



MARCH 2024 NEWSLETTER



Welcome to our March newsletter in which we look at some practical things that can be done – ideas from 'the Urban Birder' about making space for nature in cities, what can be done to help people switch to electric vehicles, and how major environmental projects can be made to work.

THOUGHTS FROM 'THE URBAN BIRDER'



Photo credit: Marie Jacquemin

David Lindo is the founder of [The Urban Birder World Community](#) and is a broadcaster, writer, speaker, tour leader and educationalist. His mission is to connect urbanites to the nature around them through the medium of birds. Watch [In Conservation With...](#) his popular online series of interviews with conservationists on his [The Urban Birder World YouTube Channel](#). He is [a patron of Humanists UK](#).

When I tell you that I am passionate about restoring some of Britain's fragmented landscapes what do you visualise? In your mind's eye do you see some beauty spot well away from habitation in a secluded part of the countryside? Or do you see a bit of parkland with a small wood surrounded by housing and factories? Well, I see both. In my view, despite the fact that it is imperative that we preserve our wild environments for future generations, the concept of conservation has to spawn from our cities because that is where most of us live.

I was born and bred in London and it seems that from the moment I popped into the world I have been observing nature and in particular birds in urban environments. My interest in urban wildlife was borne out of necessity. I grew up in Wembley, northwest London and as a kid I had no mentors nor did I have any relatives or friends that could whisk me away to Shangri-La aka the countryside; the place where in my innocence, I thought that all wildlife endured. Instead, I was stuck in the city and more precisely, my immediate neighbourhood.

Over the years I have grown to realise just how important urban habitats are for our wildlife and conversely, how few city dwellers actually realise this. It has been shown that urban areas are now essential to the survival of bees and that they provide superb roosting, nesting and feeding sites for some bird species. Even brownfield sites and certainly fallow land are magnets for a plethora of wildlife even if some urbanites view these areas as 'waste ground' or at best, somewhere to walk the dog. The nature of the beast is that almost any area of open land in a city environment is deemed fair game by developers whose dark shadows waft over these sites

as they plan the building of yet another shopping mall. Do not get me wrong as we do need new housing and offices - that is what cities are all about. But what is stopping the architects and planners from building with nature in mind? Surely it is not that difficult to provide in-built nesting and roosting sites within new structures and design the surrounding green areas using native flora and lakes with reedbeds?



Photo by David Lindo

Over 75% of Europe's population live in urban areas and a large amount of those people are disconnected from nature believing that wildlife is either to be found on television or out in the depths of the countryside. Some cities do better than others with some societies, such as those in Eastern Europe, still having strong connections to their rural origins. However, my feeling is if you cannot get the unconnected people into the countryside, then let us bring the countryside to them. So why should we consider certain parts of our towns and cities as places worth preserving? For me, the answer is quite simple. We all need space to breathe, contemplate and reflect. It is a prerequisite for healthy minds. By making urban spaces more hospitable for nature we will ultimately benefit from the tranquillity and beauty that it would bring us even in the heart of a big bustling city.

DELIVERING ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS:

WHAT I'VE LEARNED



I have been lucky enough to have been involved in the delivery of many large projects in commercial, government and environmental areas, and I've learned a lot that might be of interest to the many members of HCA who will be involved in projects that deliver environmental benefits of various descriptions.

By way of background I spent the early part of my career in the private sector; building and running manufacturing facilities for companies ranging from British Steel to Twentieth Century Fox Video.

When I moved into the environmental sector I was fortunate to be able to perform a similar coordinating role at one of England's Community Forests for a consortium of 11 local authorities and government agencies in the North West of England,

Later I joined a government department to set up and lead a programme aimed at meeting national obligations to divert household waste in England away from landfill by reducing, reusing and recycling, deploying a wide range of approaches including public information campaigns, new technology demonstrations and financial support for local authority waste management departments.

And then finally, and more controversially, I led a £multi-billion Private Finance Initiative supporting local authorities and their private sector waste contractors in building waste to energy and other technology facilities to divert the non-recycled part of municipal and household waste in England away from landfill.

I think there are four critical things that affect the success of a project:

Focussed outcomes

It's not unusual for projects and programmes to be initiated with worthy but sometimes vague definitions of what success looks like. That's ok, but clear outcomes and timescales need to be established and agreed quickly. It's difficult to attract support from funders and sponsors if it's not immediately clear what outputs the project is intending to deliver in detail. For example, at the Community Forest the first priority was to produce a comprehensive plan of how the long-term goals of increasing woodland cover close to towns and cities by 50% and creating other community and environmental benefits could be achieved over a 25 year timespan. This project is ongoing and recently planted its 9 millionth tree.

Know all your stakeholders well

It's vital to understand stakeholders and their organisations, Ministers, local authorities, government agencies and departments, community groups, not for profits and private sector companies are likely to have differing and possibly conflicting agendas. Managing the relationships with and between them all is a vital task. For example, the waste recycling project I ran from within Defra was never going to be successful without spending time convincing the private waste companies that they needed to move away from our nationwide reliance on landfilling to managing waste higher up the hierarchy. The introduction of the Landfill Tax did help to bring focus to our discussions and influence. Household recycling in England rose from 10% to over 45% quite rapidly.

Have the right people for the job

Recruit the right team members with the right skills, even if it means recruiting from sectors outside the usual or obvious candidates. Large projects need specialists depending on the subject area (e.g. foresters, ecologists, engineers, fundraisers, specialist lawyers) and generalists (e.g. financial management, marketing, comms) in the management team or available to it. For example, when putting together the team to deliver the waste PFI project we seconded in a very experienced private finance expert. He had a background in international merchant banking, private equity and fund management – not skills usually found in a government department. Fortunately, he also had experience of the environmental sector. His credibility in the City helped give us access to the major financial institutions in a way that would otherwise have been extremely difficult.

Financial credibility

Finally, find enough financial resources to be able to establish a track record that's strong enough to be attractive to potential longer term funders. Obviously this isn't always simple but it's far easier to win funding bids for substantial financial support (in my case from Europe, private sector sponsorship, the NHS, Government Agencies and HM Treasury amongst others) if it's clear that the project is capable of delivering real outcomes, even on a small scale.

The most fundamental lesson I learned was that things rarely change quickly in the public sector. Working from within government especially requires the ability to manage multiple objectives and shifting demands with political savvy, perseverance, patience and a sense of humour!

John Burns

John is a member of the HCA steering committee

THE GOOD THE BAD AND UGLY - HOW FAR CAN INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS TAKE US?



With no confidence in our politicians to respond with appropriate urgency to the climate crisis, I have long been interested in the impact and power of individual behavioural changes to support the transition to Net Zero.

Imagine my excitement when I discovered that *Which?* had produced an Annual Sustainability Report entitled 'Consumer attitudes, behaviours and barriers towards Sustainability'.

The survey finds that the proportion of UK adults that feel a personal sense of responsibility to reduce their carbon footprint has increased from 77% in 2021 to 82% in 2023. It then focuses on three key sectors: transportation, home heating and energy, and food consumption.

For the purpose of this article I will focus on transportation as it provides an interesting example that can be used for international comparison.

Transportation is the UK's largest emitting sector, producing 24% of the country's emissions in 2020, with cars alone responsible for 52% of that total. Not having a car is obviously the ideal from an environmental perspective but the introduction of Electric Vehicles (EVs) is seen as vital.

While there is a general reduction in car use, the move to EVs has lost momentum. Only 8% intend to buy an EV as their next vehicle, down from 11% in 2021. The number saying they would **not** consider buying an EV was up from 20% in 2021 to 34% in 2023. The actual percentage of the ***new car sales that were EVs in 2023 was only 16.5%***.

So what are we doing wrong?

The reluctance to buy an EV in the UK is linked to the cost of the vehicle and lack of confidence in the public network for charging. While the UK government is claiming to have “the most ambitious regulatory framework for the switch to EVs in the world”, it recently extended the deadline for the phase-out of petrol and diesel cars from 2030 to 2035. Delaying the deadline irritated manufacturers who were making significant long term investments to meet the original deadline, flagged to consumers that the government is not serious about meeting its climate commitments, and reduced the pressure on those responsible for the improvements to infrastructure required to support this transition.



Something's not working!

By comparison **in Norway, 82% of cars purchased in 2023 were electric**. The ambition in Norway is to be zero emission by 2025. EV owners were provided with a tax supportive environment **from the 1990's** with the ability to drive in bus lanes and have free access to toll roads and ferries (all of which are expensive). This provided a long term financial package that enabled Norwegian consumers to make the move to EVs.

The overwhelming conclusion is that we need coherent, ambitious, long term and consistently applied national policies that support individuals in making better choices. Partnerships with industry are essential and a stable legislative and regulatory framework needs to be designed to encourage companies to invest in the transition. The government needs to be a reliable participant in that partnership. Moving the goal posts by delaying deadlines is not acceptable.

Communication to the public should also be coherent and consistent. If those in power want to successfully make major change they have to pay great attention to what and how they

communicate. When the government appears not to be taking the climate crisis seriously they provide ammunition to the sceptics instead of mobilising the willing.

Pauline Element

Pauline is a member of the HCA steering committee

ONE SMALL STEP

Over the year we plan to suggest in each newsletter a small actionable step which individuals could take. Here is the first.

March

Support local biodiversity by feeding the birds during the breeding season.

Food availability is a big factor in when birds lay eggs. If there isn't enough food, birds wait to have babies so they can feed them properly. When there's plenty of food, birds lay more eggs because they have enough energy and nutrients for themselves and their young. [The RSPB website](#) gives advice on how to feed birds safely.

HUMANISTS UK CONVENTION 2024

We will again have a presence, with a Humanist Climate Action stall, at the [Humanists UK Convention](#). This year it will be in Cardiff, on 14-16 June. There will be more about our plans in our May Newsletter. In the meantime you can [book now](#) to attend the convention

KEEP IN TOUCH

It was good to get further responses from readers about the issue of population growth, clearly a matter about which many HCA supporters feel strongly. The feedback drew attention to the complex intersecting of the problems of growing populations, levels of poverty and the need to increase prosperity, growing demand for water and food, and the pollution of rivers and seas, indicating that environmental action requires more than just cutting fossil fuels and CO2 emissions. Chris Sutton pointed out that though the issue of women's reproductive rights is important in the context of the population debate, this is part of the larger issue of promoting education for women, something which is threatened by religious opposition and by levels of poverty which, in many countries, prevent women from having equal opportunities.

We welcome feedback and responses to items in HCA newsletters. You can contact us at climateaction@humanists.uk. All newsletters to date can be found on the [Humanist Climate Action section of the Humanists UK website](#). We aim to produce a newsletter every two months.