

Getting things done

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It is clear that we are in the midst of an ecological crisis. The recent [State of Nature report](#) made for difficult reading if you're a conservationist. Despite our supposed love of nature, Britain is now regarded as one of the most biologically impoverished countries in the world. It is clear that urgent and bold action is required. We don't have time to sit on the fence talking about issues; in the words of one of my favourite conservations, [Derek Gow](#), 'we just need to get one with it.'

The problem is that 'getting on with it' means you're often faced with opposition. Last autumn I was heavily involved in a public consultation discussing the proposed reintroduction of White-tailed Eagles to the Isle of Wight. There was a great deal of support for the project among the general public, but one group of people who expressed concerns were the farming community. They had read media stories of eagles reportedly taking lambs in Scotland and spoken to Scottish farmers about their experiences. Having investigated this matter thoroughly, and spoken with people living and working with White-tailed Eagles in continental Europe – in countries such as Netherlands and Germany – where there is no conflict with livestock farming, we felt that risk was minimal. There is considerably more natural food in southern England than the west coast of Scotland, and, as such, we felt that the comparisons with continental Europe were more valid. Natural England agreed, and granted a licence for the project in April this year. It was clear, however, that we needed to do more work to get farmers on board with the project. And that's where listening came in.

It's fair to say that the first public meeting we held with farmers on the Isle of Wight was not a pleasant experience, but it enabled us to begin to understand their concerns. Rather than dismissing them out of hand, we listened and then made every effort to adapt the project methodology accordingly. I wouldn't call this compromise on our part – the project still went ahead this summer – but, we wanted to be clear to the farmers that we were listening. We invited farming representatives onto the project steering committee, spent time on the ground with them, and organised further meetings to enable us to provide updates on how the project is progressing. After the initial animosity we have begun to build up some good relationships with some very reasonable people. And I believe that the key to that is building trust – firstly by listening to concerns, and then by acting on them. It is early days, but if I look at how our relationship with the farming community has changed over the course of the past 12 months, then we are definitely making progress.

Trust works in other ways in conservation too. Over the course of my career I have always tried to show trust in my team, whether they are staff or volunteers. I think sometimes I may actually be a little too trusting of people – particularly those I do not know that well – but I firmly believe that this is the right approach to take. In my experience people prosper when you show trust and confidence in them: it is how things get done.

Looking back, I think one of the reasons I have always taken this approach is the trust that was placed in me in me when I first worked at Rutland Water. I was 17 when I first had a summer job helping with the Osprey project – caring for the young Ospreys that we translocated to Rutland Water from the Scottish Highlands. I was one of three people tasked with the day-to-day care and monitoring of the birds, which was a fair bit of responsibility for someone of my age. I loved the fact that I had been given this opportunity and made sure that I worked to the highest possible standards to ensure that I didn't let anyone down. It felt liberating and very exciting that I had been given the opportunity and I was determined to show that I was up to the job. The old adage of repaying the faith shown in you, really does ring true.

Those early years at Rutland Water undoubtedly had a profound effect on me, and as I took on more responsibility, I was always keen to show trust in others. One of the best examples of the benefits of taking this approach came when I was managing the Osprey project and responsible for a large team of over 100 volunteers. I mentioned in a previous blog post how some people were nervous about being asked to be the public face of the project in the hide overlooking the Manton Bay Osprey nest. They were tasked with welcoming people to the hide and then helping them to view the Ospreys through telescopes. Some felt that they weren't enough of an expert to answer all of the questions they might be asked. But, having provided some basic training and additional information in the hide, we felt sure that this wasn't the case. And so it proved to be – everyone who did a stint in the hide loved it, and always signed up for further shifts. Their confidence grew and they got better and better at the job. But it was only by showing that initial trust in their ability that they were able to get to that stage.

What I think all this shows is that the only way to get things done is to listen to people and to exhibit trust. Its only once we do this that we can really start to make a positive difference – and that's what the ecological crisis urgently calls for.