

George Monbiot

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# Scapegoat Season

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Instead of addressing our multiple ecological disasters, those with power are attacking wildlife defenders.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 20<sup>th</sup> July 2023

Several grisly bloodsports, legal or otherwise, are enjoyed in the English countryside. But none is as popular as shooting the messenger. Rather than attend to our environmental crisis, politicians, lobbyists and the media prefer to hunt the people seeking to address the problem. No quarry is pursued as keenly as the government’s conservation agency [Natural England](#).

This weekend, a full-spectrum attack was launched in the billionaire press. The Sunday Telegraph [raged against the agency’s call](#) for “nutrient neutrality”. This means that new housing or business developments should not increase the amount of shit in our rivers. The paper also attacked Natural England’s advice that when new homes are built there should be no net increase in air pollution. It quoted a mysterious “insider” accusing the agency of “[green activism](#)”. What’s the betting that this “insider” is a property developer? A [similar attack](#) was launched in the Times on Monday.

A column in the Sunday Times by Robert Colville, director of the Centre for Policy Studies, a dark-money junktank that won’t reveal [who funds it](#), also [excoriated Natural England](#) for advising councils that housing developments should be accompanied by new green spaces, to take pressure off existing nature reserves.

In all these cases, Natural England is simply discharging its statutory duties. Under the habitat regulations, it must ensure that new developments don’t adversely affect important wildlife sites, through water pollution, air pollution, visitor pressure and other impacts. It is following the evidence, not the politics. This is its cardinal sin.

But the campaign against it seems to be working. Rishi Sunak is reported to be rewriting

the rules. Instead of ensuring that wastewater treatment plants must be upgraded before major new developments are completed, the government, the Telegraph says, intends to “[forward count](#)” promised improvements. In other words, just as sewage pollution becomes a major political issue, our rivers can be loaded with even more excrement, on the grounds that one day the problem will be addressed. Relying on promises of future action by water companies and housebuilders – what could possibly go wrong?

The Tories will claim they are simply eager to ease the housing shortage – and that this reported reversal is entirely unrelated to the fact that property developers are among the [principal donors](#) to the Conservative party, and seem to give most when their demands are met. The Telegraph correctly points out that the largest share of water pollution comes not from homes but “[from farms](#)”. But the government has got that covered too. Following representations from another powerful lobby – the National Farmers’ Union – it [introduced loopholes](#) into the farming rules for water, permitting livestock farmers to load rivers with dung [without fear of prosecution](#).

There’s been a similar hue and cry about Natural England’s attempts to defend protected places (sites of special scientific interest or SSSIs) on Dartmoor. In 2012 and 2013, it struck 10-year agreements with farmers on the moor to adjust their “grazing calendars” (how many animals they release, where, when and for how long) to reverse the disastrous decline of protected species. The farmers proposed a new grazing regime that, they agreed, would be adjusted if it wasn’t working. In return, they were given millions of pounds of public money, in the form of “higher level stewardship” payments.

As the conservationist Tony Whitehead documents, it became clear several years ago that these [agreements weren’t working](#), either because the wrong calendars had been proposed or because the farmers weren’t sticking to them. The protected sites are still in catastrophic decline. The farmers were repeatedly asked to make adjustments by Natural England.

This year, the agreements were due to expire. But the farmers receiving this money could, if they wanted, seek a five-year extension. Natural England published a blogpost [explaining the issues](#) and [sent emails](#) to farmers taking the payments, asking for further changes if they wanted another tranche of money. The result was an eruption in parliament and the press. The Country Land and Business Association led the charge, [calling for](#) a “full-scale review of Natural England’s remit and track record”, and claiming that the agency “does not receive sufficient scrutiny”. But it was simply doing its duty: it has a legal responsibility to protect and restore SSSIs.

In a [parliamentary debate](#) on the issue, only one MP (Labour’s Daniel Zeichner) offered a halfhearted defence of Natural England. Everyone else – Conservative, Labour, LibDem and DUP – lacerated the agency. MPs wrongly claimed that no one was consulted and no warnings were given, that Natural England “is attempting to force farmers out of business” and that its efforts to improve the condition of protected sites are “an insult”, “heavy handed” and a “grave wrong”.

Somehow they all managed to forget that the special subsidies – higher level stewardship grants – are payments for services rendered. If you don’t render the service, you shouldn’t get paid. Farmers could continue to trash the land, but they would no longer be paid public money for it. Somehow, they all also managed to forget that Dartmoor, allegedly a national park, is an ecological disaster zone, among the [most mistreated ecosystems](#) in Europe.

At the end of the festival of ignorance that passed for parliamentary debate, the farming minister Mark Spencer gave our elected vandals everything they demanded. The issue would be taken out of the hands of Natural England and handed to an “independent” review. In the meantime, the livestock farmers would continue to receive the special payments, regardless of the damage they inflicted. Who would chair this [review](#)? David Fursdon, the [former president](#) of the Country Land and Business Association.

Attacks like this are launched whenever Natural England tries to do its job. It was furiously denounced at the end of last month when it designated, for [solid environmental reasons](#), a [new protected site](#) in Cornwall.

Wildlife protection is in freefall in this country. The government’s own figures show that the proportion of SSSIs in [favourable condition](#) has fallen from 44% in 2003 to 38% last year. The figures are even worse in our [national parks](#). Natural England has an average of just [one staff member](#) to assess the condition of every 73 protected sites: an impossible workload. It doesn’t have the capacity even to see what is happening, let alone act on it.

None of the official targets are being met. The government is preparing to [smash its promise](#) of no decline in environmental protection after we left the EU. There are two options in such circumstances: address the problem or find a scapegoat. Who could have guessed they would take option two?

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