

Opinion

Unite and conquer

by Mark Elliott, secretary to the NGO Deer Branch, a joint winner of the Purdey Award for Conservation, and owner of a gamebird veterinary consultancy.

“*KEEPERS SHAFTED BY RSPB*” – JUST ONE recent headline in the shooting press referring to the buzzard study that had promised so much, and seemingly had the support of all involved – until the very last minute.

As someone who has to make evidence based decisions regularly, it saddens me that the gamekeeping industry is not even allowed to get what seemed a logical and well-intentioned piece of research off the ground.

From past experience research showing the benefits of gamekeeping is often ignored, and yet ‘incidence reports’ of unproven providence (but widely quoted in the media) lead many to believe that keepers are slaughtering raptors in their droves. Should we bother to do research at all? Will we ever achieve recognition for our work?

To be published in unbiased journals, evidence has to be repeatable and of

integrity, then it carries weight for all time. The cumulative weight of evidence can build such that in the end it cannot be ignored. So that is why we must all work towards this aim.

Reports show that wildlife thrives on a shooting estate. The difference between failure and success, in many cases, is appropriate predator control.

So why do our detractors act as they do and win? In my opinion, it comes down to two things – money, and the fact we are divided as a community.

Problems always seem to arise from competition for resources – land, money, opportunity and so on. But perhaps, one might argue, that is just evolution in action – survival of the fittest. In my view it is no different with the shooting community versus the ‘conservation bodies’.

For charities involved in the environment, there are huge funds to be had from agri-environment and habitat management schemes, often for doing nothing more than owning a piece of strategic ground. If a charity can have land bought for it, then profit from that land, it is a win-win situation.

Iconic species, too, are great fundraisers. Cohabiting the top of the food chain, man identifies with predators. By definition, there are fewer predators than prey; and that’s perfect marketing material.

Agri-environment schemes provide for habitat creation for the pressured species. If they are predated then who is to blame? If there is little success then the solution seems obvious – more money.

The stats say that well-kept kept moors hold more wildlife. Research shows the benefit of pheasant coverts for songbirds. Shooting projects are awarded for their conservation efforts. The work of gamekeepers therefore supports wildlife, unlike large-scale farming practices, which are often blamed for the decline of many bird species.

But this cannot be admitted, just like cats cannot possibly be part of the

reason many birds are in decline, much as badgers cannot be blamed for eating out the nests of ground-nesting birds, nor yet birds of prey taking prey species if diversionary fed and increased in number.

So, why do we fail to get our message across? To me, this comes down to one major reason – we are divided as a community. The sporting press is full of adverts by sporting organisations all claiming their ability to represent our interests. Each of these has pensions to pay, HR departments to run, and budgets for adverts to seek members. And none of that money can be spent on protecting our sport. There is no one key message presented, and this lack is too easy for detractors to exploit.

The RSPB on the other hand, is one large, well organised, well funded, and well placed body that focuses its efforts and stays on message without compromise. We should learn from it. We should learn also from organisations that have a drive to secure their legacy, such as the Kent Wildfowlers, through land acquisitions. What you own cannot be taken away.

The NGO has a mainly voluntary infrastructure dependent on its committees and members’ altruism, which keeps its costs low, and it achieves so much for so little in reality when compared with larger organisations. A lot can be learnt from this model. Yet this dependence on altruism has its own problems as the input cannot be full-time.

In my view, perhaps we should consider re-visiting the idea of one key over-arching organisation to represent shooting sports in the UK, one with altruistic intent, without the burden of excessive and weighty infrastructure, utilising the best talents within our community, and with the current organisations such as NGO, BDS, etc becoming the specialist divisions. We can then go forward, achieve, stop the divisive competition for members and invest to safeguard our sport for the future.

Is anyone up for the challenge?



Mark Elliott doing what he loves best.