

**Mathew Frith**

*London Wildlife Trust*

Thank you, Barbara [Young]. I am not either a landscape architect or a planner. I want you to imagine the song of a skylark in this room. It would be interesting to know how many have actually heard a skylark in the last six months or so, but therein lies an issue. I would say they are an iconic species of our green belt. This is Hutchinson's Bank [local nature reserve and Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation] in south Croydon, in New Addington, it is a site that we have been managing for 30 years. I am going to upset our chair by now saying that we have actually spent a huge amount of time over those 30 years removing a lot of trees, damaging the critically-important chalk grassland, one of the most globally-threatened habitats that we have in this country. However, the issue here is that the community that live in New Addington, on the left there, are surrounded by green belt but I reckon that very few actually can access it because most of it is closed to them. It is agricultural land, it is horsiculture, it is a landfill and we are the one site that is closest to them that we maintain as open land. It is one of a number of sites that contain a huge range of biodiversity that is characteristic of the green belt, but, as we have heard already today, the architects of the green belt did not foresee the impacts of industrial agriculture, they did not see the future impacts of social change and this biodiversity, as we now know, in many ways is under threat.

We have 1,574 wildlife sites in Greater London and the green belt contains about 44% of them. There are numerous strategies that have been evolving over the last 20 years to make sure that they meet some of those challenges that have been described so aptly today. I will not go into those details. From the London Wildlife Trust perspective we are taking a living landscapes approach, which is about restoring habitat, it is about recreating habitat, it is about reconnecting habitat for ecological resilience and it is about reconnecting habitat with people. One way that has been achieved is we are going through that is on the Lawtonian principles from the Lawton report from 2010 is that we need our sites to be bigger, they need to have better quality, we need more of them and they need to be more joined up.

How can we do that in a place like London? That is quite challenging but we have our living landscapes approach and one example is in the Crane Valley in west London across five London boroughs, from Richmond to Hounslow, Hillingdon, Ealing and Harrow. Here is an example of a site that we acquired about 15 years ago; a car park. A couple of years later we dug that up, turned it into a meadow. 2013 it looked like that and 2014 it responded to the flood water that was coming down the [River] Crane and helping to hold that back. Therefore, we are improving the natural floodwater resilience of that piece of land, which had previously been a car park. Here are some fantastic orchids but they are in the green belt but they are on brownfield land. This land would be under threat from housing nowadays, or under development threats. I have an issue with the term greenfield, brownfield, green belt because they do not really describe the function and the quality we are talking about.

Here is an example of a site in Southall. As you can see, already due for sale, but Southall is a place which is actually very, very poor in quality of accessible open space, particularly natural

open space and it is right there on the door step and it is now being sold. Therefore, these real threats are having an impact on some of the qualities that we have been talking about. Again, fantastic site for development but it is also a fantastic site for pollinators and, again, society is concerned about the impacts on bees and other species which help us in terms of food production, plus also the enjoyment that people get from connecting with an actual world.

We also have to place into the context of gardens. 24% of London is garden space but in a period of 1998 to 2007 we lost 3,000 hectares of greenery. That is the equivalent of two and a half Hyde Parks going each year. If that trend continued we would have no garden vegetation left in London. The impacts on climate are going to be profound, let alone the impacts on wildlife and people's enjoyment. Yet, we have been hearing a lot about the benefits of the new housing white paper, but if you read into that, it talks about infill into social housing spaces. We have been doing a lot of work on trying to improve the open spaces for social housing because those residents do not have access to good quality green space and I think it should be on their doorstep because that is where those big cultural and social benefits are going to accrue. The green belt has a critical role to play, but it has to be done in tandem with green space throughout the city right from the Square Mile [the City of London] right out to its very edges.

The skylarks? Who knows where their future is going to be in terms of Brexit. Agricultural subsidies may be targeted more towards their survival into the future. However, I would like to see skylarks being heard by Londoners across the city if we can help it, and therein lies the challenge for the future.

**Baroness Barbara Young (Chair, Woodland Trust and former CEO, Environment Agency):** I remember reading that in 1750 in central Edinburgh Lord 'somebody-or-other' - I cannot remember who it was - complained bitterly that he could not sleep for the noise of the corn crakes craking in the gardens at the end of the new town. Perhaps skylarks in central London is not such a distant prospect after all. Thank you, Mathew [Frith].