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Community wildlife sites in Oxfordshire: an exploration of ecological and social meanings for green spaces

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Abstract: The paper explores the experiences and meanings that participants attribute to community wildlife sites, a new kind of space created through the initiative and commitment of local residents, often without any wider organisational involvement. The study focuses on six case studies in Oxfordshire, England. It is exploratory and discusses the findings as points of departure for further research. In all the sites, community was an important part of the motivation for starting the work, social relations a rewarding aspect of engaging in it, and personal connection with the site and its experiences of nature, a widely and emotionally expressed outcome. The sites offer spaces for the active enactment of participation in nature. While access is essential, property rights appear to be less important than the sense of ownership generated through interaction with the site. Likewise, formal organisation and governance is less important to the participants, than the social interactions of the group, and new friendships. The primary purpose in each case, is to give people more access to ‘the countryside’ or ‘nature’ or ‘orchids’. In doing so, however, the participants have given themselves experiences that are personally meaningful. There is potential for contribution to resilient landscapes through networks of habitats, and to wider social objectives of government policy, but these will have to be balanced carefully with the importance of local initiative in contributing to the sites’ meanings.

Keywords: Access, biodiversity, community ownership, community woodland, conservation, human ecology, social capital, sustainability, urban greenspace, volunteers, wellbeing

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1. Introduction

Across England, a new type of space has been appearing over the last decade or so, spaces that combine a sense of human community and wildlife or nature conservation. An internet search on ‘community wildlife site’ reveals an intriguing range of starting points for exploring these, from the reedbeds behind the demolished primary school in Hastings (Hastings Borough Council 2001) to inner city community wildlife gardens such as that at Camley Street in inner London (London Wildlife Trust 2007). Any weekend exploring the countryside will reveal tiny corners of fields or woods that have been taken over by local groups with a vision of providing a place for people and wildlife.

These sites are appearing at a time of changing meanings of nature, countryside and commons, in which the function of rural landscapes is seen to be shifting from an emphasis on material production to one of consumption, or of ecosystem service provision (Evans et al. 2002; Mather et al. 2006). Discourse about formal commons (with a specific legal meaning in Britain, referring to areas of individual ownership with traditional shared access and usufruct rights) highlights their emerging importance for nature conservation and recreation (Wilson and Wilson 1997; Short 2000, 2008). While traditionally they have had an important role in rural livelihoods, there are also important symbolic dimensions of their contribution to social and cultural life that are overlooked by the utilitarian focus of much academic literature on common property (Brown 2007).

As Short (2008) points out, these changes take place in a policy context that is perceived as largely centrally regulated with little local ownership. This observation might also be applied to the tradition of nature conservation in the United Kingdom, which has given rise to a complex and increasing set of formal designations (including nature reserve, National Nature Reserve, Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), international designations such as Special Area of Conservation, Ramsar Wetland Site, etc.) (Adams 2003). A new concept of ‘Local Sites’ is now being promoted by local and regional government whereby local

authorities, working with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local partners, have set up systems of locally valued non-statutory sites. There are about 35,000 such Local Sites in England (DEFRA 2006), designated on biodiversity grounds by a committee generally made up from the county council, conservation based NGOs such as the Wildlife Trusts, and statutory government agencies. Like SSSIs, they are often in private ownership and without public access.

In this context, community wildlife sites are a hybrid. They occupy spaces in between those of traditional commons and traditional nature reserves, and are created through the initiative and commitment of local residents, usually without any institutional involvement. They provide public access and in some cases come under new community or public ownership.

This study aims to explore these new meanings which are emerging from people's experience of engaging with these spaces. It takes an exploratory approach to research the characteristics of this newly emerging phenomenon experienced by participants themselves. Because such sites are local, unclassified and often unique, there is no quick way to understand their range and extent. The study therefore focuses on one county, Oxfordshire, where the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum (ONCF)¹ supports the work of these groups as vital to providing a mosaic of essential habitats across the county. Their website records over 80 groups comprising over 1000 volunteers who are actively working to conserve wildlife in their local area, run by local residents, often with the support of the parish council (ONCF 2008). Some are, for example, restoring ponds, while others are planting trees and hedgerows or managing their churchyard for wildlife. ONCF's work in liaising with these groups provided a means to access the groups and select a range of case studies.

2. Methods

As an exploratory study, we followed closely the qualitative methodological approach described by Maxwell (2005), using a process of interactive design both within the research team and among our case study participants. In order to maximise opportunities to explore the relationship between context and phenomenon we chose a multiple case study approach (Yin 2003). Initially 10 of the most successful groups were contacted, to invite them to participate as case studies. Following meetings and participation in working days, six were finally selected on the basis that they were active and willing to be involved, and represented a range of different contexts. This made a set of two urban, two peri-urban and two rural village case studies, described in more detail in Table 1.

¹ ONCF is an independent forum consisting of a partnership of 60 conservation organizations, farming bodies, environmental and recreational interests and local authorities. ONCF 2008. Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum available at <http://www.oncf.org.uk/local-information/local-information.html>.

Table 1. The case study sites.

Group name	Surrounding area	Site description	Site ownership	Group description	Ecological contribution?	Community involvement	Website
Saints Mary and John Churchyard	Urban	Formerly overgrown churchyard (woody scrub); much tree and scrub removal; currently species-poor 'improved' (over-fertile) grassland	Church	Voluntary group (funds managed through church; group manages separate account). Set up in 2001	No known BAP species or habitat; may contribute to urban habitat connectivity	Irregular participation from wide social range including church members, volunteers seeking route back into work, those recovering from illness or addiction	http://www.ssmjchurchyard.org.uk/
New Marston Wildlife Group	Urban	Former playing field and margins; semi-improved grassland; public interest in population of bee orchids	Owned by county council, city council will manage it. New status of "ecology park"	Voluntary group; membership payments to cover insurance for work parties	No known BAP species or habitat; may contribute to urban habitat connectivity; ecological interest of grassland due to hydrology	Very focussed on local community. Close links to former school, and to existing local primary school. Good attendance at work days	http://homepage.nitworld.com/marilyn.cox/jsla/Milham%20Ford%20Park.htm
Horspath PC Wildlife Conservation Area	Peri-urban village	Former railway cutting, formerly heavily overgrown, clay. Five acres	Parish Council bought site in 1982	Informal group since 2000. Six core members	Significant population of bats (3 species, all protected by law)	5–10 people regularly on work days, drawn from surrounding village. Village events of 50+ once a year	http://www.shotover.clara.net/horspath/
St Mary's Fields	Edge of peri-urban village	Scrub and semi-improved grassland	Parish Council	Informal, strongly dependent on core group of approx five people	Important site for breeding birds and butterflies; part of wider landscape scale conservation project	Local community involvement; species interest groups	http://kidlington-pc.gov.uk/parish/StMarys.asp
Wootton Conservation Trust	Edge of rural village	Mix of habitats in a 30-acre site including semi-improved grassland with small patches unimproved (chalk) grassland; wet grassland; wetland areas; old hedgerows	Wootton Conservation Trust	Trust (5 trustees) set up in 2001	Home to water voles (UKBAP species); locally important habitat	Local community, and BTCV volunteers	http://www.ocv.org.uk/sites.php?id=16&photos=1
Hailey Community Woodland Trust	Edge of rural village	Former arable, clay; newly planted woodland with native species	Hailey Community Woodland Trust	Chairman and 7/8 trustees, set up in 2001	Increase biodiversity through native woodland creation	Strong local community involvement; links with school, planting, fundraising, ongoing events	http://www.wychwoodproject.org/wps/wcm/connect/Wychwood/What+we+do/Community+woodlands/

For each of these we made visits to experience the sites, held extended interviews with group leaders; and (usually shorter) interviews with others identified through snowball sampling. These interviews focused on respondents' motivations, prior experience of community and/or conservation work, description of the work and organization involved, and reflections on value and outcome of engagement with the community wildlife site. In total 25 interviews were transcribed and analysed in combination with field notes from 10 site visits, and printed documentation from each site. This material was studied to draw out salient themes; all respondents' quotations on each theme were then assembled and analysed in two workshops by the research team. First drafts were circulated to respondents who validated or challenged hypothetical explanations, which were subsequently modified. As an exploratory study of a diverse and new phenomenon, we do not seek to generalise from our analysis, but to present emerging patterns and contextualised explanations as potentially fruitful lines of inquiry for further research.

In the next section we present the principal emerging themes from our studies of the six community wildlife sites and their associated groups. This is followed by a section which discusses these findings in the context of the trends discussed above, and considers the implications for research and policy implementation.

3. Experiences of community wildlife sites

3.1. The initial impetus

Respondents often made a clear distinction between what had motivated them to become involved in the first place, compared with the value and satisfaction that they perceived through the experience. These original motivations represented a complex balance of concerns for nature with concerns for community well-being.

In several of the sites, groups first formed in response to a perceived threat to the site, usually through what is termed 'development' (new buildings on previously agricultural or open land). This threat focused people's attention on what they valued:

People may not necessarily value things, but once there is a threat of taking them away there is an outcry. [interview 20]

Sometimes this fear of loss was linked closely to the community; in the following comment the term 'neighbourhood' brings together the sense of environment and community:

It really did start as a political group. ... You know, I'd seen it all happen in [another part of Oxford], the whole neighbourhood had gone. And our neighbourhood down at the bottom of the road here is quite strong, it's got a real community village feel about it. [interview 21]

Others perceived the site and group as vehicles for working towards a more positive goal, fuelled by the ideals of the individuals involved. Many (particularly

those who took a leading role) were motivated by a concern about the loss of countryside, connected to the previous concerns about:

I just feel that so much of the countryside has been taken away from us. We just need to preserve as many bits as we can because so much has been taken away. It's something which takes you further into life, I think, if you have this love of the countryside. [interview 17]

Some focused more on the loss of *access* to the countryside:

We felt that people were being excluded from the countryside and in a village like this [where] children wander freely, particularly over grassland, that was diminishing. [interview 7]

The key thing for me is the kids. We have got to get kids out into the countryside more than they have been and ... that's the most important part really of what we are doing because it's that generation ... I mean the woods are for them, not for us. [interview 15]

In all of these quotations the value of nature or wildlife is implicit in the references to 'countryside', but some made this clearer:

It's not a park, I wasn't thinking in those sort of terms, we have a perfectly good playing field. It was just to enable people to spend time to explore nature and to wander, reasonably unrestricted. [interview 7]

The locals want to see the orchids. They want to be able to come in and appreciate them. They don't want them to go. There are plenty of parks with nice trees, planted shrubs, introduced exotic species, seats, swings – there are loads of parks like that. This is not going to be a park like that. [interview 19]

There was no indication across the six sites however that 'nature' was the sole aim. There was a balance to be achieved:

We don't want it to just deteriorate into a completely wild, unmanaged area. Because that's not what rural England is about. If you just abandon it, everything goes to scrub, you lose everything. [interview 7]

In two cases (Saints Mary and John churchyard, and Horspath), the social threat was felt more explicitly. The sites had become overgrown and neglected, providing cover for drug users and homeless people. For example, in the churchyard:

I came in at the point at which the community police and the church and the city had said we have got to do something about this place, it is simply being used as a criminal area. It was the community police who got the soldiers in to cut down this very dense jungle that had grown up. ... but they said that they could only maintain the bits that were restored into a manageable condition. ...

Because they reckoned it was too risky, even for their workers because [of] the dilapidated grave stones, the number of discarded needles. [anonymous interview]²

Similarly, Horspath Wildlife Conservation Area was owned by Horspath parish council for many years before any attempt was made to transform the overgrown disused railway cutting:

The councillors made a site visit in 1999 and they wondered why on earth have we got this five acres here when it's so desperate to get in there that we need to take machetes and saws. And it was partly that it was overgrown, ... partly because it was a centre for drug trafficking ... and so it was a social problem which caused the council to take action. [anonymous interview]

In three other cases groups were first set up by individuals with long experience of natural history (birdwatching and botany), but only one of these people gave these interests as a principal reason for seeking to protect the site through the establishment of a group. She was a schoolteacher who had conducted many practical biology lessons on the site and developed an intimate knowledge of its species. For the previous decade, she had protected and transplanted bee orchids (*Ophrys bombyliflora*) and:

... organized an open day. We advertised it locally and we got people coming to see, people like to come in and walk around the grounds. They looked at the pond and they looked at our hay meadow, which was full of lots of other wild flowers and they looked at the 35 bee orchids and were astounded that such things could be in the city. [anonymous interview]

In her case, years of such connection with the site led her to campaign for its protection when the school was closed and the site sold for building. So even here, implicitly the motivation was to protect the site for people who 'were astounded that such things could be in the city'.

3.2. The significance of shared space

Each community wildlife site has become a shared social space through a process of changed access (referring to the legal rights to walk on the land), or accessibility (referring to perceptions of desirability or ease of walking on the land). The urban and peri-urban sites were already owned by local authorities or the Church of England, and although there was no transfer of ownership, the work on each site has resulted in transformations of local perceptions and use.

² This and the next quotation are not linked to interview numbers as they can be identified with specific sites and would compromise the anonymity of quotations by the same interviewees elsewhere in the paper.

In these cases respondents reported a conscious shift in how the site was seen:

I felt that there was a need for a green space which was communal ... If you walk around the fields around here there are lots of paths, but you're always conscious that you're on someone else's land. [interview 16]

That's a village thing; it's a community thing. There are groups of people in the village who don't do this and don't do that, but basically I feel it's brought a lot of people together again, even if it only means that they're walking and we're walking. People are actually using that as a village facility. [interview 17]

Both the rural sites were purchased through community trust funds established for the purpose. Not one participant felt that legal ownership was an end in itself, and those who discussed it were at pains to balance this with their perceptions that ownership could exclude others:

[Researcher]: Do you feel some ownership?

[Respondent]: I do, perhaps I shouldn't.

[Researcher]: Do you enjoy that?

[Respondent]: Yes, but I'm suspicious of it because that's not really what it's about.[...] It doesn't belong to the village, it's a facility for the village. [interview 7]

The legal fact of holding title to the land is neither sufficient nor necessary to create this sense of ownership. The word 'ownership' was used as often by respondents from groups that did not own their site; for example:

Local people have shown that they feel ownership of [the site] and it's exciting and dynamic ... that's important to me ... I've just acted as the catalyst. [interview 11]

On one community owned site, one respondent explained how ownership is created through the regular interaction with the site:

People feel this belongs to them and we have encouraged this feeling of "we planted it, we look after it", and that's a very strong feeling. ... And the children, to hear them talk about it, "I've been up to my woodland." We have worked to foster that ... It was quite deliberate, and necessarily so. Because that awareness can evaporate frighteningly easily and has to be worked out and maintained. The awareness of the ownership of the woodland. You can't take it for granted. [interview 16]

It is interesting that these feelings were generated at the one site (the community woodland site) that was started through the efforts of the Wychwood Project (see table 1), external to the village. Although one example is not enough to generalise, we might suggest that it is the effort made, not the source of the

initiative, that contributes to this sense. Work done *by* local government would have not had the same effect:

If the council had done it, I don't think it will have the same sort of identity.
[interview 12]

Many interviews however reflected a sense of compromise between the ideals of conservation and accessibility. This was most clearly seen in the urban sites:

I think one's got to be realistic ... it's got to be seen as a success and what people see as a success is that it needs to be looking nice, or nice enough.
[interview 1]

Its only future is to be open to the public, so there's no point in getting upset about the fact that foxes can't gambol across the field anymore. There's no point in getting upset that green woodpeckers won't be able to forage for ants. They'll have to go somewhere else or they'll have to find ways to fit in with it being a public open space, because that's its only possible option. [...] It's an urban green space. [interview 19]

Elsewhere some respondents expressed regret at the amount of intervention needed to attract people:

I wouldn't have done as much [path-making] because I quite enjoy the wild aspect of it particularly, I would have preferred that to have been left. [interview 8]

I guess balance is right. But I suppose if it were my ground I'd let it go more wild. [interview 18]

3.3. Social connections

As some of the quotations above indicate, the value attached to the communal quality of the sites is connected with values about social connections. Three particular types of social connections can be seen: the interactions with other members of the group; formal interactions required to manage legal requirements of a group; and interactions with outside organizations including ONCF, NGOs, other site groups, and local government.

All of the respondents were unequivocal about the value of working in a group of committed people. For some this was something of a surprise; the following quotations are both from people who had been connected for many years to the place and community where they established the wildlife sites:

My life is changed enormously because I have got a lot of much closer friends.
[interview 15]

I wouldn't have those friends if I hadn't started off in 1999 campaigning to stop the site going under housing. They've benefited because they've found a new interest and something to do locally. It's brought people together. [interview 19]

The more formal interactions were less of a pleasure. Almost all respondents belonged to at least one other group in the community, and groups can represent stressful demands. One explained how several groups had arisen in the face of the threat of new building:

We didn't have any of these local groups [10–12 years ago]. It pulled the community together, because [before] it wasn't under threat.

[Interviewer: do you feel differently about it now?]

Yes, it's become more of a hassle. You always seem to have to go out and fight, defend the area in one way or another. ... every meeting you have, it's out to have a go at somebody else. [interview 21]

The groups connected to the sites vary in their degree of formality; trusts have to be formed if land is to be bought, while two other groups also had bank accounts, treasurers and annual general meetings (AGMs). Whilst nobody rated formal group meetings as their favourite aspect of the work, they expressed cheerful tolerance. The AGMs in fact became opportunities to celebrate membership, for example, by holding it in the community wood itself. Meetings attract different members of the community:

There are some people I see only at the AGM when they come and want to get together and see what the group has done all year. [interview 19]

Wider interactions with other organizations were however scarce, and specific to particular groups. The churchyard group had made particularly strong use of training courses and awards, and maintained close connections with ONCF. The community woodland was connected in to a wider project (The Wychwood Project), and members were aware of other woods. Respondents occasionally commented that individuals in their group had 'huge networks', but despite probing on the topic, showed little interest in sharing experiences with other groups.

Finally for several groups, members gained new experiences of working with local government. For most this was a positive experience:

We did get a lot of expert advice, I mean we had ornithologists and we had people who identified all the plants and all the bird life and all the insects ... people from West Oxfordshire District Council. [interview 6]

For others, especially those who had to challenge development decisions, it was the least positive aspect:

It's a very slow process, dealing with city and county council. Frustratingly slow. ... I've realized that you're often dealing with people and organizations that aren't as efficient as I thought them to be, councils ... I was sort of amazed and disappointed at how decisions were made. [interview 21]

This variation in experience of organization and networking is related it seems to the knowledge and contacts of individuals, and the degree of challenge to possible change of land use on the site. For a few, working for the groups in connection with the wildlife sites, provided new awareness for a few of the pros and cons of these linkages; but for all it provided positive social experiences of working with other members of the groups.

3.4. Personal connections with place and nature

In addition to the values expressed above in relation to community spaces and social experiences, all of the respondents talked about their special feelings in relation to the places created by the sites and the groups. For some, especially leaders, a large part of this personal meaning related to the sense of fulfilment or achievement of their aims:

The main kick out of [this] Wood is just seeing all the people who now go there every day and lots of people, not just older people like me but sort of young married couples and kids. [interview 15]

It's so worthwhile because people are back appreciating the countryside. [interview 17]

Some connected this to their wider concerns about the world:

The broader issue is that very few of us are in a position to change the international situation significantly, but we can do what we can in our little corners and I think the sign of hope here is that more people are doing this. [interview 20]

I appreciate it so much and it's made me aware that we've got to be positive about these things and we've got to make an effort to look after these sites and encourage to keep as many as possible cause we've just lost so much. ... I feel anything would help climate change if it's possible for us to help it. [interview 17]

Such sense of achievement, pragmatic or idealistic, was widespread, but even more was the expression of strong personal attachment to the site. Of the 25 people interviewed, only one avoided expressing personal emotions in connection with the community wildlife site. This was often expressed as a sense of relationship or intimacy:

I feel almost every one of those trees, as if they were my kids ... I have a conversation with every tree, I literally, I mean there is a relationship with every tree. [interview 15]

I know everything there is to know about every inch of that site and that feels good. You know you can travel the world and see all sorts of different places, but you can also travel in time with one site. [interview 19]

Others expressed something more spiritual:

It's just a huge living experience. [interview 17]

It's a beautiful place to be, it lifts the spirit. [interview 7]

Well I think the best moments are on a sunny morning after a rain storm; there's nobody there and the sun is flickering through the trees and the birds are singing. Life is put in perspective, problems drop away. It's very, I can't think of a good adjective ... boosting. [interview 1]

These experiences were quite distinct from the social experiences mentioned in the previous section even explicitly discussed the value of being there alone:

I just feel I'm still in the village, I don't feel I'm in new territory. I just know it I suppose, so I never feel a tiny bit nervous or anything over there. Which for women nowadays I think is, I mean there aren't many places you can walk – I'll go over there and just wander around on my own, I'll be picking berries or something – and perfectly safe. [interview 6]

Several emphasized that these feelings have wider benefits for well-being:

I think it's the best therapy. If you're feeling browned off or fed up, you can go to a place like that and just – you've got peace, you've got beauty, you've got birdsong. I often think it's a therapy that could be used on so many people, let alone just pure enjoyment and fun. [interview 17]

It does something good to people in the way the British playing field doesn't. And it's a quite difficult thing to define. I suppose it's because people do have an emotional response to something that is growing that is wild. [interview 16]

Others, often motivated originally to do something for their community, expressed surprise and joy at their new understanding of nature:

It's the minute daily observation which makes it a living thing. It's just noticing the little things. The quality of the mud underfoot, what's dry and what's wet. The constant repetition and contact with it. You see the buds coming and register these little things, and constant contact keeps it in the consciousness. [interview 16]

I thought it was wonderful. [...] When we cut down the blackthorn suddenly there was this wonderful limestone bank covered with cowslips, just beautiful. And I realized that I'd always thought that nature was just something that happened, you know, that you just let it get on with it itself. So you suddenly realize that in fact if you help it along a bit ... it benefits from that help. [interview 6].

4. Discussion

This study was conducted in Oxfordshire, as an entry point to understanding the new and undocumented profusion of community wildlife sites. It set out to understand the growth of these spaces through the words and experiences of participants, in particular the meanings they have brought or created in relation to interactions with nature and people. These emerged in a context where social and ecological meanings are deeply entwined, in spaces which are neither nature reserves nor urban parks, but a hybrid. In all of the six cases, community was an important part of the motivation for starting the work, social relations a rewarding aspect of engaging in it, and personal connection with the site and its experiences of nature, a widely and emotionally expressed outcome. These sites not only represent unique spaces for interactions between people and nature, but also the locus of work – processes and experiences – that create meanings and connections for the people involved. In this final section we reflect on the issues raised in the introduction to the paper and the implications of the themes identified from the analysis of the interviews.

4.1. Production, consumption or participation

We started by situating the emergence of community wildlife sites in the context of debate about changing land use, the shift from production to consumption, and specific questions about the changing value of traditional commons. These sites are not ‘commons’ in the historic and legal sense enshrined in the Commons Act of 2006 (Short 2008), and indeed one respondent wrote to us after reading an early version of this paper, concerned that the site he had helped to establish would be confused with traditional commons. However, they are commons in two senses: the sense of equal (legal) rights of access, and a more subtle, constructed sense of common space generated through shared experiences.

In order to relate this to the wider debate about the shifting meaning of commons, we must situate these spaces in the debate about post-productive landscapes. This debate relates largely to agrarian (rural) land use, the shift to conservation of some resources, and the consumption of other products and services (Slee 2005; Parker 2006). These functions – production, consumption and conservation – can be represented as a three-dimensional framework (Holmes 2006), which has been applied by Short (2008) to represent the roles of traditional commons as the middle ground between these three modes. If we apply this to the community spaces described here, they might more appropriately be represented close to the axis between consumption and conservation (Figure 1).

However, further consideration of the meanings of these terms suggests some problematic interpretations and distinctions. While ‘consumption’ is often contrasted with ‘production’ and linked to leisure, what is being consumed includes also the well-being benefits that are included in ecosystem services, and these benefits have to be managed, or produced. In the spaces described in this paper, communities (or community groups) are engaged in the production of place and meaning. They

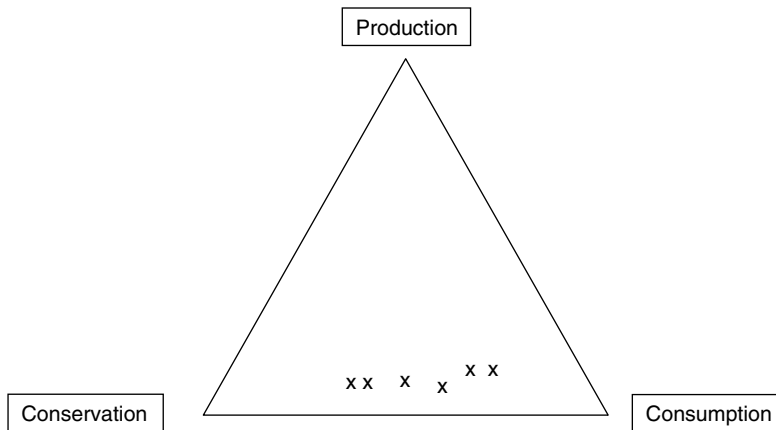


Figure 1: Classification of community wildlife sites in the land use triangle of Holmes (2006) following Short (2008).

are not passively consuming nature, fresh air or the view (although some of their neighbours may be). This then may be one of the key features of new types of commons: that they offer spaces for the enactment of participation in nature, rather than a backdrop for the split in roles between 'production' and 'consumption'.

4.2. Ownership

It is rare to find a definition of 'commons' which does not refer to tenure or definitions of property rights (see for example the review in Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007, where 'property' is implicit to much of the discussion). Yet it is clear that in the sites studied here, it is not the formal sense of legal ownership which is important to the participants, but the sense of ownership created by interactive process with the site. Yes, becoming the legal owners can make a difference, if that provides the space in which to interact, but respondents repeatedly turned discussions about ownership into discussions about process.

This provides an important interpretative angle on wisdom such as the following:

property and property relations have a strong bearing on how people use, manage and abuse natural resource systems, and ... institutional arrangements based on the creation and management of common property can have positive impacts on resource use and conservation (Johnson 2004, 407)

It is essential that we explore the relations part of the property relations question. This is not in any way to undermine the need for genuine changes in land tenure and rights, where livelihood needs are dependent on common resources. In the context of widening the discussion and definition of commons, however, and including

communities divorced from the means of production of their food, housing and clothing, further attention to the idea or experience of property is needed.

The importance of perception is reinforced by the findings on access. In all six cases, the public has legal access to the site. In three cases this legal status is exactly the same as it was before a group formed or a community wildlife site created, but the work of the group, and the existence of the site has changed the way in which the site is perceived. A few studies have indicated how these aspects of accessibility rely more on the appearance of being safe or attractive than knowledge of actual use rights (e.g. De Clercq et al. 2007).

We must also consider what has not emerged in the case studies, as well as what has. It is hard to argue on current evidence that these green spaces are contributing to any concrete improvement in social justice, except perhaps through the therapeutic opportunities offered to recovering alcohol addicts through voluntary work on one of the sites. Not one person interviewed was from an ethnic minority. Furthermore, the former users of two of the sites (drug users, teenage ravers and possibly homeless people) might well, if asked, consider the changes a loss of accessibility for themselves.

4.3. Organization and governance

The creation of these sites is a participatory process, in which individuals within communities work together to bring about a desired outcome. Respondents describe that as contributing significantly to the value of the site for them, and some respondents contrasted that with the lower value of sites created 'for them' by agencies such as local government or conservation NGOs. Indeed, this is in contrast to the British regulatory approach: the rural transitions taking place through a 'more managerialist and interventionist style of governance' (Parker 2006) and the scarcity of local ownership (Short 2008) noted in the introduction.

There are larger governance questions to be explored in relation to the spontaneity and interactivity demonstrated by these groups. While (as mentioned in the previous section) much value is attributed to the need for 'institutional arrangements' (Johnson 2004) and 'empowerment' (Holland 2004), this was not an aspect valued by the participants in these groups. They enjoyed the social interaction; they appreciated more members of the community using the sites or turning up at AGMs; but formal organizational work and attending local government meetings were only to be tolerated.

These kinds of interactions are often summarized as 'social capital', a concept that is helpfully divided into 'bonding' and 'bridging' capital. Many of the linkages that were valued in these sites were bonding, strengthening social connections with neighbours and like-minded volunteers. In fewer cases were bridging linkages valued, i.e. the connections with other organizations and levels of governance, specifically as a source of funds or expertise. The commons literature reveals some deep divisions on this subject. For example, a study in Canada found

‘empirical evidence that social capital plays a fundamental role in developing co-management’ (Plummer and FitzGibbon 2006) while a recent analysis suggests ‘social capital should not be straightforwardly associated positively with common property resource management’ (Ishihara and Pascual 2009). There are important issues of context and power relations to be taken into account. Although in Oxfordshire sites community sites are not part of individuals’ economic livelihood strategies, and are relatively free of conflicting demands among user groups, on a global scale both factors (economics and stakeholder conflict) are likely to affect any proposed change in resource management and hence require a more nuanced analysis of social capital.

4.4. Personal connection

Almost all the respondents had a range of profound and moving accounts of their personal feelings on the site, which reflected a sense of connection with the place or with the nature experienced in the place, rather than the people in the group. Several even emphasised that these experiences were solitary.

The terminology of human well-being as ecosystem service is now well established (Butler and Oluoch-Kosura 2006), and numerous studies have highlighted the social and psychological dimensions of the benefits of green space (O’Brien 2005; Fuller et al. 2007; Tzoulas et al. 2007; Makinen and Tyrvaainen 2008). But something more seemed to be going on here. The way respondents described it, their experiences were linked to the commons quality of the space; their knowledge of it contributed to their sense of connection (and even gave permission to be alone there); and the social engagement led them to new and unexpected experiences, which changed the way they felt about nature. Again, they were not passive consumers of nature, or ‘well-being benefits’, but more actively involved in processing those experiences and bringing them into their lives – as a ‘huge living experience’.

Across all of these case studies, there is a consistent framing of the wider meanings of these sites: their purpose is connected to protecting wildlife or nature or countryside, but specifically for people. The primary purpose in each case is to give people more access to ‘the countryside’ or ‘nature’ or ‘orchids’. In doing so, however, the participants have given themselves experiences that are deeply personally meaningful. These kinds of experiences may be one way to bridge the disconnect between humans and nature that underlies environmentally destructive behaviour (Worthy 2008), and like other ‘significant life experiences’ may provide insights that change other ways in which individuals act (Maiteny 2002; Monroe 2003). Those connections are not proven here, but the depth of the experience is demonstrated and provides one piece of the jigsaw of our understanding of human-nature relations.

4.5. Contribution to nature conservation

Most designated nature reserves in the UK are based on nationally and internationally selected conservation priorities in which scientists play a key role in setting the criteria. The community wildlife sites are generally not within the

hierarchy of conservation sites mentioned in the introduction, and have not been prioritized by conservation scientists and officials as hosting priority species and habitats (UK Biodiversity Action Plan 2007). There is a divergence between how biodiversity is valued by conservation specialists and what is of value to people locally. For example, members take pride in the bee orchids in New Marston Ecological Park. Bee orchids are a widely distributed species which reproduce easily, but are also large and beautiful, and provide a rallying point for weekend volunteer work. The social meanings of such sites are often significantly stronger than the ecological justification for their existence.

Nevertheless as ecological discourse focuses on resilience and connectivity as an adaptive response to climate change (e.g. Andersson 2006; Bailey 2007), the need for networks of sites for nature interwoven with human use becomes increasingly important. The community wildlife sites contribute to an evolving mosaic of social and natural places, that fits with the move in conservation for landscape scale conservation and an ecosystem approach (Jorgensen and Anthopoulou 2007), perhaps adding to the sites' importance as potential stepping stones between SSSIs and Local Sites. Conclusions about the contribution of such sites to nature conservation are beyond the scope of this study, but it is at least possible that, while scientists focus on sites of high value as defined by expert negotiation and consensus, community action to create spaces to engage with local nature will be the glue that connects them all in the future.

4.6. Community wildlife sites and policy implementation

Discourses of community conservation are often situated in policy imperatives such as that of Local Agenda 21. One study draws on the community garden movement as a model for the implementation of social, economic and environmental policies at the local level (Holland 2004). The previous paragraphs indicate many areas where community wildlife sites have potential to contribute to government priorities: sustainable development, community empowerment, conservation, health and well-being.

This line of argument has to be treated with cautious optimism. The people involved in these sites made use of government and NGO grants, but in their own analysis it was important that the initiative came from them, and that the work was done by them. The sense of ownership was created by the experience of interacting with the place and the group.

Short (2008) describes traditional commons as having outcomes 'more fortuitous than planned' in the sense that they have survived the era of enclosure (privatization of the commons) with their public good functions more-or-less intact. These spaces have public good functions which are more than fortuitous, but less than planned. There is an emergent quality to them, which is an outcome of the participation of people in the creation of the spaces and their meanings. This emergent quality is difficult to plan or predict. The accounts presented here show how valuable are the experiences, both for people and quality of place, and the role of government or

larger NGOs will be most valuable if it sees this full range of values, and provides a supportive environment in which to allow such sites to emerge.

5. Conclusions

In these six community wildlife sites distributed across Oxfordshire, we see new meanings emerging in association with the idea of 'common space'. None of these communities is dependent on the land or its biodiversity for livelihood support, and none of the spaces is a legal 'commons'. Nevertheless, legal public access rights, enhanced accessibility and shared processes of creation endow them with significance for their communities. They have arisen from social motivations (concern for future generations, quality of life and place) and social process (often laborious and stressful). In these processes, concern for the future of both humans and nature is enacted, and new experiences are generated that can contribute to personalized understandings of nature.

These sites provide spaces that bridge the split between productive and consumptive landscapes; they are spaces of simultaneous production and consumption of social and personal experiences and meanings, and conservation of parts of the natural ecology. Their 'commons' quality is created through these processes, and the work and intimate knowledge of the sites. Public access to the sites is important but ownership is not viewed as a necessary part of this, except where it is a vehicle for access and space for community interaction with the site. Some of the experiences generated are social ones: those generated by belonging to a group with a common purpose are most appreciated, while the work of linking with outside organizations including local government is more variably valued. Other experiences are deeply personal and emotional, and these too are often enabled by the commons quality of the site. The sites have potentially important contributions to wider societal and policy goals, including a more resilient network of conservation areas and a healthier society more connected with nature, but encouraging such sites will have to be balanced with an awareness that the group's own initiative and engagement are the motivating ingredients.

The results presented here are based on exploratory case studies of six relatively successful sites in Oxford. Other research is needed to document the extent and variety of such sites across the UK, and across the diversity of British society, to test the roles of external organizations through technical support or funding, and to follow through the longer-term impacts on individuals, their lives and their communities.

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