

Folly down on the farm?

by Marion Shoard

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The law protects our fine houses, so why not our fine landscapes? Marion Shoard on yet another scheme that benefits landowners

English Nature's "Wildlife Enhancement Scheme", announced yesterday, sounds good. It promises much-needed help for England's Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), the wildlife locations identified as crucial to the survival of our native flora and fauna, too many of which are being over-grazed, encroached by scrub, polluted by slurry or otherwise fatally impaired. Yet the new scheme threatens no inconvenience to the sites' mainly private owners: on the contrary, it offers them a promising new source of income.

The proposals give the impression that conservation and the enrichment of landowners can march hand in hand. Would that they could. Unfortunately they cannot.

Under the new scheme, landowners in the Culm Grasslands in Devon and the Pevensey Levels in Sussex will be able to apply for payments in return for refraining from intensifying farming methods and preventing the erosion of wildlife habitat through neglect. Though this scheme is new, the approach behind it is familiar.

Since the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act established the principle that landowners who agree to refrain from destroying wildlife sites should be compensated, we have seen the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) scheme, the SetAside Top-Up scheme and Countryside Stewardship scheme, all of which pay landowners to retain landscape or wildlife habitat.

But the experimental schemes have shown that they are hopelessly inadequate in protecting the nation's wildlife. The reason is simple: the sums of money needed to apply this approach on a serious scale would be astronomical.

One sheep farmer has just been paid £1 million in return for agreeing not to plant conifers on 800 acres of a Scottish glen, under an agreement with English Nature's Scottish counterpart. The ESA scheme will cost £65 million per year by 1994 even though only a small fraction of the countryside will be eligible to participate.

The Government knows that the largesse involved cannot be handed out to every landowner. But by launching small experimental schemes based on this principle it gives the impression that wildlife is being protected without upsetting the powerful landowners' lobby.

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The Wildlife Enhancement Scheme will affect just 27 of the UK's 5,700 SSSIs. Yet the publicity such trifling exercises attracts does wonders for the Government's green image. If we are to take real measures to protect our wildlife, they will

have to be based on a very different approach.

To persuade the owners of listed historic buildings to refrain from damaging them, we do not rely on bribes. We impose fines or even imprisonment on owners who flout the social obligations which we attach to ownership of what we see as an environmental asset in which we all have a stake. If we are to save our wildlife we shall have to apply the same principle to those who "own" those features of the rural environment on which our fauna and flora depend.

Farmers protest that they can't maintain landscape features without special subsidies. But we do not allow the owner of a listed Georgian home to turn it into an office block because he's fallen on hard times. We should not confuse wildlife protection with keeping farmers in the manner to which they've become accustomed.

As agriculture's need for land diminishes, we should expect farmers to yield up land to other uses, not to hold on to land they no longer require with the aid of new subsidies. As farmers relinquish holdings, land prices should then fall, enabling naturalists' trusts, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Trust, and others to create more wildlife reserves. This process will do far more for our wildlife than attempts to pretend that money can turn all our farmers into conservationists.

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