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Nature suffers most in this deadly drought

The government's focus is on people, not on our reckless damage to the natural world that keeps all of us alive



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I'm relieved we have a new, decisive prime minister. One who can grasp complex issues, understand trade-offs and announce a clear path ahead. It's what we need in this climate crisis.

It's the second summer of intense heat and southern drought, with shrivelled crops and shrunken harvests, dwindling reservoirs, dried-out streams, dying trees, parched ground baked yellow for hundreds of miles and dozens of wildfires burning thousands of acres, some still out of control. In the West Midlands, 19 houses have burnt down in an "apocalyptic" conflagration, the military are digging firebreaks in Wales to help exhausted firefighters, an extensive fire closed a major road to the West Country and two train derailments in 24 hours are thought to have been caused by intense heat affecting the tracks.

The situation is so serious that last week Andy Burnham called a Cobra meeting, the highest level of crisis management, to co-ordinate the government's emergency response. How should Britain, happily accustomed to its protected position as a green and pleasant land, adjust to a far more volatile and perilous world: drenched and stormy winters followed by scorching summers?

Last Wednesday I kept checking to see what Burnham had concluded. Here in Gloucestershire the landscape is scarred. The vast arable fields are pale dry stubble, harvested almost a month early with yields from spring barley down by 25 per cent and wheat by 13 per cent, ruinous for farmers already operating on the most precarious margins. The ground is cracked and hard, ominous because water will pour off that surface in a torrent in any sudden rain. Small ponds have evaporated. The tiny local river, which floods fields in winter, is now a trickle. It is the only watercourse for at least a mile, and is what nearby birds and wildlife rely on to survive, as puddles have vanished and the desiccated grasses have no moisture left.

The little roads are scattered with fallen branches as trees cannot keep their extremities alive. In my garden the trees and bushes that provide birds with critical winter food — rowan and elderberry, crab apples and guelder rose — are drying up; their fruit is dehydrating and their leaves turning prematurely brown. Wildlife dies invisibly in this intense heat.

Much of England's wildlife is falling victim to a silent apocalypse

Birds, badgers and foxes can't find the worms and insects they depend on because the ground is baked hard and the flowering plants that insects and pollinators feed on are withering.

It is a silent nature apocalypse, replicated across England. An unthinkable number of creatures have been incinerated in the fires: adders, slow-worms, hares, young birds. Fish are being left flapping and asphyxiating as rivers dry up; volunteers are helping to rescue a few and transferring them to watercourses still flowing. There are pitiful pictures of desperate bewildered ducks standing at the muddy bottom of vanished ponds, starving in their lost habitat.

Yet official advice talks only of the impact on people. It is perverse that a country that builds bat tunnels and protects newts is so indifferent to the life killed by drought and fire.

The food and water bowls I leave out are besieged by small creatures: voles, field mice, robins, blackbirds, finches, tits and woodpeckers, magpies and the occasional brown rat. Minute pale frogs submerge themselves to rehydrate. At night I watch hedgehogs, a threatened and naturally solitary species, clustered warily three at a time in a small patch, eating kitten kibble scattered on the grass and clambering into pie dishes to drink. Most nights a fox cub comes to graze kibble hungrily between the hogs, rearing away when its nose touches a hedgehog's spines. The fox is a measure of the shortage of food; he has become hauntingly thin.

And how did our resolute prime minister decide to deal with this national catastrophe of tinderbox land, declining food supply, dying wildlife and an ecosystem collapsing under unprecedented conditions? I was expecting him to cover immediate, individual and systemic responses. I hoped he might start by saying: "In this disastrous drought, nature is paying the highest price and humans must do more. Rivers are being depleted to meet careless consumer demand. So cut your personal water use substantially. Instead, in this emergency, leave out bowls for insects and wildlife, feed where you can, and water the trees, bushes and pollinating plants nature needs most."

We got none of this. Instead Burnham said, diffidently, that he was considering, possibly, in the long term, a ban on disposable barbecues, since they might have been the cause of some of the fires. It was an astoundingly feeble response. Two days later it was upgraded to an actual ban. That's welcome but avoids the substantial issues: how our country has become so vulnerable and how we remedy it, fast.



Southern Britain's fields are scorched and rivers and streams are drying up

The blindness of British politicians on this issue is petrifying. They declare a climate and nature crisis, but act only on the climate part. This year the UK's intelligence chiefs warned that Britain's food resilience and nature decline were a matter of national security.

For 70 years we have been systematically destroying the resilience of our landscape and soil by demanding that farmers cultivate intensively. Artificial fertiliser — now exclusively imported — insecticides, herbicides and fungicides have boosted yields in the moment but left soils fragile, short of the organic matter that lets it retain water in a drought or absorb it in a flood, and killing off the complex microbial and fungal networks that sustain life on Earth.

As an efficiency we have ripped out the majority of the hedges, ditches, trees, ponds, field verges and copses of my childhood, all of which protected the land from heat, wind and floods. We have dried out the wetlands, straightened the rivers and destroyed the varied habitats for wildlife, insects and plants, to create increasingly bare, near-sterile prairies.

The only minister who saw the danger of this and tried to reverse it with schemes for environmental protection and regenerative farming was Michael Gove, but Labour have shredded his policies and collapsed those budgets, ensuring continuing destruction. Burnham's weekend announcement of £65 million to help farmers was just a shifting of existing budgets, and pitifully small. Less than the bill for a week of hosting asylum seekers here.

Nobody in power has cared much about nature, farming and resilience in Britain for many years because it's assumed we can always fall back on cheap food from abroad. No longer. Potatoes are boiling in the ground in Asia, there's drought across Europe, the bombing of Odesa limits exports from the world's bread basket, Ukraine. Trump's Iranian war is blocking much of the world's fertiliser supplies. Food prices will rise, making nonsense of Burnham's cost of living pledge.

It is imperative that he and his government act decisively, coming up with transformative, sustainable, regenerative policies to protect our food, future and land. And Times readers? Could we do what we can and leave wildlife some water every night?