National biodiversity network conference

By Sheena Harvey, Editor of BBC Wildlife

Good morning. I am the Editor of BBC Wildlife magazine and when I was first approached to give this speech I will admit I was unsure what kind of insight I could offer that would be relevant to a National Biodiversity conference. My magazine exists to inform and entertain people with articles about the natural world but, despite the subject matter and any service we might give, the ultimate goal is to sell magazines.

Just like anything else that provides enjoyable and, hopefully, educational ways to occupy our time, it is a nice-to-have, but if it didn't pay for itself it most likely wouldn't exist.

So how can that have relevance to people who spend their lives doing work that really matters – recording the numbers and movements of species and feeding that information into planning for the future health and welfare of the British countryside?

How can the work I do in such a commercial world offer anything to the world of wildlife charities, NGOs and scientific institutions? And the hundreds who spend their time in recording, often for free.

Then I started thinking about how much the information that is coming out of these scientific studies and recordings is nowadays being perceived by the ordinary person in the street as important and hugely relevant, and how they find out about it. How natural science has spread out of academia into facets of our lives we would never have imagined even twenty or thirty years ago and how much of a desire has grown to be more connected with nature.

We're living in a time of increasing awareness of the human impact on our planet and what is being lost. Many more people than ever before in our history are feeling that it's not enough to simply watch the world changing, maybe listen to the scientists and conservationists going on about the loss of habitats and impacts on biodiversity, but rest easy in the fact that someone – governments – will keep things on an even keel so that we can go on enjoying what we have always enjoyed.

We have seen this awareness being fed by the general media, by newspapers, TV and magazines like mine. Years ago, only a publication like New Scientist would have translated academic studies into less specialist language so the non-specialist could gain understanding of the issues. Nowadays, our conservation stories appear all over the national press, TV and radio, and they score highly in our own particular reader research. People are so much more aware that their enjoyment of wildlife has to go hand in hand with concern over its future, and part of our function is to help them to manifest that concern and to be informed. Popularising doesn't necessarily mean dumbing down.

However, no magazine would survive if its pages were to be full of stories of animal populations crashing, and farming practices, deforestation and climate change devastating the wild landscape. Everyone needs hope and so we spread the good news stories, however small, alongside the bad ones, and report on what is being done.

We know from interacting with our readers that, for wildlife enthusiasts, hope comes from involvement, however small-scale and local. From feedback we know that even among people who only take a casual interest in the natural world there are growing numbers noticing the changes in their environment and asking why; then making the first step to understanding and moving on to action.

Take, for example, recycling. I remember a TV news item many years ago reporting on a scheme in Scandinavia where every household had a series of bins into which they separated paper, plastic, tins and food waste. It showed a happy family cheerfully sorting out their rubbish. How on earth did they think they could get everyone motivated to do that, I thought at the time. Publicity, information backed by solid facts, ease of use, peer-pressure and positive feedback have changed all that, and now it's second nature. The growing movement against plastic is going the same way. And key to really kick-starting the movement was conveying the consequences of the alternative in everyday media.

Because of the job I do I get wildlife questions all the time. Rather like a doctor who can't spend a quiet evening in the pub without being expected to comment on someone's symptoms. The questions I am asked are along the lines of: why are there no small birds around anymore, why are there no skylarks, or how come I never see a hedgehog these days? And, crucially, what's being done about it? What can be done?

A magazine like mine has a visible and accessible position on every high street, and its content is obvious – it's all about wildlife. So when readers want more information about what's going on, or what they can do to be involved and contribute something to our future wellbeing, they get in touch with us, hoping if we don't know directly we can at least find out for them. Just like recycling in the past, knowing what needs to be done and then doing it is a confusing thing to get to grips with.

Technology has also fuelled the desire to know more about the natural world. There have always been amateur specialists in birds, and enthusiasts for fungi and wildflowers, but the development of affordable bat detectors, the rise of identification apps, the proliferation of citizen science projects and the ease of finding hundreds of specialist websites have all opened up a world of possibilities, but they have also given rise to even more questions.

The modern high-speed world raises expectations of instant knowledge, as well as a feeling that all knowledge should lead to something, and that everything must be shared – down to what you're having for your dinner being

posted on Facebook. Whereas in times gone by a person would start watching birds as a child, maybe egg collecting, certainly sketching and taking notes of what was seen, building up a lifetime of knowledge just for the sheer pleasure of it, nowadays there's a need to be involved in something bigger and to get to it faster.

So, we find on the magazine that we are increasingly becoming a filter – an information point – for how you can be involved, and also a disseminator of what is being found out. If you put on a commercial hat, this is very good because it sells magazines. However, for me, how much better is it be to be part of a community of information disseminators actively tapping into this desire for knowledge and action. Keen wildlife watchers are the kind of people who like to get things right. They are receptive to training, on specific details that will enhance their hobby. A bird-watching expert I know, who runs wader and raptor identification workshops, gets booked up two years ahead, such is the thirst for quality guidance.

So, if we are to draw parallels, on an ordinary consumer magazine we are in the business of conveying in everyday language the science of the natural world, feeding the need for knowledge alongside the entertainment. In that way we recruit new readers and retain old ones. We satisfy their curiosity, help them learn new things and confirm information they have already gleaned. We do that not only through the printed word, but also on the web and on social media.

We are the same as you, old hands in wildlife recording, with our need to reach out to the next generation, to people not previously engaged. In your case, of course, it is in the much more important area of extending the reach of wildlife recording to ensure the data collection continues at a meaningful level into the future.

That's all well and good. I've sorted out where there are similarities between two such disparate disciplines. But there is one further parallel that I can draw. Like us, you must find that however willing that next generation is to buy into what you do, it has many, many other calls on its time and a hundred more distractions than in generations past.

So, that means we are competing with claims on people's time, no matter how keen, interested or well meaning they are. And the smallest thing can put them off even trying to make what we do fit into their lives.

In the world of magazines we know that to grab these people's attention, and remind them how much they enjoy what we have to offer, we have to shout loudly and clearly. We have to highlight the benefits and make it easy for them to enjoy them. In our case, that's a compelling cover on the newsstand. Or a sign up for a subscription so a detour to find the magazine isn't necessary. In your case the shouting has to come through the media, through advertising at reserves, public talks, perhaps fairs and festivals, and visiting schools.

I asked some of the people who have contacted us to ask about getting involved in volunteering, why they came to us to ask. A lot of what came back was a feeling that even with the internet it's hard to find where you can go to volunteer and how much knowledge you need to have (which is something that many people find offputting).

Some of you in specialist areas may have reservations about how useful the general public can be and whether their sightings can be relied upon sufficiently to contribute to the science. But from the contact I've had with them I can say that most of them self-select. They'll be much more likely to rules themselves out, worrying they will not have nearly enough expertise to make a contribution and will therefore make a fool of themselves. So they ask us is there somewhere that won't require a scientific degree or where they can get training.

And that's the people who know about recording and are prepared to give up the time to do it consistently. There are many more people who would just like to register one thing they have noticed, and wonder whether such a thing would be of any use at all. I've done it myself, and I should know better.

Just last week, in the recreation field behind my house, I found the bodies of two hedgehogs. I assumed they had been caught out by the recent turn in the weather and had not gone into hibernation early enough. But what if something else was going on? What if they had succumbed to disease and it was something that was going to devastate the hedgehog populations in my part of Lincolnshire, or the whole of the UK. When I gave myself time to think about it I searched for somewhere to report my finding and recorded it on an appropriate website.

Whether leaving the information there will do any good at all to the greater good of British hedgehogs is something I'm not sure about – I'm hoping the owners of the website will find a way to publish their findings in time. I'm in a better position than many people to know where to look for the right group of experts – how much harder if you have nothing but a sighting of something you think looks odd or out of place, or a lack of something suddenly, and 590,000 pages that respond to a Google search on 'dead hedgehog'? Better to have a memory in the back of your head of an article about the current status with British hedgehogs or a poster asking for hedgehog information. In fact, such things may well have been the trigger for you looking more closely at what was previously just a dead hedgehog.

I hope this highlights how using the media can work hand-in-hand with recording organisations to provide clear and simple guidance. But how do you get the media's attention?

Recent very obvious examples of this kind of symbiotic relationship can be found in the success of the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch, which is flagged up across the media every spring and which has grown in numbers and quality of data over the years thanks to simple instructions, hints and tips to aid ID, ease of recording the findings, and feedback of what has been

achieved. The benefits of spending an hour of your time – in terms of what you get out of it and what the researchers do – are very clear. It's a fun, family activity done at the weekend.

Similarly, the BTO's project to track cuckoos. The way that the public has been engaged by the website presentation of diaries for the birds, tracking graphics and breaking news has led not only to monetary donations but a far greater awareness of the birds and why they have been disappearing from our countryside.

But these are the big guys. There are lots more of you out there working on smaller, but vital recording projects who could perhaps benefit from reaching out to more helping hands. Something in what you do will excite people – you just have to tease it out.

Regular press releases written cleverly to provide the media with stories have ensured much better coverage in the press for the cuckoo project than might be expected for one species of bird. The BTO has skilfully tapped into a British institution, the first cuckoo of summer, to the benefit of not only that study but an overall raising of its profile with the public. It's something everyone can do if they find a compelling story to tell.

Look at the success of the Buglife campaign to save the habitat of the horrid ground weaver spider when it caught the public's imagination. The spider had a great name, which helped, but it was a classic tale of the little guy fighting the mega corporations that really gave it legs – eight of them, if you like. And this led to further studies that led to the first photograph and new sites where the animal could be found.

In the long run, cooperation with the media in this way can only be a benefit – to my readers, your science, and British wildlife.