Environmental history key to the future of England's wildlife

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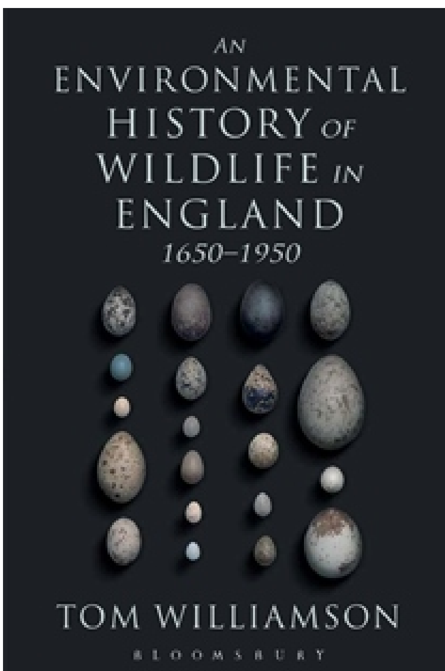

Protecting and enhancing our wildlife for future generations will need radical new policies informed by history as much as science, according to an academic at the University of East Anglia.

Landscape historian Prof Tom Williamson suggests that far from being 'natural', nature and the countryside have for centuries largely been the result of the activities of humans. Because of this, we need a better

understanding of the human history of important habitats in order manage them into the future.

In his new book An Environmental History of Wildlife in England 1650 – 1950, Prof Williamson examines how the number, and distribution, of different species altered over three centuries, a period when the environment was transformed by unprecedented levels of population growth, large scale urbanisation, economic globalisation and successive revolutions in agriculture and industry. These great environmental changes had a profound impact on the country's flora and fauna, but a less uniformly negative one than is often assumed. The book describes the changing ways in which various wild plants and animals were regarded, controlled and exploited by England's human inhabitants and explains how the environments in which such creatures made their homes developed and adapted, often in surprising ways, to new conditions.

"The environment of England faces more challenges, and more complex challenges, than perhaps ever before," said Prof Williamson. "Continuing increases in population, and radical reductions in household size, put more and more pressure on space. Our insatiable demand for energy threatens to cover the rural landscape with wind turbines and solar farms. Above all, globalization, and perhaps climate change, bring not only more foreign plants and invertebrates to these shores but also – more worrying by far – new pests and diseases, especially of trees, such as the recent ash chalara.

"Managing change to protect and enhance our wildlife for future generations will involve some hard thinking, and the formulation of radical new policies. For this we may need an historical perspective on England's wildlife, almost as much as a scientific one. Man, not God, made the countryside, and to manage valued habitats into the future, we need a more sophisticated understanding of their human as much as their

natural history."

The book, published this month by Bloomsbury, draws on a wide variety of social, historical and ecological sources. It examines the impact of social and economic organisation on the English landscape, biodiversity, the agricultural revolution, landed estates, the coming of large-scale industry and the growth of towns and suburbs. The period it covers ends at another crucial point in time - the dawn of intensive farming and other new forms of land use.

"Most people today probably think of the countryside as in some sense 'natural', certainly in comparison with the environment of towns," said Prof Williamson. "But problems over the definition of 'nature' underlie many current issues in conservation. In truth, rural landscapes as much as urban ones are largely or entirely artificial in character, the creation of particular social, economic and technological circumstances. Heaths, woods and meadows are, in most ways, no more 'natural' than suburban gardens or inner-city waste grounds. Indeed, one indication of how far removed we are from a truly 'natural ' landscape in England, uninfluenced by human activity, is the fact that natural scientists argue over what precise form this might have taken.

"What remains certain is that nature has never existed outside of or independent from the activities of men. The natural lies embedded in the social and the economic: its history is largely, though not entirely, that of successive forms of social, economic, and agricultural organization.

"We must accept the essentially unnatural character of our natural heritage, and we must also celebrate what some have evocatively termed the 'unofficial countryside', of gravel pits, wasteland and sewage farms. But we must also strive to preserve what remains of our 'traditional' countryside, for cultural reasons as much as for biological ones."

Prof Williamson also argues that recreating lost habitats needs to be informed by an historical perspective and warns of the danger of a one size fits all approach. "The widespread replanting of species-rich hedges and woodland over the last few decades has certainly brought real benefits, both aesthetically and in terms of wildlife conservation. More heaths, downs and wetlands are certainly required, simply to ensure healthy populations of birds like the stone curlew, as well as to sustain a wide range of endangered plants. This said, when we create new heaths, at great expense, and then attempt to maintain the result – an impoverished, artificial, species-poor habitat – by mimicking long-redundant economic and agricultural activities, then we are certainly doing something a little odd.

"Such action might make more sense if informed by an historical perspective, for there is a very real danger here of a one size fits all approach, and of basing our restoration policies on one type, and phase, of habitat development. In the case of heathland, for example, we might consider restoring some of the wood-pasture heaths which were common in the past, rather than insisting on uprooting every existing tree. We might replicate some of the modes of exploitation other than grazing which once existed, such as the systematic and regular stripping of areas of heather and its roots. When we undertake such actions, however, we are of course effectively farming wildlife, as we now so often do on nature reserves and in other contexts, rather than watching wildlife adapt – as it has always done in the past – to changes wrought to the environment primarily for our own practical and economic benefit."

Tom Williamson is Professor of History at UEA and heads up the Landscape Group within the School of History – a collection of academics, researchers and research students studying all aspects of the English landscape, from later prehistory to the present. He has written widely on landscape archaeology, agricultural history, and the history of landscape design.

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Provided by University of East Anglia

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