The messages that matter

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The Bird of Time: The Science and Politics of Nature Conservation. By N.W. Moore. Cambridge University Press: 1987. Pp.290. Hbk £27.50, \$49.50; pbk £9.95, \$15.95.

NORMAN MOORE's first encounter with DDT was in a German prisoner of war camp in 1945. "Before returning to polite society", he wrote, "we had to be deloused. In an environment in which typhus was active, I was delighted to be liberally sprinkled with DDT . . .". Fifteen years later he was appointed to create and run a Toxic Chemicals and Wildlife Section, where research on the effects of pesticides and herbicides on the environment could be done for the British Nature Conservancy.

For the rest of his career Moore studied the unwelcome side-effects of organochlorine insecticides on birds and mammals and benevolent insects. He patiently reasoned with government bureaucrats and farmers' lobbies to persuade them that the spread of this new kind of agricultural technology was becoming a threat to the balance of nature. And he wrote popular articles and addressed meetings in the hope that people would come to regard conservation of habitats and the protection of wildlife as essential concerns in a civilized community. In *The Bird of Time* he pauses to look back on a lifetime spent caring for the countryside.

The subtitle is *The Science and Politics of Nature Conservation*. But this is not (in my view) what the book is about. Anyone who wants to read a documented story about the politics of pesticides in Britain has to turn to John Sheail's masterly *Pesticides and Nature Conservation* — it is incomparably better for this purpose. And anyone who wants to read about the scientific aspects should first consult Kenneth Mellanby's *Pesticides and Pollution*. Dr Moore's book is rather the personal record of a scientist whose work is the foundation upon which our still rudimentary policies for conservation are built, and it is for this that it is worth reading.

Moore reminisces about his work as regional officer for the Nature Conservancy in south-west England. It is not difficult to see how his career became set on conservation. Figure 13 of the book carries four ominous maps, showing the shrinkage of Dorset heathlands from 1896 to 1960, due to the inroads of farmers and builders; and figure 16 shows how the hedges surrounding fields in a part of East

Anglia all but disappeared between 1946 and 1965. Heaths and hedges carry a rich community of living things. If the hedges are uprooted and the heaths used for crops or conifer plantations or urban development, the living communities vanish. So the choice of nature reserves and the preservation of what were called "sites of special scientific interest" (SSSIs) were concerns to which Moore willingly devoted his skill.

Nature reserves and SSSIs take land which farmers could use for profit. So there have to be compromises; farmers have to be won over to the beliefs of conservationists. Moore was well qualified to negotiate with farmers, for he understands farming himself and he rejects the

governments was that birds *were* at risk, though his evidence was weakened by all sorts of reservations and his case could not be conclusive. The simple concept, that all birds at the top of the food chain accumulate organochlorine residues, is not correct. Yet once such reservations are mentioned to officials or to the public, the issue becomes confused and governments are virtually invited to wait until more research is done. So Moore, like the rest of us, had to learn, as he puts it, "the power of simple concepts irrespective of their accuracy", though in his lectures he was at great pains to emphasize the inconsistencies in the evidence and the difficulty, in this kind of biology, of designing experiments to prove a point.

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Deadly diet? A peregrine falcon, the top of a food chain, with its prey.

common assumption that farmers are averse to conservation. One of his valuable contributions to the diplomacy of conservation was as a founder member of the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) which enlists the co-operation of farmers who want to manage their land in ways that preserve natural habitats. His experience with FWAG was invaluable when, later on, he had to convince farmers that persistent pesticides, which had brought them great benefits, were putting at risk the very survival of peregrine falcons, *and that this mattered*.

These last four words were the hardest part of the message to get across. Moore's account of the difficulty of doing this is the most interesting part of the book, for part of the difficulty lay in his own scientific integrity. It has been said of him that "his style and manner resembled that of the university don". In the book he carefully distinguishes between scientific proof and circumstantial evidence; his dilemma was that time was running out for the birds at risk from pesticides, and his message to

The Bird of Time is written in an informal relaxed style, like leisurely after-dinner talk, moving from one episode in Moore's career to another, and coming back, after a few pages, to the same basic beliefs. Look at a hedgerow in the time-scale of evolution, not of a man's lifetime; to preserve habitats is paramount — if this is done well, communities may survive; it is essential to monitor the consequences of any new substance released into the environment; anything which endangers wildlife of "no commercial value" may in the long run endanger ourselves. It is the *Apologia* of a biologist who has been (as he puts it) "prepared to advise on the strength of the available evidence" even if it is circumstantial and vulnerable to criticism, and whose reasonableness has in the long run proved to be more lastingly effective than the strident protest of activists. □

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