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Reflections: What Wildlife Needs and How to Provide It.

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Source: Ardea, 112(2) : 340-341

Published By: Netherlands Ornithologists' Union

URL: https://doi.org/10.5253/arde.2024.a11

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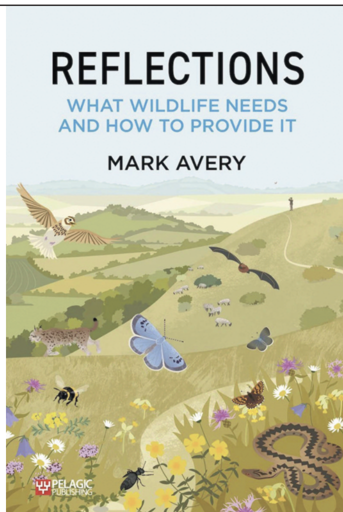
Avery M. 2023. Reflections: What wildlife needs and how to provide it. Pelagic Publishing, London. Hardback, XVI + 238 pp. ISBN 978-1-78427-460-3 (also available as ePub, PDF and Audio). Price €31.99.



In terms of saving the world from a nature conservationist's viewpoint not a few parochial words have been said and written in past decades. Mark Avery's attempt is one of many. After a youth filled with nature, a short stay in science, a career in conventional wildlife conservation (RSPB) and an action-packed life afterwards (the call for a ban on grouse shooting earned him the epitaph of being a radical), he is eminently equipped to say some harsh words about nature conservation. Of course, being also a communicator, his message is balanced throughout with introspections and positive titbits, but that's just icing on a bitter cake. For example, the chapter on wildlife conservation successes is effectively neutralized by the following chapter 'Why are we failing so badly?' We may enjoy the sight of Red Kites in the countryside, in the UK the result of a reintroduction program, but it doesn't tell us anything about the state of affairs in farmland, a state that is deplorable and degenerating as we speak.

The take-home message of Avery's book, at least for me, is – apart from the familiar disasters of unsustainable farming, land, water and air pollution, and climate change – the impotence of nature conservation against the powers that thrive upon exploitation of the environment no matter how destructive. Those powers include governments and their agencies which facilitate vested interests, a problem that has become even more acute after Brexit. Avery's analysis of the present state of nature conservation in the UK is right on the money, as already – and less forgivingly – outlined by George Monbiot (e.g. in his books 'Feral' and 'Regenesis'), and is equally applicable to the Dutch situation. Nature conservation is failing, and failing badly. It's not just that politicians have lost their feeling for environmental problems, to the point that they don't even (want to) know what you are talking about (as described by Dave Goulson in 'Silent Earth': 233–234), but that much of nature conservation is becoming a divided desk-hugging fraternity of window-dressers led by an expanding complement of CEOs and marketeers (several of which paraded in 'Behind more binoculars', in 2018, edited by Betton & Avery; review in Ardea 106: 92–93).

In the UK alone, Avery identified 47 independent conservation entities eating from the same table with food provided by the public (and spare bones thrown in by the government). Adding memberships separately for each organization may give the impression of a vast percentage of the populace being interested in conservation. Avery shows this to be a myth. Many people support more than one organization, e.g. a local/regional wildlife trust and a species-specific group on top of a nation- or worldwide operating club. The proliferation of separate organizations results in competition for scarce resources (i.e. money), rather than cooperation and speaking with a single powerful voice not to be ignored. The efficiency of organizations in terms of real nature conservation is also depressingly limited. Avery makes, and how right he is, a distinction between the brouhaha advocated in leaflets and annual reports versus hands-on action through acquisition of land, forcing politicians to take conservation seriously,

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have conservation laws passed in parliament and their application enforced, or having devastating developments torpedoed. In fact, he detects a tendency among larger non-governmental organizations to shy away from confronting government and vested interests, instead of being 'lean and mean'. Not a few organizations have become vested interests themselves, communicating for their own benefit and attracting "less-committed members" (a euphemism for selfish consumers: a nature reserve is for walking the dog or mountain-biking). Obviously, the conservation landscape has shining examples to the contrary and some clubs do make a difference with very little money. The author gives several tools to discriminate between virtual and real conservation, which is a piece of cake once you have figured out the shadow-talk used in propaganda. If you want to spend money on conservation you better chose the right club with the biggest impact, rather than the biggest club with little or no impact. Avery's advice: vote and speak up, whenever possible, consistently.

'Reflections' has much more to offer, including reminiscences, hosanna and panacea of course, but let's not cut the grass for potential readers. Anyone interested in nature conservation can use Avery's book as a starter, despite the focus on the situation in the UK, because the same is happening elsewhere including The Netherlands. An omission in the book is the role of science, and its (surprisingly small) impact on the big conservation issues. The lack of follow-up from science has many mothers, but the fact remains that scientific literature in nature conservation is largely a testimonium paupertatis, despite laudable initiatives like www.conservationevidence.com that tries to bring validated science within grasp of those working in conservation. Background sources used in 'Reflections' are, however, mostly websites rather than gleaned from the peer-reviewed scientific literature.

The powers that be rule the world relatively unchallenged, not least because nature conservation has become a splintered jungle where many organizations have shifted their priorities to self-conservation and lost their bite. Mark Avery still has some hope to improve this sad outcome of a century of well-meant nature involvement, with practical suggestions within grasp of the individual.

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