

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**Butterfly conservation, post-1925.**—Alan Stubbs' article on Butterfly Conservation in this journal serves admirably to highlight the striking lead taken by the society in butterfly conservation in the United Kingdom (*Br. J. Ent. Nat. Hist.* 8: 171–174), a most remarkable achievement for any conservation body, in fact better than many others who specifically target butterflies.

Since Alan Stubbs widens the consideration of butterfly conservation by discussing the shortcomings of other entomological societies in influencing conservation, I feel obliged to comment that he has omitted mention of some of the rich days of butterfly conservation in the 50 years *before* Butterfly Conservation emerged as a force.

He curiously glosses over these 50 years as if they did not contribute anything to the subject. To imply that conservation is only of recent origin is a serious omission. And to state that the three leading entomological societies made little headway in influencing conservation is to ignore the facts.

A lot of foundation work on the ecology and conservation of butterflies was done since at least 1925 by many notable entomologists, including L. H. Newman and E. B. Ford. In fact it was on the 25th September 1925 that the Committee for the Protection of British Lepidoptera was set up under the aegis of Lord Rothschild, H. M. Edelsten, J. C. F. Fryer, N. D. Riley and W. G. Sheldon. We have just passed its 70th anniversary with hardly a hint of a mention. Credit must be given to all those members of at least a dozen committees which considered the increasingly threatened state of butterflies from these early years to the present (Feltwell, J. 1995. *The conservation of butterflies in Britain, past and present*).

Some of this historic conservation work has been overlooked in more recent research. Not that the official conservation of butterflies as effected by the Nature Conservancy and the Nature Conservancy Council (for whom Alan Stubbs worked) has always been effective. It carries the spectre of extinctions and controversy over methods of conserving species and habitats.

Alan Stubbs is right that the Royal Entomological Society of London 'has tended to duck potentially controversial issues', but they were heavily involved in conservation in the 1920s subsidizing their own nature reserve for the large blue. Lobbying government did not come easily to them, and their role in conservation cooled off significantly.

The secrecy which surrounds the work of the Large Blue Committee, in the world of British butterfly conservation, does not help their scientific case when their main means of promulgating successes is via the media. It is fair enough having secret large blue sites where successful Swedish large blues emerge, but as for their annals, there is little accountability for this uni-directional and blinkered form of butterfly conservation.

English Nature has honed down insect conservation (let alone butterfly conservation in the great world of insect biodiversity) to a few easily-marketed, eye-catching species to which funds can be directed. But then what is new; have we made progress? Lord Rothschild's first meeting in 1925 to protect butterflies focused attention on seven threatened or extinct species, the large blue, the heath fritillary, the marsh fritillary, the black-veined white, wood white, large copper and the mazarine blue, rather more than the single species which is currently core-funded by English Nature in their Species Recovery Programme (the swallowtail was on the programme, but is not now, and both the high brown fritillary and the large copper receive 50% grants).

An enthusiasm for a more habitat-based conservation strategy is always difficult to effect when faced with an endangered species which always needs special attention. However there have been people who have tried to have a habitat-based conservation strategy in the UK in the past, but their ideas have never prevailed.

Overall, the track record of conserving butterflies in Britain has not been terribly successful, nothing that lepidopterists, statutory conservation bodies, 'secret' conservation societies or individuals can be very proud of. Great progress has been made since 1975 through Butterfly Conservation, but there were significant moves in the conservation process for the 50 years before. That most conservation bodies can come together and talk via Wildlife Link is to be applauded.

As for conserving Britain's butterflies, the theory can be easy—and has been well spelt out over 70 years—but getting it right can be very confusing and controversial, with a lot of duplication of research.—JOHN FELTWELL, 'Marlham', Henley's Down, Battle, East Sussex TN33 9BN.

**A response to the letter by John Feltwell.**—My note was clearly addressing the era of which Butterfly Conservation has been a part, and with a concern that the various societies should take a constructive view for the future. I am, therefore, pleased to see that John Feltwell endorses the positive role Butterfly Conservation has played.

It is disappointing that John has been so negative in much of his letter, with aspersions liberally cast. As a historian he must surely be aware of the pitfalls of injecting bias and failing to balance the facts.

I am aware of the historical context and the lessons to be learnt, one of which is that success in preventing decline in butterflies and other invertebrates takes far more detailed knowledge of species ecology than was earlier realized. More broadly, the historic perspective includes the rapid land-use changes since the Second World War and the limited resources for invertebrate conservation. A further historic lesson is that whilst there have been plenty of moaners about the lack of action to halt the decline in butterflies and other insects, relatively few entomologists made a personal commitment to take constructive action themselves. Let's be positive and recognize that a great deal has been achieved in recent years and that there has been a considerable turn-round in the willingness to be constructive within the agencies, many of the societies and the entomological community as a whole—and everyone is on a learning curve.

Some of John's statements, direct and implied, are patently untrue if applied to the agencies. For instance, the criticism that species conservation has become predominant over habitat conservation, and that past concerns for habitat conservation have not prevailed, flies in the face of reality. The predominant effort over the last 20 years has been habitat-based. This is the only way of catering for 30 000 species of invertebrates and most of the conservation network is site-based, including site management.

It is entirely healthy that organizations, particularly government ones, should be held accountable for their policies and practice. In NC I was Deputy Head of Geology and Physiography with no locus in entomology; in 1974 I joined the Chief Scientist's Team of NCC with the remit to develop an invertebrate conservation strategy. I am happy to be held accountable for matters that were under my control. Regrettably, the nature of John's letter risks cultivating myths about the agencies that will not serve future historians.—ALAN STUBBS, 181 Broadway, Peterborough PE1 4DS.