

What do you do when you notice that the world around you is changing for the worse? The pace of habitat loss has increased so exponentially in the last few years, most of us simply feel despair and disempowerment. We may say something now and again but most of us actually do very little. Kim Creswell acknowledges, "We were just waiting for someone to get the ball rolling." Isn't that so true for the vast majority of us? Obviously, someone should really go to a local parish council meeting to tell them what s/he thinks about the loss of wildlife in her village near Sherborne. More modestly, Kim says that she simply addressed the council to, 'give a background view of things.' Her intention was to raise awareness and the council listened to her for twelve minutes which was far longer than her allotted three. Why? Well, I imagine it is because they know in their hearts that there really has been an enormous loss of wildlife in the parish. Apparently, you don't have to be an avid nature watcher to notice that some of the village streams are now practically devoid of life.

Raising awareness is one thing and very worthy it is. But more action followed: rather than simply putting leaflets through village doors, like junk mail, door knocking accompanied with a view to discovering what other residents had thought or noticed.

It soon became clear from talking on the doorstep that a clear majority were aware and unhappy about the loss of animal life in the area. Talking is a time-consuming business but that's the point: you are willingly giving each other your valuable time because the issue is so very important. When neighbours talk they get to know each other and find out what would never have been known otherwise. Shortcuts like leaflet dropping can never replace engagement. 'It took quite a long time,' admits Kim but just simply talking on these doorsteps somehow turned into a call to action: people wanted to become involved in the newly formed Queen Thorne Nature Watch Group (QTNWG) which aims to monitor the local environment. The concern in the village which is easiest to

identify is the water course as many householders have streams through the bottom of their gardens!

In the past, when the villagers noticed 'fish-kill' incidents, the Environmental Agency could not help because they were not on hand and by the time they did arrive, the cause of the pollution event had been swept downstream. Nor could the village simply rely on the parish council as it didn't have the resources to tackle such events. However, raising awareness has already increased so much interest that the parish council have stated that they support the aims of the group and some of the councillors may support a proposal to use some of the parish budget budget for proposed water testing equipment . What a break-through that would be. All you activists take heart, progress is possible.

It is now vital that the QTNWG embeds itself firmly in village life. There are two immediate aspects to this: community engagement and legal status.

On community engagement, the early enthusiasm shows QTNWG that if anything is going to be done, it has to be community action, with everyone being kept in the loop. The group has to work together and not let differing opinions become a reason to do nothing. Now that the ball is rolling, the group has to maintain that momentum by ensuring its members from diverse backgrounds, ages, interests, circumstances and occupations, all have the opportunity to express their perspectives in a democratic forum. A forum perhaps like a local Citizens' Assembly where diverging views are welcomed and discussed. QTNWG is onto something here and the community has had a very promising start. Having a vision of the human and natural worlds being integrated more harmoniously and seeking to achieve that in an organic fashion seems to be an excellent model.

At the first, and informal, meeting attended by 21 people, there was no jumping to conclusions about causes, no blaming, no shaming, no cajoling of individuals to take on potentially onerous duties. Instead, there was an explanation about bench-mark river testing, discussion of up-to-date research on chemicals and open-minded listening to differing views. Kindness and consideration lie in the

group's constitutional core; fun and enjoyment lie in its heart. The subsequent demonstration of the high tech water testing equipment proved to be 'a real treat. Tea and cake and paddling,' Kim says, 'Getting together and having fun while doing something positively soul nourishing... some people have become more isolated during the last few years, anything to bring people together has to be a good thing.' From now on, there will be regular water testing, more pond dipping and lots of talking with each other. There will be a 'ripple' effect in more ways than one. This action group is helping people to relate to each other more and that leads to a healthier society.

In addition to the scientific testing, a 'Great Village Wildlife Survey' is planned. In past decades village residents have recorded the area's wildlife and topography. The purpose of the survey will be to find out how residents of the village are relating to wildlife and what changes they have noticed. That should give a really good picture. Although not as 'scientifically' accurate as the water testing, having anecdotal observations of moments in time is absolutely invaluable. After all, the RSPB uses an annual, snapshot model to identify trends. It works for them.

The second aspect to the group becoming an integral and permanent part of the community is through some form of legal status. There are many different legal structures available, each with their own merits. The group will be forming a constitution and applying for charitable status this year and already has a chair, a treasurer, a secretary and a couple of trustees in place. With a charitable registration number the group can open a bank account and apply for funding for running costs, monitoring equipment, and an interactive website for uploading data, research and other relevant information.

It appears there is a groundswell of support. How heartening for those of us who may be dithering in the face of what may seem overwhelming odds. 'I have been so heartened,' says Kim, 'doing this has changed my whole world outlook.' By bringing people together, she now realises that far more people are concerned than she had thought. Her last words to me were: '...small local groups

are spreading across the country like mycelium. We just need people to say to themselves “ hang on - we don't want to live like this, let's do something about it”. And if everyone did that in their own local area then what a massive effect it would have on the whole country and in fact the world.'

I whole-heartedly agreed.