



Forum News

Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum

Natural Environment and the Big Society

Robin Buxton, ONCF Chairman



Photo: Northmoor Trust

I hope Defra's Natural Environment White Paper consultation has delivered a strident message that the natural environment is important to all of us, not just because it is nice, but because it is a foundation of the economy.

It is easier to see the mistakes that undermine ecosystem integrity in other countries than at home. The heat wave and catastrophic forest and crop fires in Russia are fully predicted by climate change modelling, while the unprecedented floods in Pakistan are linked to mismanagement of forests, farmland, soils and rivers as well as to a "freak" weather event.

The economic consequences of destroying biodiversity are no less severe and Russia's World genetic resource, the Pavlovsk soft-fruit seed bank may yet be destroyed, with impacts on British fruit breeders, growers, food processing businesses and all of us individually. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/oct/12/russia-seed-bank-vavilov-pavlovsk>. Many genetically diverse ancestors of crop plants and animals no longer exist in the wild because their habitats have been destroyed, and the loss of seed banks is a real threat to food security.

While launching the White Paper consultation, the Government has been thinking aloud about selling National Nature Reserves and the Forest Estate, privatising flood

defences, reducing agri-environment grants and relaxing regulation on industry. Councils are cutting costs, while Defra, Environment Agency and the UK country conservation agencies have been told to make deeper cuts than most other government sectors. How will these cuts affect ONCF? Although grants from local government and national agencies have been declining for years, those we do get are important politically as well as financially and support ONCF's part in Oxfordshire's outstanding record of voluntary community involvement – the bedrock of the Government's "Big Society".

I get mixed signals from local government, and feel we have to make a very big effort to engage Councillors. The year has been marked by high profile international initiatives such as TEEB (The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity <http://www.teebweb.org>) led by international banker Pavan Sukhdev and detailing our economic dependence on the

Cont. back page

Inside

- ONCF Round up 2
- TOE Funding Biodiversity 3
- Western Conifer Seed Bug 3
- Brasenose Wood and Silver-washed Fritillary 3
- Butterfly Population Trends 4
- The Search Goes On 4
- Crayfish Trouble 5
- Breeding Waders 6
- Farmland Birds 6
- Otters 7
- The natural environment: an asset to farming 8



ONCF Round up

Cynth Napper,
Community Officer

Bulletin

I think we are still the only county that produces a free, weekly, email round-up of much that is going on in the world of nature conservation and climate change. It is a big commitment but so worthwhile. 1,305 people now take the bulletin directly, and lots more receive it, or items from it, indirectly. If you are not yet on and would like to receive it, or if you have an item to put in just email cynth@oncf.org.uk

NERC Duty

Another major part of my work is to give talks to parish councils on the interpretation of Section 40 of the NERC Act 2006, which requires local authorities to 'have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity'. I have now given 42 talks, choosing parishes that are in Conservation Target Areas (ie, they are known for their biological diversity). Several councils have sent delegates to my last two local group conferences and some have made enquiries about habitat management for sites that they own or lease. It is really good to learn that at least two parishes are undertaking a full parish conservation plan.

Local Environment Groups Conference

We have just held our 6th conference for local environment groups, with 58 of us enjoying a day of updates, workshops and walks, hosted in beautiful surroundings by the Kirtlington Wildlife and Conservation Society. Networking and group support is the main aim and the feedback suggests we got it about right, with stimulating workshops on Oxfordshire's geology, wood culture, managing habitats, and how to safeguard biodiversity through the planning system. The next conference will probably be in Spring 2012. Anyone got a good venue and local group in mind?

Oxfordshire Goes Wild

Our Oxfordshire Goes Wild is an amazingly successful event that takes wildlife to the city to enthuse children about their natural environment. "Took two grandchildren to this yesterday and it was quite brilliant. It works so well amongst the permanent exhibits. I was dragged from pillar to post - look at this, look at this, look at this!" Many local groups kindly give up their time to provide activities or bring pond life, invertebrates and other creatures into the museum. With over 4,000 attending last March in just four hours Oxford University's Natural History Museum could have been overwhelmed but the atmosphere is so wonderfully calm that everyone just moved from stall to stall, taking their turn at all the activities and meeting all the different creatures. Bats, owls and seven other attractions are already booked for next year's event on Saturday 9 April 2011.

Funding for Voluntary Groups

ONCF has secured some funding for the next three years to support some of my work. We also have a small pot of money to offer to local environment groups or parish councils. The conditions are that I must approve the project, the group must provide at least 50% of the match funding, and a group can receive up to £150. One council may use this funding to pay a hydrologist to discover why their village stream is disappearing, another needs help with their parish conservation plan.

Swifts and Churches

Chris Mason, of the Cherwell District has been mapping swift nests for some years with the idea of restoring lost nest sites, particularly on local churches, where swifts used to frequently breed. I would like to see this scheme extended to the county, with



Photo: Clare Mowbray

LEG Conference, Kirtlington

local champions, and can offer funding, as above, for buying building materials for the boxes if your local church would agree to their being installed.

Machinery Ring

Some groups are having trouble managing their grasslands because of lack of volunteers, time and energy. Cutting the hay is not the problem, it is the raking up that is so difficult. We are wondering if it would be worthwhile if we could buy a Danelander combi-collector and hire it out to groups in the county. Having seen it in action I am very keen for it to be used on my own parish wildflower meadow! If you think this would be useful please let me know your group, location and amount of grassland you manage. There would be a charge to cover insurance, transport costs and for the operator.

Cynth@oncf.org.uk www.oncf.org.uk

Diary Dates

Recorders Conference

26th Feb 2011

Finances

Finances continue to look bleak, as they do for many organisations. ONCF has been topping up its funding gap from reserves for the last few years.

Last year we had to spend £17,641 from our reserves. At this rate, without resort to exceptional measures, we have enough reserves to fill our funding gap to take us to the end of 2012. It costs ONCF around £66,000 per year to pay for the Biodiversity Officer and two part-time staff (Clare and Cynth). This year we have had two unexpectedly generous donations from the Wills Trust and Patsy Wood Trust, however these combined with £6,000 from local authorities, £5,000 from Thames Water and £16,000 from Natural England still leave a £18,000 shortfall.

Ongoing support continues to come from: our members through their annual subscription, Cherwell District Council, Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council not forgetting Natural England, Patsy Wood Trust, Thames Water and the Wills Trust.



Trust For Oxfordshire's Environment Funding Biodiversity

Fiona Danks, TOE

After twelve years of making Landfill Communities Fund (LCF) grants available for community and environmental projects across Oxfordshire, TOE is now winding up. This seems a good time to reflect on all that has been achieved, but also to look to the future, and the growth of a new TOE!

Across the UK the LCF has made a huge impact on biodiversity, providing £millions so that local organisations can deliver practical projects. Here in Oxfordshire TOE has provided over £1million for biodiversity projects and about £425,000 for countryside access and interpretation.

It has been a great pleasure to work with many of the local groups in the ONCF network. TOE funding has supported land purchase, habitat management and restoration, habitat creation and infrastructure works necessary to carry out site management. Our very first project was £20,000 towards a new access bridge at the Hurst Water Meadow and one of our last will be £8,754 towards hedgerow creation and improvement at BBOWT's Chimney Meadows nature reserve.

No matter how much enthusiasm and energy is put into local conservation groups, the bottom line is that capital works and site management don't come cheap. There is a real and ongoing need for funds to help local groups and larger wildlife organisations achieve real biodiversity gains. Although TOE is closing down, local groups may apply to WREN (www.wren.org.uk) and Viridor Credits (www.viridor-credits.org.uk) for LCF monies - and in the future they will also be able to apply to TOE's successor TOE2.

TOE2 will support and fund communities wishing to deliver real improvements to biodiversity, the sustainable use of renewable resources and access to the countryside and green spaces. TOE2 is being set up through the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) under the chairmanship of Karen Woolley from the Woodcote Conservation Group and with the support of a team of committed and experienced board members. For updates on the development of TOE2 please go to www.trustforoxfordshire.org.uk or contact Fiona Danks on 01865 883488 or Fiona.danks@oxonrcc.org.uk.

Western Conifer Seed Bug

Gavin Bird, TVERC

A pretty large and impressive bug called the Western Conifer Seed Bug, *Leptoglossus occidentalis* has recently appeared. I knew nothing about it until about two weeks ago when three records came in (one from my bathroom). It isn't an entirely welcome first for the county as the bug is a pest of plantation trees (esp. conifers, as the name suggests). It's an American by origin but has come into Europe with timber imports. First appearances were in dockland locations in the extreme south and south east, now it's spreading northwards.

Gavin.bird@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Brasenose Wood and Silver-washed Fritillary

Ivan Wright, Shotover Wildlife



Photo: Mike Wilkins

2010 has been a good year in Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill SSSI for Silver-washed Fritillary and its food plant Common Dog-violet.

The fritillary is a south-western species with just scattered records in Oxfordshire, and the County sits just where changes in the distribution are likely to be noticed. Nationally the Silver-washed Fritillary has done well in recent years. The first known record for Shotover was last year, with at least one female gliding about, and this year we had a minimum of four including an observation of egg laying.

Common Dog-violet also did well, but for more direct reasons. For two years Shotover Wildlife has operated minimum-disturbance high level coppicing and the response of the ground flora to this work has been excellent - complete with extensive patches of violets.

The temptation is to pat ourselves on the back and claim a causal link in attracting the butterfly with our coppicing work. However, the fritillary's overall decline is attributed to reduced woodland management through the 20th century, and perhaps our work, together with that of other similar work around the county, will have come at just the right time to help consolidate a Fritillary breeding site in the county.

enquiries@shotover-wildlife.org.uk



Some Butterfly Population Trends in 2010

*Mike Wilkins,
Transect Coordinator
Upper Thames Branch
Butterfly Conservation*

Photo: Mike Wilkins



Common Blue

With data from 33 butterfly transects in Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire received so far it is possible to see local population trends for the commoner species. Unfortunately for many the trend is down but there are some winners.

The Small Copper and blues mostly did well, the Copper having its best year in the past nine, a 57% increase on 2009. Brown Argus and Common Blue had their best of the past seven, up 62% and 140% respectively from 2009. In contrast, the Holly Blue has continued to decline for some years.

The Silver-washed Fritillary has increased steadily from 2004 by 570% and by 129% over 2009. Individuals were reported from many sites away from their woodland habitat, including gardens. Small Tortoiseshells continue to recover slowly from their low point in 2008 and had their best year since 2004.

In general, the browns did not fare as well as in 2009, Speckled Wood down slightly but Marbled White and Meadow Brown declining since 2006, the last to its lowest of the past nine years. Only the Small Heath increased, for the second year in succession, to show some recovery after a long decline.

Weather, both during the current and previous flight seasons, is a major cause of year to year fluctuations but steady declines are often little understood. We still have a lot to learn.

mikeawilkins@googlemail.com

The Search Goes On...

Rod d'Ayala, on behalf of the Oxon ARG

The Oxfordshire Amphibian and Reptile Group was created to try and promote an awareness of these often neglected and unloved groups. We collect, and disseminate on request, information about the nine widespread native species and any others that may be encountered.

The species of most concern is the Adder. Despite our best intentions it remains elusive with no new sites being confirmed and only a small handful of animals hanging on where known. Two longstanding colonies were reported in 2009 – but these colonies too may have gone or at least been badly damaged when pheasant rearing pens were installed nearby. We aim to check these sites out in 2011. Adders have undergone major declines in many central England counties due to factors such as loss, damage and fragmentation of habitats and disturbance. It is probably the rarest vertebrate in the county – with the number of known animals perhaps being down to as few as five individuals. Its future in Oxfordshire is uncertain.

Other species are doing better but all have problems. For example the so-called Common Toad has experienced a significant overall decline, but not everywhere as some populations seem to be holding up. Its decline is, as always complicated, being down to many factors including changes to and/or loss of terrestrial and breeding habitats, cumulative losses from road deaths during migrations and perhaps changing weather patterns. Milder weather has been shown to cause problems in over-wintering resulting in poor physical condition in spring – affecting their breeding performance. However, 2010 seemed to be a much better year in the ponds I visited – perhaps down to the colder winter and resulting good unbroken healthy kip? If so, here's to another cold one.

The group is always interested to get records of all and any species of reptile or amphibian – native or escaped. We are also happy to advise on any "herp" related issues.

dayala@waitrose.com

Photo: Rod d'Ayala



Juvenile adder



The trouble with invasive crayfish is that very few people are aware of the extent of the problems they cause.

I have been studying crayfish populations in the Upper Thames for three years at the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Oxford University. When I began, I, like most people in the UK, was aware that we have one native species of crayfish – the white-clawed crayfish, *Austropotamobius pallipes* – which is being replaced throughout most of its range by the American signal crayfish, *Pacifastacus leniusculus*. I started with the intention of finding places where the two species co-exist and examining the habitat factors that might promote this co-existence in the hope of creating guidelines for the conservation of white-clawed crayfish. Unfortunately I could not find any white-clawed crayfish in the Upper Thames. I did, however, find a lot of signal crayfish. Indeed the few sites in the area where the white-claweds are known still to exist are under threat from rapidly advancing populations of signals. The signals are spreading. Fast.

Signal crayfish are inimical to white-clawed crayfish. They are larger, more aggressive and more numerous and out-compete white-clawed crayfish for food and shelter. When the species meet in the absence of other factors the white-claweds are replaced within a few years. Signal crayfish also carry a fungal infection,



Photo: Tom Moorhouse

Dr Tom Moorhouse
Zoology, University of Oxford

Aphanomyces astaci, or crayfish plague, to which they are resistant but which decimates white-clawed populations. So lethal is the plague that a boot (or a dog, or a fishing rod) dipped in infected water and then moved upstream and dipped into uninfected areas can result in the destruction of a population of white-clawed crayfish without a signal crayfish being anywhere near.

The species replacement of white-clawed crayfish is ongoing and is probably unstoppable in the majority of waters in the UK. As an observation this suffers from the "so what" factor. So we lose one species of crayfish and gain another: so what? It is a fair question. The answer lies in their habits and numbers. Crayfish are omnivorous.

They will eat decaying leaves and

detritus, fish eggs and fish fry, amphibian eggs and any other freshwater invertebrates they can find. Essentially if it is soft-bodied, slow moving, and made of protein, they will eat it. And they eat quickly. A big fish head left in a crayfish trap becomes a skeleton in one night.

White clawed crayfish were present in high densities, but caused little problem for the other species. Signal crayfish can, however, reach astronomically high densities. This year, working on 400 m of river, we captured over 27,000 signal crayfish in 64 days. This approximates to over 3,000 crayfish per 100 m length. And this 3,000 is actually only the proportion of the population big enough to be captured in a trap. There are probably at least that many again which are too small to be captured. The densities in our sites were 6-12 signal crayfish per square metre of river bed, and this is by no means atypically high. Densities of up to 20 per square metre have been recorded.

As one of my colleagues commented, if this species replacement was happening where we could see it we would be horrified. Try to imagine what it would look like if the local park was covered with crayfish in that density. Now try to imagine what would happen to anything edible (e.g. amphibian or fish eggs or snails) left somewhere in that park. In the coming years we could well be witnessing the wholesale loss of many species and populations of fish, amphibians and macroinvertebrates from our rivers and lakes.

tom.moorhouse@zoo.ox.ac.uk



Photo: Tom Moorhouse

Signal crayfish haul



Breeding Waders

Mike Shurmer, RSPB

The results of the RSPB's 2010 Breeding Wader Survey of the Upper Thames Tributaries show a mixed picture for our wading birds. The headlines are that waders are still declining, but sites undertaking the best management are holding onto their birds.

The Upper Thames Tributaries (27,000 hectares covering the Thames, Cherwell, Windrush, Ray, Evenlode and Glyme floodplains) has historically been important for breeding wading birds – lapwing, redshank, curlew and snipe – leading to the designation of the Upper Thames Tributaries Environmentally Sensitive Area in 1994. However, numbers of waders have been in continual decline.

In 2010, we surveyed many of the sites we covered in 2005, along with several new sites. Over 4,000 hectares of floodplain habitats were surveyed, by more than 40 volunteers. We found 189 pairs of breeding waders – 109 pairs of lapwing, 48 pairs of curlew, 22 pairs of redshank and 10 pairs of snipe.

In comparison to 2005, numbers have fallen. Analysis of the 48 comparable sites (eg those surveyed in both 2005 and 2010) shows that wader numbers have declined from 197 pairs in 2005 to 153 pairs in 2010 on those sites.

However, of those sites which have undertaken restoration and enhancement work since 2005, the majority appear to have either maintained or increased their wader populations. This tells us how important continued wader recovery work is in the area and how timely the 2010 survey has been to further target our work.

The last major survey in 2005 identified key areas to concentrate wader recovery work. Since then farmers have worked with the RSPB and Natural England to enhance and restore more than 700 hectares of floodplain habitats. Restoration work has continued this year, with farmers on nine sites restoring more than 100 hectares of floodplain grassland.

We would like to thank the farmers who allowed us access to their land and the volunteers, along with BBOWT, The Lower Windrush Valley project and Natural England. The Lapwing Landscapes project, is funded by Biffaward, Cherwell District Council, Environment Agency and The Waterways Trust.

Mike.shurmer@rspb.org.uk

Photo: Andy Hay



Lapwing

Farmland birds in the North Wessex Downs

Diane Nicolle, RSPB

The North Wessex Farmland Bird Project is an exciting new partnership initiative with the aim of boosting farmland bird populations in the North Wessex Downs. The project works in the areas of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Hampshire that lie within the boundary of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and is funded by the RSPB and Natural England, working with other organisations including FWAG, the AONB, the Wildlife Trusts, and the Campaign for the Farmed Environment.

Numbers of lapwing and turtle dove have plummeted since the 1970s, along with other birds of farmland habitat such as corn bunting, grey partridge, yellow wagtail and tree sparrow. The North Wessex Downs remains a nationally important farmland bird hotspot, with pockets of the landscape still holding populations of these species, albeit in much lower numbers than thirty years ago and with the six key species mentioned here continuing to decline. The North Wessex Farmland Bird Project has begun working with farmers and land managers across the Berkshire and Hampshire Downs to help create and manage habitat for these birds and try to reverse these declines.

The project's Farmland Bird Advisor Diane Nicolle says 'Working with farmers right across such an important landscape for farmland birds as the North Wessex Downs is the best way to help boost farmland bird numbers. We know through research and practise the types of habitat that these birds require to thrive, and the Entry Level (ELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) schemes present a great opportunity for farmers to provide these vital habitats, while receiving compensation for their efforts.'

Farmland birds need habitat to provide them with the 'Big 3'; safe areas to nest in spring and summer, insects for chicks to feed on in summer, and a source of seed over winter. By choosing appropriate options under ELS and HLS, farmers can provide these habitats, and not only benefit farmland birds but other wildlife such as hares, bumblebees and hoverflies, while receiving a stable income over the five or ten years of the scheme. Diane offers free advice and farm visits to help farmers and land managers choose and manage the options that will best fit into their farm and provide the most benefit to farmland birds.

If you farm in the North Wessex Downs and would like advice on Environmental Stewardship or to arrange a farm visit, please contact Diane on 01488 680452 or email diane.nicolle@rspb.org.uk



In the UK, otter populations crashed from 1957 to the late 1970s, mirroring the situation in many parts of Europe, and this crash has been strongly linked to the introduction of certain cyclodiene organochlorine pesticides such as dieldrin and aldrin. These pesticides were used in both arable and pastoral systems, and their use has been shown to be primarily responsible for the declines in a number of our birds of prey, such as the peregrine and sparrowhawk. Following the banning of these pesticides over time, we saw a dramatic recovery of our birds of prey, but otters have taken longer to recover. This may be as a result of the slow reproductive rate of otters and therefore reduced powers of rapid re-colonisation, but also because rivers and other wetlands act as sinks for whatever toxic chemicals are used on the land, and are likely to be the last ecosystems to show the decline in toxic levels needed for vulnerable biota such as aquatic top predators to respond.

We are fortunate to have been able to monitor the recovery of otter populations in the UK with five completed national surveys since the late 1970s.

As project manager for the recently completed fifth national otter survey of England, I was keen that we got the most comprehensive coverage possible to inform national UK BAP reporting requirements. In all previous England surveys only alternate 50km squares had been surveyed, using professional surveyors to cover a suite of sites each of which was surveyed for up to 600m. For this fifth survey we also used experienced volunteer surveyors to undertake spot checks at a maximum of ten sites in each of the 718 10km squares in the 'missing' 50 km squares. Along with the contracted surveys, this gives us for the first time complete survey coverage of England in a national otter survey.

So what of Oxfordshire and the Thames catchment? The otter continues to recover across England, and the situation in the Thames catchment has changed rather spectacularly in the last ten years or so. In the first two national surveys of England (1977-79 and 1984-86), there were no signs of otters anywhere in the Thames catchment. In the third national survey (1991-94) just 4 of 169 sites were positive in the catchment, including some early signs of activity in Oxfordshire on the Thames near Chimney. By the time of the fourth survey 18 sites were positive in the Thames catchment, and this included sites on the Cherwell and upper Thames in Oxfordshire. We had already known from monitoring work previously undertaken by EA, WildCRU at Oxford University, and other fieldworkers that there was much

Otters in Oxfordshire and the upper Thames catchment



Photo: D Cousins

*Graham Scholey,
Chair, UK Otter BAP
Steering Group*

otter activity in the Cotswolds part of the county not covered by this national survey.

The fifth national survey has now revealed that 41% of all the main sites surveyed in the Thames Region were positive for otter, and the spot checks in the remaining 10km squares showed that 44 out of 75 had evidence of otter activity. For Oxfordshire, the main surveys and spot checks reveal that otters are now present in all parts of the county: on the Thames from Buscot to Henley, on the Evenlode, Glyme and Windrush in the Cotswolds, and on the predominantly clay catchments of the Cherwell, Thame and Ock.

There is little doubt that the independent release of captive-bred animals by the Otter Trust in

the upper Thames in 1999 helped speed up this process of recovery. But equally, it is clear that the recovery would have happened sooner or later anyway. The Environment Agency and BBOWT collaborated in three otter projects in the 1990s which covered all or part of the county, identifying good habitat for landowners to conserve and providing good cover through scrub planting in other areas. Work by these projects, including liaison with landowners and angling clubs, did we think set the scene for what we hope is a welcome to their return from most landowners in the county.

There are inevitable issues arising from the return of the otter. There has been a significant increase in roadkill and also drownings in illegally set fyke nets and crayfish traps, and it is incumbent on us to reduce anthropogenic mortality where we can. There has also been a growing conflict between some specimen fishermen on rivers and stillwaters in lowland England, including the upper Thames, and this requires us to better understand how some of our river fish communities have become skewed with large numbers of specimen fish but poor recruitment of some species, issues we need to solve if we are to meet our targets for Good Ecological Status under the Water Framework Directive.

However, the return of the otter does tell us a lot about the general health of the water environment. They simply would not be here if our rivers weren't able to support them. For field naturalists in Oxfordshire, there has probably never been a better opportunity for two generations for seeing otters in the county, and indeed sightings by anglers, boaters and early birders are getting more frequent. We now have a wonderful opportunity to observe this remarkable animal back where it belongs, on the waterways of Oxfordshire.

graham.scholey@environment-agency.gov.uk



natural environment. But I think, perhaps wrongly, that these important messages have not been noticed locally. A financial focus is inevitable in a serious recession and many more councillors have financial and business backgrounds than environmental ones. I feel uneasy that a crucial component of all of our livings is not understood and so does not get the attention it needs.

On the other hand very positive things have happened. Oxfordshire County Council's countryside team has been greatly strengthened over the last year and all the processes of environmental information (Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre), ecological input to the planning process, and countryside management (Oxfordshire Woodland Project, Wychwood Project and Lower Windrush Valley Project) plus Countryside Access have come together in excellent new premises at Eynsham. With strong internal cohesion, good outreach and our exceptional county network, Oxfordshire County Council is well placed to continue to lead innovation in good conservation management.

Community engagement in wildlife conservation was part of ONCF's work before the new government coined the term "The Big Society". New local groups are contacting Cynth Napper regularly for advice, support and to become part of the network. Out of a list of 193 local groups that we are in regular touch with, about 85 are actively surveying and managing habitats locally. Making The Big Society accessible to all takes leadership, insight and empathy, ability to match people to practical opportunities and continual reassurance and encouragement. These are professional skills that are in short supply and need infrastructure and material resources to be effective. The dream of "Big Society" really will not happen without properly supported, community focused organisations like ONCF.

Robin.buxton@btinternet.com



Photo: FAI Farms

The natural environment: an asset to farming

Mike Gooding, FAI Farms

The news is full of rising food prices, driven by population growth, changes in dietary preference, and the pressures on limited resources to produce food and energy. Demand is only set to increase and political drive defaults towards making sure your own population is fed. Continuity of supply is key to profitable retail food business and food security critical to Governments – at the end of the day hungry people are dangerous people. All this means that for the foreseeable future increased food production will be demanded from farmers around the World.

FAI Farms based at Wytham, tenant 1,400 acres of average land following the River Thames around the famous Wytham Woods, where for much of the year flooding and wet pastures dominate the management of the farm. In addition to the commercial farming operations, the company undertakes development programs and consultancy, as it pioneers sustainable farming practice.

Fundamentally this is about the efficient use of resources, but not simply those resources brought in shrink wrapped packages, nor bulk loads of imported raw materials. Rather it is the use of all the resources available, land, water, people as well as the manufactured inputs that drive modern agriculture. Increasingly there is a realisation that meeting future demand for food is only likely to be met by a rethinking of the way all resources are used in production. Soil health, natural fertility, disease breaks offered by rotating crops and livestock, become increasingly important, and the role played by biodiversity and the 'natural' environment becomes an asset not a challenge.

FAI's work focuses on food production systems that demonstrate true sustainability by being economically robust, environmentally sensitive and ethically sound. The company argues you cannot have a sustainable system that only delivers two of these three facets. This approach builds in important considerations such as animal welfare, land use, the well being of the community; at the same time as creating a reasonable financial return that allows future investment.

The good news is that systems based on efficient use of resources need nature, and require land managers to work with the environment. Typical systems at FAI include planting hedges to provide chickens with the shade and shelter to keep them stress free, maximising the nutrient value of muck to drive crop growth, and growing protein rich crops for animal feed and moving away from imported soya.

You can find out much more about FAI's work on their website www.faifarms.co.uk or simply observe while walking along the Thames Path from Binsey to Eynsham.

Mike.gooding@faifarms.co.uk

Waterless printing by Seacourt www.seacourt.net

Design: Linda Francis 01865 407626 linfran@linfran.com

ONCF Charity number 1131540
www.oncf.org.uk
tel 01865 407034