100 years of The Wildlife Trusts: a potted history

1912-15: Charles Rothschild and the move to protect wild places

On 16 May 1912, a banker, expert entomologist and much-travelled naturalist named Charles Rothschild formed the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (SPNR) in order to identify and protect the UK’s best places for wildlife. The SPNR would later become The Wildlife Trusts.

At that time, concern for nature focussed on protecting individual species from cruelty and exploitation, but Rothschild’s vision was to safeguard the places where wildlife lived – the moors, meadows, woods and fens under attack from rapid modernisation. In 1910, at the age of 33, Rothschild had bought 339 acres of wild fenland in Cambridgeshire, which later became the SPNR’s first nature reserve.

From its base at the Natural History Museum in London, the SPNR started putting Rothschild’s vision into practice. By 1915, Rothschild and his colleagues – among them future Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain – had prepared a list of 284 special wildlife sites around the British Isles they considered ‘worthy of permanent preservation’, and presented this to the Board of Agriculture. The list of potential reserves included the Farne Islands and the Norfolk Broads in England, Tregaron Bog in Wales, Caen Lochan Glen in Scotland, and Lough Neagh in Ireland. However, despite Rothschild’s efforts he became ill and the list was not adopted by government. It would take many more years for the protection of wild places to make it onto the statute.

1920s-50s: The National Parks & Access to the Countryside Act and the birth of local Wildlife Trusts

Rothschild died early, in 1923 at the age of 46, and stewardship of the SPNR passed to another visionary – a retired gemologist from the Natural History Museum named Herbert Smith.

Initially too busy with his day job, Herbert Smith played a very important role from his retirement in 1937, during WW2 and afterwards. Wildlife habitats were being destroyed at an alarming rate (due to the pressures of food production etc.) and as the Government began to look at post-war reconstruction (as early as 1941) the SPNR, under Smith, led a series of conferences entitled ‘Nature Preservation in Post-War Reconstruction’. As a result of this thinking, under Smith’s guiding hand the SPNR helped to establish a Nature Reserves Investigation Committee and local sub committees, tasked with identifying possible nature reserves and using Rothschild’s list as a blueprint.

1 For a full list, and more information on each, see here: http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/rothschildreserves
As a result of SPNR’s influence, the Government began the process of setting up statutory nature reserves. In 1949 it set up the Nature Conservancy, which was the first governmental nature conservation agency of its kind in the world, and, later the same year it passed the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. This led to the establishment of National Parks, National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). For the first time, government had responsibility for nature conservation.

Between 1912 and the 1950s the SPNR was active internationally. It was instrumental in the formation of the IUCN and in the very early days it communicated the importance of nature reserves to other countries within the British Empire.

Meanwhile, Wildlife Trusts were beginning to appear in response to the widespread devastation of our natural habitats – firstly in Norfolk, where the Norfolk Naturalists’ Trust purchased Cley Marshes in 1926, and followed by Yorkshire in 1946 and Lincolnshire in 1948. Soon, Lincolnshire founder Ted Smith began helping Trusts establish in other counties, arguing that each county needed an “independent organisation devoted primarily to conservation, incorporated to hold property, with some financial resources and, most importantly perhaps, deriving its support from a much wider section of community than the average natural history society”. By the end of the 1950s it was clear this growing movement needed national representation, and in 1959 the SPNR became its central co-ordinator, helping young Trusts to get going and encouraging others to form.

1960s-80s: Growth of the movement and the Wildlife & Countryside Act

Between 1960 and 1970 the number of nature reserves owned by Wildlife Trusts grew from 46 to 547, reflecting the emergency measures they were taking to protect local wildlife from threats such as intensive agriculture and development. During this time Wildlife Trusts began welcoming visitors to their sites, helping people to engage with nature. The first major Wildlife Trust visitor centre opened at Woods Mill in Sussex in 1968, and educational facilities began to appear at reserves like Nower Wood in Surrey.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust was founded in 1964, by which time Trusts now covered the whole of Britain. In 1978 the founding of Ulster Wildlife Trust extended that coverage to the whole of the UK.

Meanwhile, the SPNR was developing its role as the Trusts’ national association, gradually transferring ownership of its nature reserves to local Trusts. In 1976 the SPNR changed its name to the Society for the Promotion of Nature Conservation in order to reflect its broader role beyond nature reserves, and 1977 saw the formation of the junior branch, Wildlife Watch. In 1981 it changed its name again to become the Royal Society of Nature Conservation (RSNC), before finally becoming the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT) in 2004, reflecting its current role as the national body for the Wildlife Trust movement.

From 1970 The Wildlife Trusts collectively campaigned to halt damage to and destruction of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), culminating in the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, which was Britain’s first comprehensive legislation for wildlife. Throughout the 1980s the movement began to protect wildlife in towns and cities as well as the countryside – in 1980 Avon Wildlife Trust created the UK’s first urban nature reserve, a small meadow on the

---

2 Speech to the SPNR, July 1954
slopes of Brandon Hill in the centre of Bristol. Encouraged by the urban Trusts, people discovered they could help nature in their own back yard, and wildlife gardening took off.

**1990s-2000s: Championing nature’s recovery and the launch of the marine campaign**

In 1994 the Government introduced the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, giving conservationists new tools for protecting wildlife. The Trusts became involved in helping to save species as iconic and varied as the red squirrel and bottlenose dolphin.

At the same time, a new kind of nature conservation began to appear – as people’s understanding of climate change and habitat fragmentation grew, more and more Wildlife Trusts concluded they needed to restore, recreate and reconnect habitats on a landscape scale. A new vision for the restoration of our landscapes – *Living Landscapes* – was developed, a vision that would drive change at a faster pace with the aim of halting and reversing the decline of wildlife. Rather than standing on the goal-line defending the places that had been rescued over the preceding century, the case was now being made for nature’s recovery. A report was launched in 2006 and within a few years there were more than 100 Living Landscape schemes around the UK. The aim of these was not only to protect what already exists in nature reserves, but to create and restore new habitats by working with landowners, local communities and partners outside nature reserves and across the wider landscape.

During the 1970s the movement had also begun working to help save marine wildlife, and apart from some local successes a major breakthrough came with the passage of the Marine & Coastal Access Act in 2009. Sixty years after the 1949 Act, which first secured the protection for some special sites on land, the Act finally put the protection of our seas onto the domestic statute. The Wildlife Trusts were instrumental in building cross-party support for this legislation and, through its Living Seas campaign, it remains in the forefront of those pressing for its implementation, and, in particular, the creation of an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas in UK waters.

Meanwhile, aware that many voters were members of wildlife organisations, in the run-up to the 2010 General Election the political parties were showing an interest in The Wildlife Trusts’ concept of Living Landscapes. This lay behind the Government’s decision to appoint a panel, chaired by Professor Sir John Lawton (Chair, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust), to undertake England’s first ever review of wildlife sites and networks. The resulting report, *Making Space for Nature*, authoritatively endorsed the need for a “step-change in nature conservation… a new restorative approach which rebuilds nature and creates a more resilient natural environment for the benefits of wildlife and ourselves”.

The Wildlife Trusts looked to put the emerging thinking of the Lawton Review into practice, calling for a White Paper on nature in the build up to the 2010 General Election. The Trusts played a key role in securing the support of both main parties and the wider NGO movement who rallied behind it. In 2011, the new coalition Government published its White Paper – *The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature* – and similar initiatives have followed in other parts of the UK, with Wildlife Trusts playing significant roles. The White Paper called for the value of nature to be placed “at the centre of the choices our nation must make: to enhance our environment, economic growth and personal wellbeing”. At its launch a Minister said that no other organisation had as great a claim to be described as its ‘midwife’ as The Wildlife Trusts. No doubt he was unaware the Society had been so described at the birth of the Nature Conservancy, 60 years earlier.
The Wildlife Trusts today

By 2011 there were more than 800,000 members of The Wildlife Trusts movement, including 150,000 members of the junior branch, Wildlife Watch. Collectively, Trusts now own and manage 2,300 nature reserves across the UK, encompassing every imaginable type of natural habitat, including beaches, islands, mountains, moorland, rivers, meadows, bogs, grasslands, ancient woods, heathland, and coastland marine habitats. The list is still growing and whenever the chance arises, these precious sites are often extended.

Some reserves have seen large-scale habitat restoration – such as at Rutland Water in Leicestershire, with its huge lagoons for waders, or Abbott’s Hall Farm in Essex, the site of the UK’s largest managed coastal realignment at the time (2002). In the Cambridgeshire Fens, the Great Fen is reconnecting Charles Rothschild’s Woodwalton Fen nature reserve to nearby Holme Fen NNR, and creating a huge 3,700 hectare wetland. Wildlife Trust nature reserves have also been used as sites for the re-introduction of species such as the otter, beaver, sand lizard and large blue butterfly.

Every year the Trusts advise thousands of landowners and organisations on how to manage their land for wildlife, and run marine conservation projects across the UK, collecting vital data on the state of our seas and celebrating our amazing marine wildlife. The Trusts also work with thousands of schools, while nature reserves and visitor centres receive millions of visitors every year. In short, the Wildlife Trusts today are inspiring, educating and involving people, campaigning and influencing decision-making, in an ongoing bid to secure our vision of Living Seas and to create a Living Landscape.

While the reserves that Rothschild pioneered are now part of a bigger plan to restore people’s connection with nature, many are still places where you can feel the timelessness and wildness he knew – and tried to save – 100 years ago.

May 2012