very ordinary, even – if I might be so rude - common names. The common frog, common gull, common skate and common smoothhound are all in trouble. The common eel is now listed as critically endangered everywhere. I remember, years ago, sitting beside a chalkstream whose entire bed was a writhing black conveyor belt of eels moving upriver. The eel was a universal, indestructible species. It can live almost anywhere, even stagnant water in which no other fish can survive, it can eat any old carrion and travel overland between ponds on dewy nights. Nobody

valued them because they were everywhere. Had someone told me, on the bank of that river, that within my lifetime they would be threatened with extinction, I would have laughed out loud. If the common eel is now critically endangered, is any species safe?

Beside the clanking rigours of commerce and technology, our concerns about biodiversity sometimes appear almost effete. That there are pay-offs here is undeniable. The major cause of extinction in most countries is habitat loss. Most of this is caused either by clearing land for farming or by intensifying farming methods, in both cases to increase production. Even in the UK, where hundreds of millions have been spent on schemes to make farms hospitable to wildlife, Natural England blames changes in farm practices – cutting grasslands early, ploughing in winter stubble, the replacement of mixed farms with arable deserts - for many of the losses. The rightwing thinktanks which demand a further intensification of farming argue, as they always do these days, that their real concern is not the welfare of the rich (the businesses and bosses who pay them to develop these arguments) but the welfare of the poor. If we were to farm with wildlife rather than only profit in mind, the decline in productivity would raise the price of food, at an intolerable cost to the poor.

There is some truth in this, as far as it goes. But I have never heard these people argue on the same grounds against unregulated urban sprawl, which every year takes millions of acres of good farmland permanently out of production. Far from it: they demand the scrapping of planning rules. Nor do I see them making the case for reducing the rich world's consumption of meat, to release grain for feeding humans. The immediate choice we have to make is not between biodiversity and feeding the world, but between biodiversity and blithering stupidity.

As a child I watched chalk downlands, where rare orchids and wild strawberries, adonis blues and marbled whites, whitethroats and hobbies, flint pits and burial mounds had survived since the Neolithic, being wiped clean by ploughs, to produce grain that fed nothing but the subsidy mountains. Now I watch the remaining scraps of our collective memory erased to grow biofuels which produce more greenhouse gases than the petroleum they replace. This week's issue of Fishing News tells us that around 2m tonnes of the fish sold in Europe is used for feeding other fish or terrestrial livestock, and a further one million tonnes of edible fish are dumped back into the sea, dead, as they are over-quota catches(4). Much of this bycatch consists of species like the once-common skate and once-common smoothhound, which are now in danger of extinction. Japanese fishing policy might be stark raving mad; ours is scarcely saner.

So where does hope lie? I'm often struck by the strength of national feeling when an artwork – even one that scarcely anyone has seen - is stolen or damaged or bought by a foreign collector. Yet our animals and plants slip away unknown and unmourned. This country's wildlife groups are admirable in many ways, but they have somehow failed to ignite our interest in most of the species threatened with national extinction, many of which are small and unobtrusive.

It seems to me that one of the handicaps conservationists suffer is that few of these species have common names. It is hard to persuade people to care about something they can't pronounce. Nature is most valued when it intersects with culture. I would love to see a body like Natural England launch a public competition to name the country's nameless species: the micromoths and creeping mosses, the bashful beetles and unassuming mushrooms known only in Greek or Latin. It need simply list their characteristics, habits and locations and let the public do the rest. But it should set one condition: don't call any of them common.

[www.monbiot.com](http://www.monbiot.com)

References:

1. [http://www.cites.org/eng/news/press\\_release.shtml](http://www.cites.org/eng/news/press_release.shtml)
2. <http://www.cites.org/eng/cop/15/doc/E15-52.pdf>
3. <http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/NE233>
4. Fishing New, 12th March 2010, page 6.

## Stay Updated

Get new articles by email:

## Categories

- [advertising](#)
- [Books](#)
- [climate change](#)
- [corporate power](#)
- [culture](#)
- [economic justice](#)
- [education & childhood](#)
- [employment](#)
- [environment](#)
- [farming](#)
- [food](#)
- [foreign affairs](#)
- [General](#)
- [genetic engineering](#)
- [globalisation](#)
- [health](#)
- [health & safety](#)
- [hunting & the countryside](#)
- [interviews and debates](#)
- [landrights & planning](#)
- [law & order](#)
- [media](#)
- [nuclear](#)
- [oil](#)
- [politics](#)
- [privatisation](#)
- [protest](#)
- [racism](#)
- [religion](#)

- [science](#)
- [supermarkets](#)
- [tourism](#)
- [transport](#)
- [war - afghanistan](#)
- [war - general](#)
- [war - iraq](#)

## Links

- [About George Monbiot](#)
- [Careers Advice](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Discuss these articles](#)
- [Talks](#)
  
- [Articles by RSS](#)

Copyright © 2006 Monbiot.com | site by [Tom Dyson](#)