

NatureNotes



Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world
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What does nature mean to us?

I read an interesting statistic this week! The statistic came from a new government survey - The People and Nature Survey for England - set up to collect data on how people experience and think about the environment.

Among other things the survey has shown, perhaps unsurprisingly, that since the coronavirus restrictions began more people are spending more time outside and with that there has been an increase in 'wildlife watching' as an activity. However, the statistic that really struck me was this: "The large majority of adults agreed that, 'being in nature makes me very happy'."

For me as a long-time convert to the world of nature this is a heartening statistic and one that sparks hope for the future. Such a grassroots re-acquaintance with nature might lay the foundation for the kind of seismic shift in social attitudes that is needed to bring about the environmental change we often feel so helpless to enact.

The global threats to the environment are increasingly well documented - plastics, pollutants, the over-exploitation of natural resources, to name but a few - but often we need look no further than our own back garden or street. Day-in, day-out mature trees are cut down, hedges replaced with fencing, gardens tidied to within an inch of their life and areas covered over with concrete and cars. The destruction of the environment it seems is not just the work of the 'bad boys' of industry but is built into the very fabric of society and 'the way things work'. It can be very hard to marry this with the fact that we are, at least statistically, a nature-loving nation.

Almost one in eight of us are members of one of the great conservation organisations - the Royal Society for the Protection



A blackbird finding rich pickings in an overgrown corner of the garden.

Picture: RUPERT EVERSLED

of Birds (RSPB), the Wildlife Trusts, the Woodland Trust, to name but a few. The RSPB, to take just one example, enjoys a membership that, when taken as a proportion of the national population and compared with like organisations in other European countries, is the twice the size of the Dutch, three times the size of the German, 25 times greater than the French and 87 times more than the Spanish equivalents. Few nations on earth it seems care as much about the environment as the British. Despite this apparent national support for wildlife the UK State of Nature reports continue to provide stark warnings of decline with a significant proportion of species assessed facing extinction. What then, I wonder, does nature really mean to us? I think perhaps this contradiction between the state of nature and our professed support of nature suggests there is a profound difference between appreciating nature and loving nature. The difference, I believe, lies in our proximity to nature.

It is one thing to visit a beautiful nature reserve, woodland or beach and another to feel daily connected to the nature on our doorstep, on our route to work or in our local park. One experience leaves us as just consumers of nature - getting a green fix. The other demands of us a more

integrated connection and one where if nature is lost we feel that loss or if nature thrives we recognize our part in that.

Lockdown and the coronavirus restrictions have afforded a time like never before to reconnect or maybe connect for the first time with the everyday business of nature: the simple routine of garden birds, the appearance of wildflowers in unkempt areas and the visits of butterflies to bramble borders. This is the bread and butter stuff of British wildlife and does more for our love of nature than the celebrity barn owls or kingfishers we might encounter from the sheltered hides in luxuriant nature reserves.

Such basic encounters awaken a deeper kind of appreciation in us - dare I say - a real love for nature that could well be our salvation as far as the environment is concerned. We save what we love but for that love to be real it has to be connected and that means local and lived, not exotic and visited. That 74 per cent of us are "taking more time to notice and engage with everyday nature, such as listening to birdsong or noticing butterflies" is surely a reason to hope!

Read the Government report "The People & Nature Survey for England: Monthly interim indicators for May 2020" here: <https://bit.ly/2P2n1IU>