Community wildlife sites in Oxfordshire: new ecological and social meanings

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Abstract

Our paper explores the social and cultural relations underlying 'community wildlife sites', a new type of commons emerging in England which appear to symbolise people's need to connect with place and 'nature'. England benefits from a long history of nature protection, informed by scientific criteria for site designation, and it might be questioned whether these community wildlife sites will make any significant contribution to the conservation of biodiversity. Nevertheless, their numbers have multiplied over the last decade and we take six in Oxfordshire as the basis for comparative case studies to explore leadership, participation, social organisation, personal experiences, perceived benefits and change. We take an actor-oriented approach in exploring the motivations, experiences and changing perceptions or behaviour of those involved, based on action research theory that proposes that human organisation and behaviour changes through experience, and especially through reflexive experience. Ultimately, we ask, how is the meaning of these sites affected by their sharedness.

Key words

action learning; biodiversity; conservation; human ecology; social capital; sustainability

Introduction

'Commons' have a specific legal meaning in Britain, referring to areas which may be owned by a single landowner, but where a specific group of people, known as 'commoners' hold 'rights of common' such as pasture, timber collection and fishing; this meaning has been confused somewhat by the Commons Registration Act of 1965 but nevertheless tends to refer more often to areas of individual ownership with traditional shared access and usufruct rights (Short 2000) than to the more global notion of shared (or public) ownership. They are important places for nature conservation and recreation . But despite their high profile, they continue to be under threat, or even lost to bureaucratic confusion over registration and *de facto* change in rights (Wilson and Wilson 1997). Whilst traditional commons have been in decline, other areas of common use, ownership or purpose have taken shape. The most obvious example is that of the community forests of Scotland (Jeanrenaud and Jeanrenaud 1997, Mackenzie et al. 2004), and new community ownership of crofting lands (Brown 2006).

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These new commons introduce an element that has been neglected in the bulk of academic literature on common property: the non-utilitarian focus. While the idea of the 'post-productive countryside' is contested (Evans, Morris, and Winter 2002, Mather, Hill, and Nijnik 2006), the utilitarian or economic focus of much work on commons has been critiqued. For example, the

> emphasis on examining common property through an environmental, and often rational choice, lens has been noted as being to the detriment of deepening understanding of social and cultural facets. (Brown 2007) p. 508

In this paper, we examine a different type of 'new commons', created with the specific intention of shared social rights to experience nature and place. These places either explicitly create new access, or improve access, together with changing tenure rights, so that the perceived *nature* benefits of the site can be shared. Ownership is part of the 'common-ness' of these places, but they are more than that – they are the outcomes of 'community environmental management', and as such are both representations of social action, and of social constructions of nature.

After describing our methodological approach, we provide a brief overview of traditional, government- or NGO-led approaches to site-based nature conservation, and explore the ways in which these new commons differ. We then examine, through the words of participants, the meanings of these commons to individuals, the ways in which opening access to nature has provided a *common experience*, and complement this with the individual experiences of group members.

Nature sites in Britain

Britain has a long tradition of nature conservation, through a complicated and ever increasing set of formal designations (including nature reserve, National Nature Reserve, Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and now the international designations Special Area of Conservation, Ramsar Wetland Site, etc.) (Adams 2003). For all such formal designations there are agreed processes and stakeholders responsible for their identification and monitoring. Recently, in addition, a new concept of 'Local Sites' has been promoted by local government, referred to by DEFRA (the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs) as 'Local Sites'. In most areas, local authorities, working with other NGOs and local partners, have set up systems of locally valued non-statutory sites. There are about 35,000 such Local Sites, (DEFRA 2006), designated (by a committee generally made up from the county council, wildlife trust, local authorities, and statutory agencies) on biodiversity grounds and seen as the tier below SSSI (i.e. less well protected but often equally important from biodiversity point of view).

The subject of this paper is an even less formal phenomenon, in which local government has had little or no role, although some are *also* local sites (known in Oxfordshire as County Wildlife Sites). In Oxfordshire there are over 80 groups with over 1,000 volunteers that are actively working to conserve wildlife in their local 'patch', run by local residents generally with the support of the parish council. Some may be restoring ponds, while others are planting trees and hedgerows or managing their churchyard for wildlife. The Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum (ONCF) supports the work of these groups as vital to providing a mosaic of essential habitats

across the county (ONCF 2008). In contrast to many of the county wildlife sites which are in private ownership, these sites have public access, and in some cases community or public ownership. It is possible that the need is particularly high in Oxfordshire, where only 1.7% of the land area is designated as SSSI, compared with a national average of 8%.

In 2006-7 we conducted research into these sites and the social groups that had formed around them. We were particularly interested to explore
- What does this site mean to the people involved?
- What contribution does it make to nature conservation?
- In what way have individuals or groups changed as a result of engaging with the site?
- In what sense are these 'commons' and how does that affect the human-nature relationship?

Methodology

We deliberately took an 'action learning' approach to this study, because the three authors come from three different academic and professional backgrounds, and we recognised the role of those backgrounds, as well as our personalities, in identifying the research questions. We wanted to use this engagement with our own community and environment, to explore how co-learning amongst ourselves could help new insights to emerge.

We began with the list of community wildlife sites that had been awarded ONCF's 'Jubilee Award', i.e. two leading community sites in each of Oxfordshire's five districts. Although we recognise that award winning community sites are not representative of the 'average' community wildlife site, we decided that learning about the processes that worked, with people who were enthusiastic about their site, would provide more valuable material for our research. Initially we visited all sites where the leaders responded, participated in working days, and discussed experiences with the group members. We selected five for more detailed case studies, on the basis that they were: successful, continuous, represented a range of different contexts, and the members were willing to be involved. We added one group in New Marston, which although not award-winning was known as particularly active. This made a set of two urban, two peri-urban and two rural village case studies, described in more detail in table 1.

For each we made site visits, held in-depth interviews with key people; and (usually shorter) interviews with contacts identified through snowball sampling. To facilitate our own joint learning and analysis, we paired up in different combinations for the interviews, transcribed each other's interviews, and met periodically to discuss our reactions and adjust our focus. We also held two structured events where we spent several hours reflecting on the key factors emerging, and our own changes in perspective; and drafted this paper.

Overview of groups

All of these sites are characterised by a significant change of vegetation which has generally increased the biodiversity value of the site. Where this increase was less

clear or not present the group emphasised an improvement in accessibility and the site as a community resource.

Every one of these cases has a strong element of community involvement, but in most there is a significant dependence on a few or (more usually) one highly motivated leader. In four out of the six cases, leading members were teachers. Other members came from diverse backgrounds; but it was interesting to note that in contrast to other work which found that newcomers were more likely to become involved in volunteer work to help create a sense of belonging (e.g. Corbett 1998), most of the group members were relatively long-term residents.

> I thought I'd like to learn a bit more about this place I've lived in for thirty years. I've lived on the same road, and thought it's nice around here but don't know anything about it really. [interview 21]

Others had retired there; but none were recent arrivals. In contrast in one rural group and one peri-urban, several members had family connections spanning past generations.

In each site, a group has been formed to take the work forward. These groups vary in their degree of formality, and this is related to the ownership of the site. Two sites *changed* ownership, and to enable this the group had to form a trust, whereby the trustees are legally responsible for the land, held on behalf of the community. Trust management brings legal requirements of structure (Board of Trustees), process (regular Board meetings); and financial accountability (appointing a Treasurer).

In all the sites, ONCF has played a key role, providing advice and support by setting up conferences and making links between the groups. ONCF have also taken an active role in raising awareness of these sites in local government and other NGOs. The ONCF is a unique forum of 60-plus organisations in Oxfordshire with an interest in nature conservation, which exists to 'provide a collective voice for matters affecting the natural environment of the county' (ONCF 2008) and it is this collectivity that gives it a united status within the county. Nevertheless, whilst members appreciated the networking opportunities, it was not high amongst their priorities; their motivation was the local site, energetic individuals with experience of *making things happen* were usually the key resource, and what they need more than anything is sources of *specific* expertise.

Whilst funding has also been important in some cases (particularly Breach Wood, where members had to buy the site), many respondents emphasised that the problem is 'time not money'.

> [it astonishes me] that it's not actually that difficult to raise money. If you'd said to me ten years ago, you've got to raise all this money to buy land, from the public really, from the public purse, I would have said I'm not the one. But in fact you've just got to keep on. Just get your head down and do all the letters. [interview 6]

Nevertheless members who had knowledge about local grants are particularly valued members of the groups; and again, former (often retired) teachers are prominent in this regard.

What does this site mean to the people involved

Social and ecological motivations in balance

In the initial impetus for each we see a complex interweaving of motivations, particularly in balancing concerns for nature with concerns for community well-being. In many of the sites the initial impetus for forming a group came from a perceived 'threat' to the site, and a corresponding desire to protect it where the landowners were not apparently valuing it as an ecological resource. Once the group had started, it became a vehicle for building towards a more positive goal, fuelled by the ideals of the individuals involved.

For example, on two sites, the initial impetus came from a fear of losing the village land to private developers.

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

> *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 quiqte strong, it's got a real community village feel about it. [interview 21]*

Many (particularly those who took a leading role) were motivated by an explicit concern at the loss of nature. However this loss of nature was expressed as a problem for people:

> *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]*

> *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 its that generation…I mean the woods are for them not for us [interview 15]*

Others were more explicit about the social motivation; in two cases the land had become overgrown and neglected, so that it was providing cover for drug takers and homeless people.

Only a few people went on to make a link to the larger problems affecting the environment:

> *Because 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 and effort to look after these sites and encourage to keep as many as possible cause we've just lost so much. This is all part of, I feel, the process… I feel anything would help climate change it it's possible for us to help it. [interview 17]

Making nature accessible

Hand in hand with the desire to protect 'nature' was the desire to make this 'nature' *accessible* to local people, reflected in an expressed feeling that *being in* nature is beneficial to one's well being. One interviewee described how she felt on the site:

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]

Others expressed their satisfaction at seeing more people make use of the site:

The main kick out of Breach 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 worth while because people are back appreciating the countryside [interview 17]

While accessibility is important this is only of value if the 'natural' integrity of the site was maintained. People differed in how 'wild' they would like the sites to be, though expressed a common opinion that these sites were not just another council park:

As far as I'm concerned, the countryside is the place where you appreciate rural things, 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]

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]

One urban site explicitly uses the term 'ecological park' to describe its site, since it wants to draw people in whilst maintaining the ecological richness of the land.

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]

What contribution does it make 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. It would be inappropriate to judge the contribution of these sites on such criteria, but many of the people involved do appreciate their sites in ecological terms (and by referring to such 'scientific' criteria). Here we see the divergence of how biodiversity is valued – nationally, and in the conservation 'world' (protected species, BAP habitats etc) and what is of value to people locally. Common species are often important to the group (for example, the butterfly garden in St Mary and John Churchyard, and bee orchids in New Marston Ecological Park – the latter being widely distributed species which reproduce easily, but are also large and beautiful, so provide a rallying point for weekend volunteer work). Many group members were keen to tell us of the rarer species they have seen on their site. Overall, there is a sense that it is those species *in that place* that matter; without the biodiversity (or wildlife) the sense of place gained by the members of these groups would be diminished.

Members were aware of this confusion in values, and in most cases attached great importance to the ecological 'expertise' of a few members, or of outsiders. Respondents showed consistently high values for 'scientific knowledge' but their views often revealed diverse constructions of such knowledge.

More pragmatically, most had reached a compromise, the urban sites most conspicuously:

> *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. There isn't a possibility to put a wall up and say, "Oh, it's a nature reserve, you can't come in! It's for wildlife!" You can't do that. It's an urban green space. [interview 19]*

How have people changed as a result of engaging with the site?

People were changed by their experiences of working with local groups. There is a sense here that change works both way. Those who were initially motivated to protect nature were moved and delighted by their connection with the social group; those who wanted to do something for the community were eloquent in their (re)connection with nature.

The experiences of leaders and members were somewhat distinct. Leaders of often expressed pleasure in their sense of achievement; and delight in the social rewards:

> 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]

Non-leading members, who played a regular part in the group, were more likely to express deep satisfaction from their personal experiences, and perhaps implicitly a rediscovery of something missing in their lives:

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

> Well I think the best moments are on a sunny morning after a rain storm there's nobody there and the sun is flicking 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]

> 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]

There was something more though, among many respondents who came from a perspective of 'doing something good for the community'. They often expressed surprise and joy at their new understanding of nature:

> I thought it was wonderful. A bit like the poppies in Flanders you know, when they blew up the ground all these poppies suddenly appeared. Well when we cut down the blackthorn suddenly there was this wonderful limestone bank covered with cowslips, just beautiful. And I realised 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 realise that in fact if you help it along a bit … it benefits from that help. [interview 6].

There was also a strong sense of the benefit of the 'shared-ness' of the space and the experience; and this brings us back to our theme of the 'new commons', which we analyse in the next section.

Sense of these sites as 'commons'

Unlike the traditional forms of common property in England (and other parts of the UK), these sites are intended not for economic or utilitarian purposes, but a response to perceived threats to wildlife and the sense of commuity. With the exception of one community woodland site, where the local woodland officer strongly encouraged the

members to plant trees with timber harvest in mind, none of the community groups aim to gain money from the resource they have created. These sites provide access and space for wildlife, but there are no bounds on who can use them and gain these benefits.

What is interesting in this process is why and how these motivations led to the creation of voluntary driven, communally-managed sites. Was this the only way to achieve these aims of the sites, and how important is it to their functioning that they are communally managed?

Many interviewees explained how important it was that the local people felt some degree of connection to the site even though the day to day responsibility for management has remained within the hands of a few self-selected individuals.

> *I think probably 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]*

> *It came from an attitude within the village, "this is our land to do what we like with!" It doesn't belong to the village, it's a facility for the village. [interview 7]*

> *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]*

Of those people more actively involved several of them expressed their own feelings of stewardship over the sites, feelings bordering on those of personal ownership.

> *It's odd it almost feels like my little farm. It shouldn't, though. It's not personal. [interview 7]*

> *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]*

Several respondents contrasted this approach not only with private ownership, but also with a government led approach. The fact that these sites are local initiatives is a significant part of their value to the community.

> *If the council is running it, I don't believe that they will care as much. [interview 15]*

Some even felt that the experience had made them more cynical about local government. The process of gaining recognition and protection for their site had

been a laborious and stressful one. And contrary to prevailing wisdom that increased social capital is self-evidently a 'good thing' (Bridgen 2006, Plummer and FitzGibbon 2006), there was not a strong interest in increasing community organisation for its own sake. Almost all respondents belonged to at least one other group in the community, and groups can represent stressful demands:

> [it's changed] only in the last ten to twelve years perhaps. We didn't have any of these local groups at all. 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]

Others were less negative, pointing out that they had 'learnt about how local councils work'. Some counted this a benefit, but few. There were both pessimists and optimists amongst the members; two quotations reflect this succinctly:

> I think that frankly these things are tinkering at the edges. […] Basically my wife and I are church-goers … It adds a little moral pressure because … one has to examine one's behaviour … At a certain point people are going to say what are you going to do about it, and what I'm doing about it is pulling up weeds. [interview 20]

> I think my faith in humans has improved actually because you know I was outside of all this before, it is heartening to realise how many like minded people there are, and in fact if anything I've got more confidence now that people are highly motivated not to destroy the planet. [interview 6]

Discussion

The community wildlife sites represent in many cases profound and surprising experiences, changes of understanding, new friendships and sense of purpose. The social meanings of such sites are often significantly stronger than the ecological justification for their existence, although participants are increasingly aware of the contribution of such sites to ecological resilience (through landscape connectivity), and relate it to their felt need to respond to climate change and habitat fragmentation. Furthermore, these sites contribute to an evolving mosaic of social and natural places. Community woodlands and wildlife sites setup and run by local communities are springing up through out the country. There is a move in conservation for landscape scale conservation and an ecosystem approach (DEFRA 2007). Here we see this approach arising spontaneously, perhaps adding to the sites' importance as potential stepping stones between SSSIs and Local Sites, adding to the matrix which enables habitat connectivity.

There is a considerable personal cost to involvement. Looking after a wildlife site involves fundraising, potentially ownership of land, setting up trusts, fighting with the local government. In contrast, the benefits (being out in the open air, meeting people, getting exercise and so on) could be provided by one of many other activities, such as walking or playing sport. So why do these people choose to get involved in setting

up wildlife sites? We see three main factors: Firstly, these groups create a resource for the community. Secondly, a desire to protect the wildlife and create spaces for the human community (which is in some cases also a way for people to respond to perceived global and national threats to biodiversity and the sense of community).

The third element is the aspect that, in our view, keeps the members of the group attending meetings and setting up work parties. The relationship with the ecology, the human community, and the individual is changed through working on these sites. This unfolds as the formation of a close relationship with the site itself, the building of a sense of place. Respondents did not get good feelings from being part of an organisation. Rather, while some did feel elated through their achievement, all of them got good feelings from associating with neighbours in a common purpose, or from spending time alone on the site and relating to nature. The organisations varied, the ownership varied; but the importance of process and relationship, with people and with nature, was underlined in all.

Researchers' reflections

Finally, we would like to finish with our own reflections on the experience of conducting this research. It was a challenge for all of us, to fit this in without funding, to already full working lives. The way of working was also challenging – for some of us, disturbingly unstructured and goal-free, for others a liberating departure from the rigidities of research plans. But as Oxfordshire residents, we all felt that we learnt unexpected things about our locality and community – and about our relationship with it. We felt inspired by seeing what can be achieved, and by seeing new possibilities around us. All of us felt that it gave us a new sense of belonging in Oxfordshire, not least through being invited to meet respondents in their own homes, homes which represent a wide range of ages, professions and time in Oxfordshire.

We also felt newly aware, or confirmed in our belief, that people need contact with nature. It was moving to share people's expressions of what that means to them, the immediacy and intimacy of a necessary contact for some, and a life-changing experience for others. We felt drawn into the active negotiation between the relationship between humans and nature. All of this was uplifting fascinating, inspiring - and added convincing 'reality' to official documentation that wellbeing is enhanced by being in nature (Deutsch, Folke, and Skanberg 2003). It also provided us with a sense of this all adding up to something bigger, made up of a mosaic of many small changes; and the urge to see a wider project mapping these sites and their relation to SSSIs and other more formally protected areas.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1. The case study sites

Group name	surrounding area	Site description	Site Ownership	Group description	Ecological contribution?	community involvement
SS 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 depression etc.
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.
Horspath PC Wildlife Conservation Area	peri-urban village	Former railway cutting, formerly heavily overgrown, clay. 5 acres	Parish Council bought site in 1982	Informal group since 200. 6 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?
St Mary's Fields JWS	edge of peri-urban village	Scrub and semi-improved grassland	Parish Council	informal, strongly dependent on core group of approx 5 people	important site for breeding birds and butterflies; part of wider landscape scale conservation project	Local community involvement; species interest groups
Wootton Conservation Trust	edge of rural village	Mix of habitats in small area including semi-improved grassland with small patches unimproved (chalk) grassland; wet grassland; wetland areas; old hedgerows 4.3 acres	Wootton Conservation Trust	Trust (5 trustees) set up in 2001	home to water voles (UKBAP species); protected sp, locally important habitat	Local community, and BTCV volunteers
Hailey Community	edge of rural	former arable, clay; newly planted woodland with native	Hailey Community	chairman and 7/8 trustees, set up	Increase biodiversity through native woodland	strong local community involvement; links with

Woodland Trust	village	species.	Woodland Trust	in 2001	creation	school, planting, fundraising, ongoing events