Deep belief

JEREMY MYNOTT

Michael McCarthy

THE MOTH SNOWSTORM
Nature and joy
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In this election year, what should we think of as the greatest changes Britain has experienced in the past half-century? The end of empire abroad, the effects at home of immigration, rising living standards, multiculturalism, greater gender equality and the decline of social deference? No, the greatest change is far more radical: it has been extraordinarily rapid and far-reaching in its effects; it is well understood and documented by scientific experts; but it has still scarcely penetrated the public consciousness. Since the break-up of the *Beatles* in 1970, we have lost over half of the wildlife of this country, mostly through our own agency. In this passionate book, written in both love and anger, Michael McCarthy explains how this could have happened, why it matters and what our response should be.

McCarthy has for years been the doyen of environmental correspondents, writing first for *The Times* and later the *Independent*, and he is conversant with the hard facts, the political realities and the moral complexities of the conservation world. But he writes also as a man inspired by the beauty, diversity and abundance of the natural world that we are destroying. This combination of worldly wisdom and deeply felt personal experience makes this a highly original and refreshing account of our current predicament. McCarthy draws as freely on the imaginative resources of poetry as he does on the findings of biologists to make his case – some twenty poets are quoted, ranging from Catullus to Philip Larkin, and not just quoted as literary decoration but as bearers of truths that are best expressed in that form.

The heart of the book is the story of McCarthy's own discovery of nature as a boy and his subsequent engagement with it as he came to realize both its perilous condition and its transformative power. The work is framed by a personal story of emotional bereavement and an eventual healing, but the book's arguments do not depend on this private journey.

The central chapters document the objective facts. First, as a result of intensive farming, there has, in the period from 1967 to 2011, been a 95 per cent decline in the number of turtle doves in Britain, an 88 per cent decline in corn buntings, a 58 per cent decline in skylarks, and the near extinction of several butterfly species. McCarthy is particularly struck by the mass destruction of the moth population that once formed the "moth snowstorm" of the book's title – seen at night, illuminated by headlights, through our car windscreens. There are unfolding international disasters too, particularly as a consequence of the rapid industrialization and population growth in China and Asia, like the "reclamation" and "improvement" of Saemangeum, the vast estuary on the Korean side of the Yellow Sea that once supported up to half a million migrant wading birds but is now designated by local naturalists a "deadscape". And looming over all this is the cloud of global warming and climate change, suggesting an ominous new geological metaphor, the Anthropocene epoch, the current period in the earth's history when one species has evolved the power to change, and destroy, the whole biosphere.

McCarthy considers the main responses of environmentalists to this devastating picture. They are of broadly two kinds. There are those who argue the case for conservation by reference to the economic benefits, the "eco-services", that nature provides. On this account, nature is a greatly underestimated resource that delivers quantifiable financial benefits large enough to excite even the least green politician. Bees pollinate our crops, rainforests regulate our climate, mangrove swamps protect us against tidal surges, many herbs and plants have important medicinal properties, and so on. Price tags can be put on these that make governments take notice. But, asks McCarthy, what then is the value of a nightingale's song or the fragile beauty of a clouded yellow butterfly? The commodification of nature can't do justice to our responses to such things. The second main approach has been to propound the need for "sustainable development" or "green growth", to meet the material demands of the present but with a restraint that does not compromise the needs of future generations. That, too, has its strengths as a political objective, but it has turned out to rely too much on the goodwill of governments and their electorates and on their willingness to sacrifice short-term gratification for long-term benefits.

Both these approaches are ultimately utilitarian, seeing nature as a means rather than an end. And it is the recognition and celebration of nature as an intrinsic good, to be valued for and in itself, which stands at the core of McCarthy's vision. He argues his case through an appeal to direct experience, the intuitions hard-wired into us by our evolutionary heritage. He uses the examples of our instinctive responses to seasonal change, to the natural beauty of birds and butterflies, and the attraction of certain landscape features, like rivers – Michael McCarthy's own favourite. These are all stimuli for the kinds of wonder, peace and joy in which, he insists, we most fully realize our own natures and our affinities with the rest of the natural world. The book is an appeal to act on our deepest beliefs and convert them into a new form of collective action.

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