

Seeing the full picture

For anyone who has appeared as a witness it must be a daunting prospect. To accurately remember what was seen or what actions were taken must be confusing with what was felt. Emotions must colour retrospective vision to some degree. No wonder that the support of on camera evidence is able to clarify the what, where, when and to whom.

So it is with Foot and Mouth. Looking back at the pictures allows the feelings and emotions to gather again. The practical points are also revealed. The reality of the buildings commonly found on the family farms. The difficulties to come with cleansing the wood, stone, tin, concrete and earth. The smell is not difficult to imagine, particularly when you are told that the animals were not collected up for over two weeks.

Pictures have been shown to be the critical factor in allowing emergency welfare activities for distressed animals. Reports from farmers, vets and animal charities were not enough in the early weeks to allow animal movements. But pictures of sheep wallowing in mud and dying lambs made some distant official place a tick instead of a cross on a form and relief became possible. With modern technology anyone involved with animal welfare should perhaps be including a camera, with internet uplink, as standard equipment.

Witnesses to the events of the past eight months tell different tales. Just like the court accounts one hears about the tall, short, blonde, dark, clean shaven, bearded villain. There is some common agreement, like it was a terrible experience and we fear for the future, but much of the detail offered clashed with the related experiences of others. The hero to some was the villain to others.

The local Inquiry has revealed a real mess of information which will no doubt be sorted out into a reasoned report, but do not expect the answers to be logical and accurate if that means that they should reflect your understanding. Anyone who kept a diary of their actions and understandings as the disease developed should consider making it available. The farmer, whose stock is shown in the photographs, is publishing her diary kept since the 1950's. The pictures are the final chapter.

The outbreak in Devon has not affected the over two thousand hectares of Sites of Special Scientific Interest within a 3 km buffer zone. There is concern however about the shortage of dung beetles close to bat roosts. No stock, no dung, no dung beetles, fewer bats. Devon has over one third of the population of greater horseshoe bats. Disinfection and clean up may impact on barn dwellers including bats, barn owls and swallows. Lack of grazing of wet healthland, because all the stock were culled, threatens a population of the southern damselfly. The ideal habitat has been created by Devon Red cattle.

There is a link between endangered farms and farmers and endangered wildlife and habitats. We can expect to hear more about the cirl bunting experience. A five year local programme, involving one hundred and twenty farms in countryside stewardship, quadrupled the breeding stock of the birds, enhanced farm business viability and increased farmers 'optimism' about the future.

In the past it is the best semi natural and least degraded habitats that have been targeted for environmental support. Now the talk is of the intensively managed lowland improved pastures and biodiversity. Managed pastures for livestock farming are considered to have the greatest decline in biodiversity. The logic being discussed is that as they have seen the greatest decline in wild birds and beasts they are deserving of the greatest attention and support. Devon can lead the way with agri-environment schemes for lowland improved grasslands.

Many will have already recognised that such schemes will depend on 'degressivity'. Post FMD a new rural language is coming in. As my neighbour puts it 'they are going to shake the moneybox and give it out to whoever can fill in the right form'. Or, as the official language puts it 'redirect resources away from production linked subsidies and towards area payments, environmental improvement and rural development schemes'. However, it is not essential to discover a rare plant or flutterby. Apart from habitats and endangered species the scheme would include the alleviation of flooding, establishing woodland, energy crops and environmental features.

These programmes would not be instead of the traditional livestock unit, they would be all one system and the beauty of it is that the management of the livestock would have to follow all the welfare and production standards that are best advised by veterinary surgeons. So look around. Come to Devon. View the county as it now is because you will want to tell your grandchildren I was there, at the beginning, when the full picture was being developed.

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