

GWCT – Peter Thompson’s Blog

Bridging the gap between town and country

With 82% of British citizens living in urban areas, and a quarter of adults having never visited a farm and unaware of where their food comes from, I believe we all need to do more to help close this gap.

Did you know that Britain was the first country in the world to have as many people living in towns as in the countryside? What’s more, it was a blooming long time ago, as this stat was recorded in the census of 1851. By 1891, the figure had jumped to 72%. Nowadays around 82% of British citizens live in urban areas.



So, potentially, the majority of the British population has been relatively ‘disconnected’ with the countryside for nearly seven generations. Perhaps therefore we should not be too surprised that a survey carried out by Linking Environment And Farming (LEAF), revealed that over a quarter of adults had never visited a farm, while the average time since being on a farm was nine years.

Worryingly the survey also revealed that many adults still struggle to understand basic food knowledge. More than one in four people questioned (26%) were unable to identify that milk came from a dairy cow, one in five (22%) did not know that eggs came from chickens, and just under a quarter (23%) were unaware that bacon comes from pigs. Accordingly, their children also seem to know very little about the food they eat and how it’s produced.

A survey of more than 27,500 children conducted by the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) found that nearly a third of children believe cheese comes from plants, tomatoes grow underground and fish fingers are made of chicken. General knowledge about our wildlife does not fare much better. Another survey of 2,000 adults found that more than a quarter of respondents couldn’t say for sure that they had ever seen a blue tit or a starling, while 10% couldn’t confirm that they had ever seen a blackbird. Having read the above, you could easily surmise that the vast majority of people are therefore not the least bit interested in the countryside and what happens there. Well, that might be a bad conclusion to make.

Cambridge University research revealed evidence of a clear and widespread passion for the British countryside, with even 73% of Londoners feeling this way. As we move towards Brexit, those of us who live and work in the countryside may come to rely more and more on the public’s ‘widespread passion’ to keep money flowing from the Treasury, as we compete with so many other essential demands.

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There are many new initiatives afoot in an effort to close the ‘town vs country’ gap. Natural England’s Conservation 21 (a strategy for the 21st Century) puts people at the heart of the environment. The farming industry too has acknowledged that there is much to do. Minette Batters, the newly elected National Farmers Union (NFU) president said: “Learning about British food and farming from a young age will ultimately help our future generations make informed choices.” How true.

However, presently it appears that the majority of folk are lacking in knowledge about the countryside, yet they will speak passionately about it, perhaps making uninformed statements and demands. A potentially dangerous combination. We cannot sit back and expect the likes of Defra, NFU and LEAF to try and sort this out. All of us need to do our bit to help close the gap by being far more welcoming, informative and communicative. Plus, we need to start right away.

Peter Thompson

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