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Beauty and the Bees

> When California was wild, it was one sweet bee-garden throughout its entire length, north and south, and all the way across from the snowy Sierra to the ocean. Wherever a bee might fly within the bounds of this virgin wilderness – through the redwood forests, along the banks of the rivers, along the bluffs and headlands fronting the sea, over valley and plain, park and grove, and deep, leafy glen, or far up the piny slopes of the mountains – throughout every belt and section of climate up to the timber line, bee-flowers bloomed in lavish abundance. (Muir, 1972: 434–435).

The last chapter of John Muir's *Mountains of California* is a celebrated evocation of bee-pastures and his own early walks through them:

> Sauntering in any direction, hundreds of these happy sun-plants brushed against my feet at every step, and closed over them as if I were wading in liquid gold. The air was sweet with fragrance, the larks sang their blessed songs, rising on the wing as I advanced, then sinking out of sight in the polleny sod, while myriads of wild bees stirred the lower air with their monotonous hum – monotonous, yet forever fresh and sweet as every-day sunshine. (Muir, 1972: 436)

The remembrance of the bee-pastures forms part of his lament for a world that has been lost to 'ploughs and sheep'. The opening lines of Muir's chapter reappear in a poem by Gary Snyder (1997), 'Cover the Ground'. In the poem it is the world of urban development, of houses, roads and industrial agriculture that fill the scene. The bee-pastures are lost – 'us and our stuff just cover the ground'.

The work of writers like Muir and Snyder has had a powerful influence in the environmental movement. Passages like these on the disappearing bee-pastures are eloquent defences of places rich in wildlife from their destruction by industrialised agriculture and urban sprawl. However, at the same time their identification of places of ecological value with those that are taken to embody wilderness and a particular conception of beauty raises its own problems. Some of these are well discussed, in particular the way in which the depiction of the 'new world' as a 'virgin wilderness' effaces the memory of indigenous populations. Many of the flower meadows were the result of their pastoral activity: 'Staring in awe at the lengthy vistas of his beloved Yosemite Valley, or the extensive beds of golden and purple flowers in the Central Valley, Muir was eyeing what were really the fertile seed, bulb, and greens gathering grounds of the Miwok and Yokuts Indians, kept open and productive for centuries by carefully planned indigenous burning, harvesting, and seed scattering' (Anderson, 2006: 3). The wilderness identification not only erased the memory of indigenous populations but later caused its own problems in protection of the biodiversity of sites such as Yosemite (O'Neill, 2007: Chapter 7).

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The problems in conservation policy based upon the identification of ecological value with a particular conception of beauty and wilderness are also evident in the fate of the bee in the UK. Largely through the impact of habitat loss to industrialised agriculture and urbanisation a number of species of bumblebee have significantly declined. However, as Ted Benton notes in his excellent recent book *Bumblebees* a number of significant sites for the bumblebee are to be found in 'brownfield' urban fringes. For example, the East Thames corridor in the South East of England offers particularly rich habitats which have a very different character from the 'virgin wilderness' celebrated by John Muir. They are full of the presence of us and our stuff. They do not conform to the ideal of natural beauty as it has been traditionally presented. However they form important habitats for wildlife:

Scattered among the built up areas is an exceptional mosaic of sites of great wildlife value: relict expanses of old, unimproved grazing marshes, sea walls and ditches, disused chalk quarries and sand-and-gravel pits, abandoned industrial sites, roadside verges, silt lagoons and areas formerly spread with power station waste, and lightly managed public open spaces. A combination of the warm dry climate, and nutrient poor, well-drained soil has made possible the establishment of extensive areas of flower-rich grassland. Succession to scrub land has been retarded in many sites by the dry climate and nutrient poor-substrates, and in others by low-level grazing, recurrent fires and occasional cutting. Small scale disturbance by motor cycle scramblers and other occasional vehicle use has increased the habitat diversity, and encouraged the colonisation of plants such as narrow-leaved bird's-foot trefoil and red bartsia, both important late forage for several of the rare bumblebees. Recent surveys have established the national – perhaps international – importance of the associated invertebrate assemblage of the east Thames corridor (Benton, 2006: 519).

In the UK the natural is not identified with wilderness – there is little putative wilderness. However, that role is often taken by the countryside and the rural. Hence, wildlife rich areas in the urban fringes like these are particularly vulnerable to development. Much of popular environmentalism and Green theory and practice fails to recognise their value. Urban planning authorities take such brownfield sites to be prime sites for development. The east Thames corridor itself is the subject of a large urban regeneration programme – the 'Thames Gateway'. As Ted Benton notes there are good reasons to rethink the identification of the what is of natural and ecological value with the rural: 'The widely assumed association of wildlife and "nature" with the countryside no longer holds good, and urban areas, especially large derelict and ex-industrial zones, can act as vital refuges for species virtually eliminated from the agricultural landscape' (Benton, 2006: 524). There are in addition, as Benton notes, strong arguments of justice to defend wildlife sites that are close to urban populations where most people live and which offer the possibilities for a variety of encounters with the non-human world which would otherwise be absent for many. And finally we need

to question whether beauty and the bees are always found together, at least if natural aesthetic beauty is identified with the rural or wilderness.[1]

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NOTE

[1] For recent discussions of the conflict of a particular form of aesthetic and other environmental values see Brady (2006), Saito (1998), O'Brien (2006) and Fenner (2003).

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