On positive shifting baselines and the importance of optimism

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Early morning at The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds’ Ham Wall reserve, in Somerset, UK. On passing an even earlier visitor, the natural history writer and broadcaster Stephen Moss poses the birdwatcher’s perennial question: ‘seen anything?’. ‘Nothing much’, comes the reply ‘just the usual’. But here in the heart of the Avalon Marshes—one of the largest expanses of restored wetland in the UK—what now passes as usual is anything but.

Before being drained for farming and mined for peat, a complex mosaic of raised bog, reed-bed and fen woodland once blanketed the valley between the Mendips and the Polden Hills. By the mid 1800s little natural habitat remained, and following World War II, agricultural intensification and industrialized peat extraction for horticulture reduced wildlife populations still further. But by the 1990s growing public concern about the environmental impact of peat removal led to the scaling-back of operations and catalysed a remarkable partnership between English Nature (now Natural England), The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Somerset Wildlife Trust, the Hawk and Owl Trust, and remaining partnerships with nature. To take part in an #EarthOptimism event in person or online, visit http://earthoptimism.si.edu/ or www.cambridgeconservation.org/earthoptimism/.

In some cases the conservation movement’s successes are starting to alter what we think of as normal. Our baselines are shifting. In most countries it is now difficult to imagine women being denied the vote, or smoking in restaurants or offices becoming acceptable once more (Pauly, 2011). So too in conservation. In much of Britain birdwatchers have become almost blasé about seeing red kites (down to fewer
than 20 pairs in the 1960s) tilting over towns and roadways. Ospreys are once again considered common in coastal North America. The bitterns (and indeed glossy ibises) of the Avalon Marshes have become ‘the usual’. Much of me rejoices at this recalibration. These creatures should be part of our expectations. Healthy populations of raptors, strong laws to protect nature, and reed-beds that stretch to the horizon should be unremarkable: the rule, rather than the exception.

But I also have a worry here—one that underscores the importance of consciously and continually reminding ourselves of conservation’s achievements. Just as negative shifting baselines—repeated acts of intergenerational amnesia over nature’s erosion—mean we have often failed to grasp the scale of human-driven declines (Pauly, 1995), so positive shifting baselines also carry a risk. If we fail to remember and to celebrate what conservation has achieved, we miss opportunities to convince the public that there are real and practical solutions with which they can engage. We lessen the chances of learning from our successes. If we forget where we’ve come from, we risk allowing things to slip backwards.

In the UK the partial recovery of the common buzzard is now seen as sufficient for the government to sanction the return of its lethal control ‘to prevent serious damage to young pheasants’ (Natural England, 2016). But this argument ignores the role buzzards play in limiting numbers of corvids (whose populations have been boosted by road-kills and that through nest predation probably suppress declining songbirds; Lees et al., 2013); it overlooks the fact that buzzards and many rarer raptors are still illegally persecuted in much of the country; and it neglects the point that all this is to protect the economic interests of a shooting industry that releases over 20% of historic levels. If as a result of positive change in the natural world, detect and communicate where we would be without conservation, the progress we have made risks being reversed.

While there is as great a need as ever for us to track changes in the natural world, detect and communicate new threats, and devise interventions to address them, celebrating conservation’s many and diverse accomplishments is also vital: to inspire people rendered hopeless by what can seem like an unending torrent of bad news, and motivate them to purposeful action; to learn more about what works—and hence be able to sharpen our efforts; and so that we can reinforce rather than let drift the many gains that the conservation movement is making.

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**References**


