SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGY AND NATURAL HISTORY:

ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET

EDITORIAL

Have you ever thought of the inescapable connections between wildlife, economic interests and public opinion? To give a few examples: recently the controversial Bakun Dam in Sarawak, Malaysia, which would have inundated almost 70 000 ha, and caused the forcible relocation of 9000 indigenous people, has been shelved because of lack of public funds. On the other hand, a dubious deal struck between English Nature and a peat company with regard to commercial exploitation of peat moors in South Yorkshire has resulted in loss of wildlife to the extent that English Nature is now considering de-notifying 100 ha of Thorne Moor and 500 ha of Hatfield Moor in this Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This means further exploitation by the peat companies which can sell their product as non-SSSI peat, overcoming the ethical objection of people who would otherwise refuse to buy or sell SSSI peat. A similar deal was entered into on Westhay Moor. Will it receive the same treatment?

On a more cheerful note, public opinion has a far greater effect on government policy than it has ever done before. The anti-roads lobby has been proved right in its contention that to provide more and wider roads encourages more traffic, whilst traffic calming reduces the number of vehicles and the speed at which they travel. But there is still no nationwide willingness on behalf of government and local authorities to grasp the nettle and come to terms with an adequate, cheap, less polluting, integrated transport system. As biologists we know that time is running out. Many believe that global warming is less conjecture and more fact. Also, human health is adversely affected by exhaust pollutants including greenhouse gases and chemicals in agriculture and the food industry. Gaze along the shelves of bottles and packets in any garden centre or the list of additives on food labels and the heart sinks because of the implicated damage, not just to human health, but to wildlife and the gene pool. We are not ignorant of some of the effects of garden and agricultural chemicals but we are in the habit of expecting to have an off-the-shelf, quick and easy solution to every problem.

Where is the incentive to take firm action on environmental problems? Is it acceptable to plough up an SSSI to grow money-making flax? The greed for money and the fear of job losses appear to act as a brake to sensible legislation. In fact, jobs could be created, especially in the fields of energy saving, recycling and the use of human muscle power in preference to earth-compacting, fuel-hungry, pollution-creating machines. Out-of-town hypermarkets with accompanying inner city decay encourage car use and deprive older and poorer people of their local amenities.

But how can the government get into an ecological mind-set? Does it listen to us? Big business seems to assume that we as buyers want foods out of season and rapidly grown (and therefore bland) fruit and vegetables of a uniform size, of a few selected varieties and blemish-free, all produced as a result of an enormous input of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. How guilty are we of contributing to this attitude by our shopping habits? If I eat an apple with a live maggot in it, does this not show it is safe for me to eat!

The enormous subsidies paid to farmers have given direct support to the agro-chemical industry but not to ecologically-based organic farming interests. Only now is new legislation changing this attitude and providing further funding for organic farmers. If we practise wildlife-friendly methods we will be following the important precept of 'Think global, act local'.