

Report: Volunteering in Conservation.
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In October of 2008 I was fortunate to be selected as a volunteer for a project ran by the European Conservation Action Network Trust¹. The main aims of the trust were to attract people to become involved in wildlife conservation, to assist in the conservation management of other countries, and to inspire good working practices.

One project set up by the trust to achieve these aims was a two week volunteering expedition to France from the UK. The project was very easy to volunteer for, and required some basic training weekends in Dorset to ensure that all volunteers had competent skills and were prepared for the type of work that was to occur.

We left by minibus on **Friday October 10th**. We were picked up at designated places, and took the ferry from Portsmouth to Caen. We were giving cabins to share for the night's journey. The 'dorms' were not mixed, and this is a pattern that remained during the visit. We arrived somewhat blurry-eyed in France at 7.30am, there was a cold mist but it was a beautiful morning. None of us really knew what to expect which was part of the excitement.

Now it was **Saturday October 11th** and we started to drive to La Brenne where our first project would take place. We stopped for lunch on the way at a house of some English people that had emigrated to France, close to Le Mans. Here we visited a large farm that was in its initial stages of development into a home/wildlife habitat. Here I saw my first Praying Mantis - an incredible creature that one would not think is safe to pick up. But in one's hand it is amazingly delicate and serene. Here I also took a photo of a Wasp spider's web and felt a real affinity for another country's diverse wildlife and fauna.

We arrived in Mézières-en-Brenne, in the early evening and arrived at a wonderfully quaint hostel (*gîte*) that would be our home for the next week. We met Tony Williams, the conservation officer in Brenne, at the Maison de la Nature in the early evening for an introductory talk on the activities that we would be doing, before going out to supper nearby.

La Brenne is a system of man-made reservoirs that were originally used for fishing, many of which now serve as bird habitats. Some are protected by the French Government, others are privately owned with varying degrees of protection for wildlife.

Over the next week many fantastic and personally challenging events occurred in La Brenne. I developed skills on how to identify birds, bats, moths, and butterflies, I was taught how to competently use tools to clear areas of overgrown pathways, and spent a time with many incredible conservationists – who helped inform me of a subject I knew very little of before getting on a minibus in Dorset. I had many occasions to practice French with our French hosts, associated conservationists, and the wider community of Brenne. I experienced a wide range of foreign foods and spent many hours photographing the beautiful wildlife. We even had the opportunity to hire bicycles, and travel to nearby villages to explore the surrounds.

Particularly useful in understanding the difficulties I faced in La Brenne, is understanding the complexities of wildlife conservation, and the economics of conservation.

¹ The **European Conservation Action Network** was established in 2007 by **The Kingcombe Trust**, a charity based at **The Kingcombe Centre** in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the **Leonardo da Vinci** section of the **European Union Lifelong Learning Programme** and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from **Nigel Spring** (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).

Our first task was to transplant water lilies. Water lilies attract dragon flies, dragon flies attract wagtails, and wagtails attract birdwatchers, and birdwatchers attract money for the local economy, and this keeps La Brenne nature reserves functioning.

Another example is that lakes are drained yearly in succession to manage 'unwanted' populations that are a menace to 'desired' populations. For example, catfish devour diverse fish populations, and then birds have limited food-stock, and consequently move to another location. Thus because economically birds are considered the desired species the catfish are considered unwanted. However, if catfish suddenly became an extraordinary delicacy, or a marvelled species, then it would be the birds that would have to suffer. This has lead me to the personal conclusion that economic considerations are blind to environmental needs, and we need higher motivating factors in order to truly conserve wildlife diversity.

The most difficult part of the volunteering of this stage for me was draining the lake. The aim, as noted, is to separate the fish. Catfish are to die, and the other fish are separated for resale or repopulation. I did not participate in this stage, and was not forced to either.

I was very glad to see the conversation management of the lakes, despite my personal reservations. As it has made the question, "What is Conservation?" very pertinent to my life. There are two main strands of thought. One is that nature by itself regulates itself – with little need for intervention; the other is that intervention can cause beneficial or disadvantageous effects. In life, I think an extreme stance in either of these directions is simply inadequate, they are both right and wrong in specific instances. Nature does regulate itself, predator species can wipe out whole sections of populations that are demonstrably worth saving, diversity is better for many species survival,...etc., etc.

I am a Vegetarian. I believe fish feel pain (See Royal Society 2003 Proceedings B), and believe that if we choose to intervene, we have to have a clear scientific and moral reason, and be committed to wildlife interventions that cause the least damage to the largest number of species. Particularly, with the aims of: **1) protecting the diversity of species 2) with the least amount of intervention.** I do not feel such policies were the guiding motivations in La Brenne, since the lakes are specifically targeting the economy of 'bird-watching', and the method of separating the fish was not in my opinion humane. I will concede that in the context of 'bird-watching'... the birds, and bird-watchers needs are catered for well.

Where current conservation practice has to rely on economic goals at the cost of philosophical or scientific ones I think there will always be unsatisfactory compromises. It seems that the problems that beset the social fabric, also affect our humanitarian designs.

Birds are most beautiful, and serve many indispensable ecological functions (www.ucl.ac.uk/bioecon/6th_paper/Gil%20De%20Weir.doc). That many bird populations are, to all accounts, lessening is a major concern. Clearly there are less and less water habitats for certain birds, and much needs to be done to remedy the damage humans have caused. La Brenne is certainly protecting birds, and their habitats - and from the model of private fishing La Brenne has developed much. But there is room for further improvement, and constantly asking the question, "What is Conservation?", and constantly refining our definition is surely the goal of every committed conservationist.

The second part of the project started on **Saturday October 18th**. When we drove to Congis-sur-Therouanne near Meaux east of Paris and stayed in a gite on the edge of the village of May-en-Multien. We met our hosts that evening. They represented the Aven du Grand Voyeux, an area of reinstated gravel pits close to the river Marne. This area although less well developed was in my opinion a much better site, and its development inspired me much more than that in La Brenne. The Aven du Grand Voyeux was a project initially set up by a group of local government councillors and community members that sought to improve their local environment and engender a positive environmental impact. The site was a large

area of a disused gravel pit that was flooded, and planted, to encourage wetlands and bird life. There are several bird observation 'hides', and a large area of unmanaged willow, and other trees.

The level of conservation expertise was certainly less in this project, and it was clear that our team had a wealth of information to impart regarding managing a wetland habitat. For instance, large amounts of willow were dominating the wetland habitat, and clearly needed to be better managed to encourage more wetland birds. This became one of our key responsibilities.

In order to promote a sustainable approach to clearing the willow, we used the willow to make a new hide. Although it may have been considered the most unsophisticated on the site, it was nothing short of beautiful, and the project gave the volunteers the chance to work on a shared project that they planned and actualised together.

During this part of the project we were lucky enough to visit a beautiful market, visit a fantastically painted medieval church, ride horses in a professional stable led by one of our own volunteers, and stay in a fantastic gite together – which really helped everyone to become close associates. We watched thousands of starlings dance in the setting sun, and wove intricate patterns of willow into the hide. Moreover, we even had a local catering college prepare a four course meal for both the hosts and guests on the final evening.

The latter project was in my eyes excellent conservation, a group of local people taking responsibility of their area; and, regardless of experience, learning to work together through consultation, trial and error, and specialist support. Their aim was to protect wildlife, and their mission to develop and become more competent at doing so. Moreover, they were helped by a group of volunteers that were giving the opportunity to work in this way. In many ways this helped me answer the question of, "What is Conservation?".