

Essex Wildlife Trust 2020 AGM

Following the AGM, we promised to publish details on the website of the various questions received. This has taken a little longer than planned, due to ongoing challenges with our resources, as a direct consequence of the global pandemic.

In addition, please note that these answers were provided at the end of October and some of these answers may now be slightly outdated, as our operations may have changed in response to government requirements.



Question and Answer responses are as follows:

[Mrs Bancoft-Hall](#)

[How will it be safe to visit Abberton Wildlife Centre in the future? Medical issues \(e.g. asthma\) will prevent me from coming inside for purchases, refreshments and bird information.](#)

The Trust has strict COVID secure measures in place to ensure you have a safe visit with us. We undertake regular thorough cleaning procedures at all of our sites. Masks must be worn inside the centre, hand sanitizer is available on arrival, social distancing and one-way systems are in place. Our food offer is limited to takeaway and we ask all visitors to check in via the Track and Trace QR code.

Should individuals not be able to enter our Nature Discovery Centres but would like to access the attached nature reserve, where the layout deems this is the normal procedure (i.e. Abberton & Hanningfield) if you're able to give the centre advanced warning, we will be able to give you side access directly onto the nature reserve.

[Mr and Mrs Clark](#)

[Can we make all the EWT locations COVID compliant so that we can enjoy visiting them again?](#)

All of our Nature Discovery Centres are COVID-secure. We chose to open them individually in a phased approach and although this was frustrating for many people, it meant we were able to thoroughly check that our procedures were working and we could make our sites as safe as possible. We review all changes to government restrictions and put new precautions and procedures in place as soon as possible. For our nature reserves we ask all visitors to practice social distancing and to respect the rule of six to help keep others safe.

[Gillian Seymour-Pugh](#)

[What plans for 2021 do the Board and Strategic Leadership team have to counter the deteriorious effect of the Covid 19 lockdown and take EWT forwards?](#)

At the moment we obviously don't know how long Covid will last. As with so many aspects of this pandemic, and like so many other organisations across the UK, we are learning as we go. But we can obviously still put some robust plans in place. We very quickly changed our offer in centres – and we will continue to respond to guidelines with what we can and can't achieve.

In terms of conservation, we are looking across all of our sites to prioritise our efforts in those areas where we can have the biggest impact. In terms of our education delivery, we're looking to see if we can make changes to our formats to allow us to continue that vital engagement.

Many of you over lockdown will have seen the huge success of *WildlifeTV* where we had a

programme of daily wildlife videos – we will continue to adapt our communication methods to be more innovative and far reaching. We are currently planning our budget for next year and we are looking at potential new income streams, to see if we can diversify that financial risk. The office based staff have obviously largely been working from home since March, so we are looking at a potential hybrid model going forward, where home working becomes a proportion of the normal working week. The lockdown also provides the opportunity to look at important aspects of our operations in more detail – such as our sustainability, our carbon footprint, or our approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. So despite Covid, we are pushing the Trust forward in many areas of our work.

John and Diana Camp

1. What are you doing to encourage more people to visit reserves for the purpose for watching wildlife instead of just walking around chatting and disturbing everything? Only 11% (p13 of report) visit to see wildlife.

The 11% relates to our centres specifically (not our reserves), so that number is always going to be skewed somewhat by the multi-offer available. We are using all of our various communication channels to highlight wildlife spectacles across the county – so we will actively push people to engage with certain key sites. We will use those same channels to talk about iconic species in Essex, to inspire people to go and look for wildlife themselves. We will also highlight various projects on our reserves that have had a particular impact for wildlife. We are delivering a signage and interpretation project across our Nature Discovery Centres and our nature reserves and this will enable better communication about sites and between sites. There will also be ‘seasonal signage’ which will be regularly updated as the wildlife changes. But at the same time we must not underestimate the value of multiple user groups visiting a site. If 150 birders visit a site that’s wonderful, but if 30 birders, 30 walkers, 30 artists, 30 mums/dads with buggies and 30 school children visit, that results in the site being considered (by decision makers) as more valuable and therefore more likely to be protected, whilst also offering a greater opportunity to inspire new and diverse audiences.

2. What are you doing to encourage young people to visit for the purpose of learning about wildlife/conservation instead of encouraging kids to play on zip wires and climbing frames? You are entrusted with wildlife, not playgrounds and country parks, which is what some reserves are turning into.

Only four out of our 101 sites have outdoor equipment and these are all at Nature Discovery Centres. EWT wants to be an inclusive charity and we want to encourage a more diverse visitor group, in order that more people can gain that lifelong love of nature. For many people, nature is not an important part of their lives and we need to create different opportunities that will encourage those less likely to visit a nature reserve to come to our sites. To begin with it may be small natural outdoor equipment that will encourage a visit, but we will ensure that once on our nature reserve, they will learn about the wildlife. In terms of encouraging more young people – our incredibly successful forest school and outdoor learning team are encouraging kids all over the county (totaling 70,000 last year). We have to use every tool in the bag to get as many people, from as many different backgrounds, to engage with wildlife.

Helen Utting

Why is Fingringhoe still not open? (Visitor Centre) Are we able to walk there or is it all closed off?

Fingringhoe nature reserve is open 5 days a week Thursday – Monday
Fingringhoe centre is open Friday, Saturday and Sunday, with the aim of opening more days, please give us a call for the most up to date opening times (01206729678) or look on our website, where we will keep all the opening times up to date

Mr P Morrison

Can anything be done about noise pollution created by light aircraft practicing their maneuvering above Abberton Reservoir?

I think this is something that needs to be raised with the Civil Aviation Authority and they would need to determine whether light aircraft are not adhering to restrictions. It isn't something that EWT can control unfortunately.

Ron & Marel Elliston

'We must seriously question the relatively recent adoption of the badger as a symbol, which EWT has followed simply to conform with other Wildlife Trusts, without apparent consideration for the effects this animal has upon the areas within our county, and elsewhere. There was a time when the badger was considered something of a rarity, principally because of its nocturnal habit, when it was not often encountered, but in recent years badger populations have expanded so massively and to such an extent that their numbers have become a burden. Whatever the situation in some other areas of the country, where it is necessary for badgers to be culled, it cannot be challenged that their numbers have expanded very rapidly since protection measures were introduced and that neatly demonstrates the value of protection. However, when populations are no longer at risk, consideration needs to be given to reducing, or withdrawing, such protection. Over the years, mankind has had a devastating impact upon wildlife, but this is not addressed by having an unremitting support for a few selected species. Otter numbers, for example, were in massive decline because of pesticides and pollution but, because of measures to alleviate these problems, their numbers have, encouragingly, increased but to an extent where they now present something of a hazard to other aquatic species. Everything should be proportionate, in moderation, and must be kept under review. In our own area of Essex, where there is now no shortage of badgers, hedgehog populations have dropped very markedly - to such an extent they are finally considered to be endangered - and badgers are really their only predator in the animal field. There is consequently a very strong case to introduce measures to protect the hedgehog, which means dropping the former emphasis on badgers, and we feel EWT should be in the forefront of this.

Will EWT continue to conform to an unlimited support for the now ubiquitous badger or instead lead a campaign to protect the endangered hedgehog?

Retaining the badger in our logo was a decision made by Board in July 2019. The decision was made based on the pros and cons of 'evolution' (i.e. retaining the badger) or 'revolution' (i.e. dropping the badger).

In terms of revolution, the Board of Trustees agreed unanimously that prioritising a full rebrand and diverting the Trust's time and effort – as well as members' donations – on image, rather than conservation and campaigning was unjustifiable, especially at this moment in history. Dropping the

badger would have undermined our history and heritage, upset the majority of members, disenfranchised volunteers and staff, and resulted in a temporary loss of identity at a time when we are most in need of visibility and support.

'Evolution', on the other hand, allows for the old identity and the new identity to coexist without the need to embark on an intense and costly programme of renewal across the entire estate. It maintains our solidarity with the Wildlife Trust movement, demonstrates our ability to change, while remaining the same at heart, and preserves all the positive emotions associated with the Trust.

The badger is our emblem. It is not our only 'key species' and does not receive a disproportionate amount of conservation effort. It is true that the badger is not without controversy, but it continues to be a charismatic species and is still an evocative symbol of the English countryside. Given the Government's plan to extend the cull, the badger continues to need our protection.

Without doubt, hedgehogs also need our protection and we support them through a range of conservation work and campaigning, and we are planning to do more in the future.

Jonney

"Land clearance, species extinction and loss of biodiversity are all mostly being driven by what the world eats and how we farm". Essex Wildlife Trust is probably unusual among wildlife trusts in that it owns two farms. In this light and that of the statement above (from 'The Food Programme, Radio 4) what is the latest from our farms? Is there a possibility that we can be a 'beacon of hope' to the world and show that wildlife and sustainable food production can exist in the same place? (I am a great advocate of 'forest gardening' and a shareholder of Lauriston Farm).

Blue House Farm was once a dairy farm but since its acquisition by EWT in 1998 we have created a large nature reserve, providing a fantastic haven for over wintering wildfowl and breeding waders as well as iconic species such as Brown Hare.

At Abbotts Hall Farm (AHF) we made the difficult decision to relinquish arable production in 2019 due to ever increasing costs and economies of scale. We are currently planning to diversify this site for nature. At AHF, I think we proved your point about wildlife and food production – with breeding passerines, winter finches, beetle banks and a healthy population of brown hares, barn owls, marsh harriers, Fisher's estuarine moth. But we also proved that it was not sustainable for us to produce food at AHF, because 420 acres just wasn't commercially viable.

But places like the RSPB's Hope Farm has proven the concept of wildlife friendly farming, similarly the Knepp in Sussex has brilliantly demonstrated rewilding, so EWT needs to find its niche in driving forward new demonstration sites. We do have exciting ideas for AHF and we will hopefully announce these in the New Year.

Janet Whybrow

I would like to ask: can/will EWT do anything to help to tackle the environmental disaster coming our way from the enormous quantity of PPE and disposable face masks now being used, and which are already being found littered on beaches and in the countryside. Could the public be educated to dispose of the items correctly, and importantly to cut through the ear loops before disposal, to avoid wildlife being caught in them?

I certainly think this is something that we can tackle through our various social media channels and our website – spreading the message of sustainability and responsible disposal. We can also talk to our partners and stakeholders to share that sustainability message. Throughout Covid, we have unfortunately experienced issues with increased littering on EWT Nature Reserves. Our staff and

volunteers have had a difficult job of re-prioritising to manage litter and other 'items' of waste, which has diverted important resource away from delivering impactful conservation. The sustainability work that we have embarked upon will continue and one of the projects we have identified is the way we not only manage our waste, but also how we assist by communicating those important messages.

John Smart

I'm a great advocate of buying land to extend / create nature reserves. Has the EWT plans to acquire land in the near future? A classic successful example of this was the addition to the Fingringhoe Reserve. Naturally one can only take advantage of this when the opportunity of land becomes available. This in principle of course goes hand in hand with the 30 by 30 initiative by the WT itself. Quote by Mark Twain, "Buy land, they're not making it anymore."

We're supporting and embracing the 30-by-30 campaign (which is a national Wildlife Trust initiative) demanding that 30% of our land and sea be connected and protected for nature's recovery by 2030. Land acquisition will always be considered by EWT as a way in which we continue to protect wildlife. However, in a county of high agricultural productivity, with significant areas of urbanisation and associated development pressure, this offers more challenges than ever in terms of financial affordability of new land.

The mantra of 'bigger, better and more joined up' remains and we will always look to extend what we already have, where appropriate. It is by using our influence and sharing our ambition with partners and other stakeholders that we also hope to unlock more land for nature's recovery in new ways. We will share best practice with other NGO's and identify and focus on Nature Recovery Networks in Essex; whilst also gaining leverage from the soon to be mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain planning reforms.

Jonney

Mmm, you seem to have fallen into the trap that the land is either for food or wildlife. While we think like this, we will never save our wildlife. Our land needs to be both for food and wildlife. There are wildlife friendly ways to farm but they are unconventional, alley cropping is one, Bio-dynamic is another and you have one on your doorstep (Lauriston Farm) which is exceptionally good for wildlife. Times are changing people are concerned about what they eat and how we manage land. Frankly its bonkers to think the only place that wildlife can exist in on nature reserves, sure they have their place and EWT has vast expertise but we need to make farms wildlife friendly. Yes, I know that EWT does work with farmers and landowners (I work for one) but I was hoping that EWT could show the way with a practical demonstration, as you do in so many other examples. Of course I am interested in how Abbots Hall intends to diversify, is wilding an option? Food production on wild land is one of the most exciting projects if we are prepared for it and the possibility to attract support (including financial) from people like myself.

We fully recognise that land must be able to support food production and wildlife. We also recognise that many farmers and landowners are already enabling this to great effect, with novel as well as traditional methods. We hope to use our farming experience and knowledge, working with farmers and landowners to identify and promote ways in which we can together put nature in recovery and grow food in a sustainable and profitable way. Our nature reserves cover <1.5% of Essex, but arable land covers around three quarters, so we know that for certain species, there are big opportunities on farmland. Nature Recovery networks are not just reserves, they are about connecting up habitats at a landscape scale and farmland obviously plays a key role in this.

Questions or comments raised during or after the AGM

Andy Beardsley

We used to source most of our food for the cafe locally. We now buy our food from companies like Brakes, so a significant food miles addition to the trusts carbon foot print. Can we start sourcing as much food as possible locally to each centre, or at least Essex?

We always aim to source food locally wherever possible and we are continually reviewing our suppliers and our offer. Essex Wildlife Sales runs the commercial operations for the Trust and as a business, we have to look at the balance between quality, localness and cost. Essex Wildlife Sales is a trading company and under the rules of the Charity Commission, we have to make a profit. Our suppliers have always been a mixture of local and national. Local products already sold at our centres include honey, crisps, milkshakes, juices, jams, ice-cream and birdseed. Unfortunately there are not the local producers to support all our needs and sometimes the costs of local items may also be prohibitive and we would be unable to achieve our margins. In addition to local, we aim to supply ethical products as part of our range but they are not always available locally.

Anonymous

Could you let us know how many are attending and the voting for/against/abstain?

There were 133 attendees.
The votes are posted separately on the website.

Paul Hudson

The future of the Farm was being considered last year. What decisions have been made?

No final decisions have yet been made regarding the future of Abbotts Hall Farm, but a series of workshops have started to develop some exciting plans. These ideas need a little more work and then we look forward to sharing these plans in 2021.

Christine Knight

Do you think there is a case to be made for every item purchased to carry a carbon footprint rating like foodstuffs show calories and ingredients?

This is a good suggestion Christine - but actually quite hard to do accurately. It can become quick a thing to do. I think it's actually easier to focus on local, sustainable and organic food, and then cut down meat (Jules Pretty).

Anonymous attendee

If we don't have space ourselves to plant more trees, how can we find more spaces in Essex ourselves to plant trees/ encourage more planting?

The Essex Climate Action Commission is bringing new initiatives to the County, Boroughs and Parishes - and this includes a large target for tree planting. So I would say, put pressure on councillors at all levels (Jules Pretty)

Dorothy Free

Just a comment. Thank you for an interesting AGM and a thought-provoking report from Professor Pretty. Please use virtual systems for future AGMs as some of us cannot get to a physical AGM. (generally- a 'billion' seems a bit vague, I always think. How about using 'a hundred' or 'thousand' millions instead. This would sound realistically fearsome!

Thank you Dorothy - good point! Much appreciated (Jules Pretty)

ps - when at college we were told 'explain a thing in THREE different ways. That way you get to more of a class...' DF

Good stuff! (Jules Pretty)

Lynne Henderson

I totally agree, we must engage more Essex residents to help nature.

With 1.5 Million people in Essex, and 40,000 Trust members, we need to tell about 37 people each! (Jules Pretty)

Nicola Wilson

Can you give an update on work on inclusivity please?

Improving diversity and creating a more inclusive culture are key parts of Essex Wildlife Trust's five year strategy. We want everyone to benefit from nature. We recognise that this won't happen automatically, and we need to take steps as an organisation to ensure everyone has access to our sites and can enjoy nature.

We already:

- Monitor diversity in our staff and volunteer teams.
- Provide equality and diversity training to staff and through volunteer inductions.
- Have an equality and diversity policy that outlines our commitment to inclusion.
- Have taken affirmative action to increase the diversity of our board in terms of age, gender and race.
- Have set up an Inclusion Group with a diverse range of staff and volunteers from across the Essex Wildlife Trust to identify and conduct practical strategies to effect change.
- Have set up a dedicated inbox for suggestions on how we can become a more inclusive organisation inclusivity@essexwt.org.uk

We acknowledge we have a long way to go to become more diverse and inclusive, we commit to:

- Consulting with a wide range of people, to develop an innovative action plan.
- Creating a clear vision around diversity and inclusion, with meaningful targets and goals to help us achieve this – not just focussing on numbers.
- Creating specific projects to improve the range of people we engage with

Wendy Hedgecock

I was just wondering about the role of Mike Dilger as patron during these challenging times. I was hoping to have heard more from him.

Mike has been very busy with commitments this year, but we will certainly be asking for his support in 2021 and going forward.

Anonymous

How has the Covid situation affected the volunteer section? You mention trouble with litter on the reserves and the subsequent demands on staff. Could volunteers be recruited specifically to clear litter which could surely be organised in a social distanced way?

Anti-social behaviour and a profusion of litter on many of our nature reserves was a feature of the lockdown and its subsequent easing earlier this year. Volunteers have always been a very important part of how EWT operates and they will continue to be in the future. As and when we are able to, we will look to incorporate volunteers to help staff tackle this unwelcome problem.

Charles Joynson

How many tons of carbon did we save by all not driving to a tented AGM?

We would need to calculate where attendees would have travelled from and we would also need to pick a hypothetical location for the marquee. We will certainly work on scenarios, so that we can publish carbon saving predictions prior to any future AGMs.

Roger Hawkins

Is there a plan to re-open the car parking area at Brookes Nature Reserve in the near future or is there an issue which prevents this from happening?

The car park at Brookes Nature Reserve remains closed due to the ever present risk of fly-tipping, occupation by travellers and other anti-social behaviour. We are sorry for the inconvenience. If you wish to visit the reserve, parking is available on the road verge adjacent to the entrance.

Kathy Sayer

What plans do you have to welcome disabled people to your reserves – such as hiring out mobility scooters?

We have a number of sites where mobility scooters are available – these include Thorndon, Abberton, Fingringhoe and we are just in the process of getting one at Hanningfield.

Anonymous attendee

Would have appreciated some short wildlife presentations as additions to AGM

Thank you for your comment; we will pass that back to our design team.

Janet Whybrow

Thanks to Andrew Impey for answering my question, I do appreciate your considering it. I do think the cutting through the ear loops point is important as they can strangle wildlife.