

**London Wildlife Trust AGM
19th September 2020**

Questions and Answers

There was some talk a couple of years ago of beaver reintroduction to the River Lea, but things seem to have gone quiet on this front since then. Is this still a consideration or is it dead in the water?

Yes, this floated by some four years ago, as a proposal by a group no doubt inspired by the actions on the River Otter in Devon by Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) and FoE with a wild beaver family, and recently 'licensed' by Defra to now remain free following the excellent work by DWT and University of Exeter to study the impacts of a beavers on a water course (in very rural situation). It is not, alas, a serious consideration for the Lower Lee (basically that between the M25 and Bow Creek) due to the lack of floodplain space, the multiple uses of the Lee/Lea Navigation, the artificial nature of much of the water courses in the Valley, and the paucity of riparian woodland with enough trees to feed beavers and their lodge-building.

There are also arguably more important conservation priorities for the Lee and its tributaries such as addressing the pollution impacts in the watercourses, the need to develop better fish passages (weir removals, etc), and focus on the remaining water vole populations through mink control and habitat enhancements. Beaver introductions are taking place in Essex, and there may be opportunities further north into the Lee catchment outside London; we maintain dialogue with partner organisations to see what potential there is on the London fringes (e.g. Colne in the west and Ingrebourne catchments in the east).

As a family thinking of visiting some of the Trust's reserves for the first time, we wonder what the Trust's experience has been of all dog owners adhering to the dogs on leads policy? We wonder how the dogs on leads policy is expressed – e.g. as a request or a requirement with the threat of a fine? In essence, does it need updating?

The Trust has its own Dogs on Reserves policy which seeks to minimise the adverse impacts of dogs on biodiversity (e.g. disturbance) and other visitors, whilst acknowledging many of our site visitors are dog-walkers (often their primary reason for visiting). On the few reserves in which we can control access, dogs are not allowed (apart from assistance).

However, the majority of our reserves are leased from local authorities and are public open spaces, by which we are bound by their bye-laws. Some have dog control orders, others don't, few have the resources to police and enforce them. Of course this is in the context of rising dog-ownership. Our staff will keep an eye on matters as and when, and encourage responsible dog behaviour, but we are also mindful that some owners don't take lightly to being asked to control their charges, and so judgement is always required to choose as and when to intervene. In a few instances we have reported contravention of bye-laws to the appropriate authority, and one dog-owner was served an anti-social behaviour order to prevent her accessing the reserve (over 10 years ago), albeit this took a lot of effort.

In the light of the recent Countryfile piece by Dwayne Fields and research from DEFRA's Landscapes report showing that people from BAME backgrounds often feel unwelcome in the countryside, what are London Wildlife Trust doing to support people from diverse backgrounds to feel comfortable using green spaces?

We have implemented a range of projects and activities over the course of the last 30 years to gain better insight, listen and learn. This has included, for example, holding Chinese

New Year festivals at Camley Street Natural Park, through to Cockney Sparrow, Natural Estates and Keeping it Wild, all projects specifically set up to reach those we know are less likely to access wild spaces. We have also participated in parks refurbishment projects to make them more welcoming, safe and enjoyable places for people of BAME and other under-represented backgrounds. This has been further consolidated through a Diversity Action Plan (for example addressing recruitment, the language, imagery and behaviours we use), a Youth Forum, and now a formal Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Group that is embedded in our governance structure and shaping our Strategic Plan to make our organisation, activities and actions better representative of London's diversity of people.

We recognise we still have a long long way to go, and that there are many systemic and cultural barriers that we and other environment organisations have to address in order to make sure our green spaces (and the wider countryside) are welcome and beneficial for all. Please keep an eye out as we plan to share our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy on our website, and will be talking more about the issues of systemic racism in the environment sector more in the coming months.

A by-law to protect LNRs and other sensitive green areas in residential zones from encroachment by residents of properties backing onto the boundary. I am involved with The Parkland Walk LNR in north London. This is former railway land and is a linear park stretching for 4.5km through residential areas. Over the years residents have been creating access by putting gates in their fences so they can have their own route to the main path. Where this was once just occasional, we now have stretches where as many as 10 consecutive households have encroached creating trampled paths through vegetation every 5 metres. These encroachments are often also associated with the dumping of garden waste, rubbish and other more significant fly-tipping. Haringey council has no legal way to control this abuse (the access and trampling) despite the fact that access is supposed to be via the entrances provided by the landowner and has suggested a by-law may be the only way to carry out any form of enforcement. This is something a cash strapped council cannot afford to undertake on its own. As this is quite possibly a problem affecting many green spaces across London and over the whole country, would the Wildlife Trust be prepared to look at financing the drafting of a by-law that can give LAs more power to protect green spaces and valuable wildlife habitats?

This has affected sites we managed in the past; and we'd say it's part and parcel of a legislative framework that places status on private land ownership, and weaknesses on preventing trespass or squatting of public land, especially in suburban areas. However, the length and context of the Parkland Walk makes it probably more vulnerable than most LNRs in London (it certainly occurs, but how commonplace it is aside from some particularly narrow sites bordered by gardens (e.g. Mill Hill Old Railway, Belmont NR, Coombe Wood nr Kingston) it is difficult to determine. At a national level we have no idea, and I suspect that firstly we'd need to get a better understanding of the issue and what tools could help reverse the situation.

Unfortunately, the Wildlife Trusts are unlikely to have the resources, and arguably, as LNRs are a local authority legislative tool, then it is the Local Government Association (or the Association of Local Government Ecologists) that should be engaged. If it were a nationally significant issue, with tangible damage to biodiversity interests, then no doubt the WTs would help on advocacy and support. It is, alas, one of many problems we face in protecting and conserving our ecological jewels, and we are mindful how frustrating it is for those of us who care for them, but not getting the support we need.

How isolated does the far east of London become [in terms of nature reserves]?

We want LWT to be relevant to all of Greater London. We continually look for projects and land across the capital including all areas of the east of the Lee Valley. At the moment this is mostly limited to an advisory role on, for example, the Epping Forest Consultative Committee and the Roding Beam & Ingrebourne Catchment Improvement Group.

We acknowledge we once had greater activity in eastern boroughs, such as at Claybury, Dagenham Chase, Harold Hill, Barking Reach and Stratford, but circumstances led to those changing. We are mindful this is a part of London where we want to have a greater presence, and believe there are opportunities, such as those for Fairlop Plain and the River Roding if our resources and capacity enable to progress these.

Are developers always compliant with allowing extra space/land for biodiversity and ecological needs?

Developments over a certain size, more than 10 properties, are currently required through planning policy to provide 'open space'. Our work is focused on influencing developers to think biodiversity and ecological needs right at the beginning of their design process so they achieve genuine gains for nature. When developers pro-actively work with us, we do see real positive outcomes for wildlife. Our aim over the next 5 – 10 years is to influence far more developers across London in order to establish a meaningful nature recovery network.

You mentioned the London Plan - how will LWT's work within that plan be affected by the Gov's proposal to rewrite the planning act with the interests of developers given more weight than local democratic control of development?

We will be working with our partners to campaign for significant changes to the White Paper, feeding into The Wildlife Trust's (TWT's) response (which has direct links to Government on such matters). Our initial views on the White Paper are here, but they will be updated shortly in line with TWT's campaign <https://www.wildlondon.org.uk/blog/mathew-frith/will-planning-reforms-revitalise-or-ruin-londons-nature>.

On consultancy, I very much support the principle. There was some surprise in my neck of the woods when LWT seemingly 'endorsed' a local application. In the future, might it be possible for local groups to be made aware when LWT is working with a developer?

We absolutely should be working more closely with local groups, members and volunteers with regards to our consultancy work, this is indeed an absolute must. Admittedly in some cases, we have but in others it's been an accidental oversight. We now have a new CRM software system in place, and we are looking into ways to 'cross-check' with our local groups and our consultancy projects, so the team can engage very early on with members. At the moment, we're relying on staff contacting each other and some projects get missed which is unfortunate, our apologies.

Could you explain the relation of Group and Charitable elements; also the position of the Trading Company?

The 'group' in our annual accounts means the Trust plus the trading subsidiary London Wildlife Limited (LWL); 'charitable' means the Trust only. LWL is used to run activities which do not fall within our charitable objects (currently cafes and events) to generate unrestricted funds for the charity. In the previous two years we had invested some of our own funds to establish the café and events business on a sound commercial footing. In 2019-20 LWL made a surplus, and we are confident that it will continue to do so from now

on. Consulting activities are run through the Trust, not LWL, as they contribute to our core purpose.

Is there any way that pressure can be put on developers to design inbuilt space for biodiversity so lacking in London. Don't know if perhaps this should be a policy set out by Central Govt/Local councils?

That is the direction of national and regional planning policy so far, but the devil is always in the detail. There is the Biodiversity Net gain principal, set out in the national Environment Bill- this principal states that developments should leave biodiversity in a better state than before the development started. It is our job to make sure the right habitats are created in the right locations so that the development 'fits' and compliments the local ecological network. Locally the Mayor's New London Plan sets an Urban Greening Factor- a policy that encourages developers to create at least 40% 'Green Infrastructure' on new residential developments. Again, it is our job to influence developers to create ecological rich and local relevant green infrastructure, rather than a disappointing patch of amenity grass and a line of poor-quality birch trees, as is so often the case.