



## From Isolated Islands to Nature Recovery Networks

In 2000, I bought Horseshoe Island, a small island in the River Thames at Swinford. I was on a cycle ride and saw a black and white advert in the Oxford Times saying, "Unique opportunity to buy an island in the Thames". I was looking for a flat in Oxford and this was a lot cheaper. I was curious. It's basically a little A-frame and I ended up buying it. But the really amazing thing was I bought at the end of July and Long Mead, the 1000 year wildflower meadow that came with it, had just been cut, so it was very short grass, and its secret flowers were entirely hidden. Then a week after I bought it, I fell off a ladder and broke my back. I ended up in the John Radcliffe for a month and the meadow flooded. I didn't come back until the next spring, and suddenly in May, it came out in all these extraordinary flowers: it was amazing - like Christmas happening in summer.

For some peculiar reason this whole unique habitat had fallen off the radar of the environmental organisations - this is one of the last pieces of ancient floodplain meadow in the country, only four-square miles of it remain in the UK. I had bought the island as an escape from the world and found myself falling into another world that I couldn't ignore. You become a birder, you become a botanist, you become an entomologist, because it's all around you. As you live with it you learn about it. My house is off the grid and floods in winter, so if you weren't interested in it, you'd probably go and live somewhere else!

In 2019, my partner Kevan Martin and I went to an Oxfordshire-level meeting of NGOs and local government, looking at how you might create nature recovery networks to try and stem the ecological decline. There were no farmers and no community members i.e. no one who lives on the land that is needed to create these networks. We came back and decided that we needed to start where people live. If you connect up people in the place where they live - the people who know stuff, with people who are eager to do something - then you have a powerful network of local people to start building a nature recovery network around them. And, instead of getting into your car and driving 15 miles to the nature reserve to do your volunteering, you can do it on your doorstep and see the results of your labours every time you walk out of the house. So that was our idea - a very local network of experts, enthusiasts, local government, and businesses all coming together with a long-term commitment to the local environment and wildlife. If you connect local experts with local people, you can build up, over time, a network of skilled people in the community who then know how to protect and restore the land around them. We leafleted every single house in the village so that everybody had an opportunity to be involved.

It was the Eynsham Society and Eynsham's GreenTEA who came together with us at Long Mead to set up the first meeting of the Nature Recovery Network. GreenTEA have been encouraging sustainability in Eynsham for decades. The Eynsham Society have a famous history of tree

planting around Eynsham. In fact, between 1970 and 2010, they planted 1000 trees around the village. It was GreenTEA who suggested that we joined CAG as it is a very useful network to get involved with and the communication and connections would benefit us. That has proved to be very much the case. It's a fantastic pooling of resources and a pooling of knowledge. The CAG is a brilliant, brilliant network. We see the Nature Recovery Network as a node in that bigger Oxfordshire-wide network.

We started the Nature Recovery Network in autumn 2019 when GreenTEA invited us to make an exhibition of the idea at their autumn festival. We then put a map of the parish up in the Market Garden Shop in Eynsham for six weeks, inviting people to put stickers on it where we might get some biodiversity gain (wildflower areas, trees, hedges, ponds). Serendipitously, I made a mistake in drawing the parish boundary, and actually included about four or five other parishes! So, from the beginning, our network was much bigger than we anticipated.

Then, one dark, rainy, cold January night in 2020, we had a meeting in the village hall and 250 people turned up. We had this huge wealth of proposals of what people wanted to do. Now about 10 villages around Eynsham have become involved in nature recovery. The network and the sharing of skills and knowledge have grown so much faster than we imagined. There are seven primary schools under the Eynsham Academy Partnership, and they are setting up their own nature recovery network within schools, with their own newsletter and replicating the wider network in microcosm.

The Nature Recovery Network is not a conventional community organisation, and that's really important to us. It doesn't have a chair and a board and then everybody else underneath. The idea is that anybody with an idea can gather like-minded people around them, and go off and do something, supported, hopefully, by people who know how to do it. And that's the critical thing, finding the people that can help you, can hold your hand as it were. And the other thing is that the 'people who know' are not necessarily only professional ecologists. We have found in the last twenty years that there's a huge amount of important knowledge that isn't brought to the table. The conventional view, for instance, is that it's the farmers who are destroying the landscape and we, the conservationists need to rescue it from them, but actually, I've learnt so much from older farmers or people who are on the land every day and know stuff, practical professional stuff. Also in the community, there are wonderful people who have been born and brought up in the village, who are very modest and who are not usually bought into the conversations because they're not professionals, but who have a very profound and historic knowledge of the local environment. This historic knowledge e.g. where the lizards used to hide in the dry-stone walls or when the last nightingale was heard, or how you make hay, is very valuable but very fragile as the older generation leaves us.

Our other idea, which we came up with in 2018, is to try to increase the UK's four-square miles of floodplain hay meadow by working with our neighbouring farmers and landowners to restore and recreate floodplain meadows along the Thames above Oxford, where the last large fragments of these beautiful wildflower meadows lie. Floodplain meadows are the most biodiverse land that we have in the UK, but they have declined by 97%.

Most importantly, those handful of farmers like us who still have them know how they can play a key role in 21<sup>st</sup> commercial agriculture. They get free fertiliser when the river floods and their wildflowers provide nutrient rich food for cattle and sheep, so vet bills are reduced. But there are so few of these meadows left that knowledge of their economic value is lost from our culture.

And that is only from a farming point of view, they are also hugely valuable in climate change mitigation, helping stop Oxford from flooding, filtering and detoxifying the water in the Thames and most importantly, storing carbon. Most people think only of planting trees for carbon

storage, but floodplain meadows store more carbon in their soils than trees and more securely since they are not subject to disease, e.g. ash die-back, wildfires or simply being chopped down.

What has been so exciting over the last three years is that our idea of creating a meadow wildlife corridor has caught on with our neighbouring farmers and landowners and we now have commitment from them to create a connected meadow network along the banks of the Thames between Long Mead and the famous Oxford Meads: Pixey, Yarnton, Cassington and Oxey. Our neighbours upstream are also restoring their meadows and, in Oxford, John James, the inspiring head gardener at Christ Church College and the equally inspiring Lucille Savin at Merton have been restoring their colleges meadows with us, so the meadow network is also growing from the Oxford end as well!

Both our projects have escalated far beyond our kind of wildest dreams. Now, one of our Nature Recovery Network members, Amanda Stibrany from Standlake, inspired by Freeland farmer Robert Crocker, has suggested a new project: to connect by hedgerow our network of people in Eynsham and the surrounding villages.



From the Ground Up: Stories of Climate Action is a co-produced project by Community Action Groups Oxfordshire and The Old Fire Station.