

La Brenne, France, February 2009

Conservation *en France*



EuCAN Volunteer Trip 6th – 22nd February 2008

Report By

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On a cold day early in January 2009 an email arrived in an inbox. It outlined an incredible opportunity to learn about conservation techniques and issues both in the UK and several countries in the EU. An application was sent off and an induction weekend covering some of the skills required attended shortly after. Early in February a group of 13 individuals from across England embarked on a trip to La Brenne, in central France. Two of the group represented EuCAN (European Conservation Action Network), the rest were people who had found similar adverts and emails to the one mentioned above.



(Courtesy of a French journalist, unknown name)

Conservation is a strange and multifaceted thing. If you tell people that you volunteer with a conservation trust, which mostly involves cutting down trees and bushes and clearing scrub, they look at you as if you're mad, as if to say "why on earth would you want to do that!?!?" Those that think slightly deeper into the idea then question the action, under the logic of "surely by cutting down all these trees and clearing the scrub you're doing more damage than good." Some even get very upset with you, especially if they encounter you working, in the belief that you're destroying the environment rather than helping it. What they do not realise is that by leaving the trees and scrub to grow the landscape would eventually grow into a landscape consisting of little other than oak woodland (at least in the UK, and large parts of Europe). Such a landscape would be severely detrimental to the diversity of organisms living within.

As such, many management plans have been designed to conserve as many species and habitats as possible. Unfortunately, it is impossible to implement one scheme in order to conserve everything. Most (if not all) schemes are aimed at the conservation of a particular taxonomic group or habitat. For example, without sustained management of grasslands, involving clearing encroachment of neighbouring habitats, this man-made habitat which supports numerous species of rare flowers would disappear (such as various orchids). The conservation of the plant species within the grassland is not the only concern. The wild flowers within the grassland support many other organisms, such as pollinators, which themselves may support higher trophic levels. Clearly, conservation is important.

Natura 2000 is a network of protected areas within the EU aimed at the conservation of organisms. They include areas which are rich in many different taxa. *Parc naturel regional de la Brenne* is one such area. It is a large area in central France which has approximately 1200 man-made lakes. These lakes were originally made by damming an area and allowing it to flood. Such damming created broad, shallow lakes which were used to supply fish to the area (which was too far for fish to be transported from the coast). The soil quality in the area is such that it is poorly suited to agriculture, so the lakes have also been economically important. With such a large number of lakes in such a small area (approximately 160000 ha) it is a haven for many bird species, such as teal (*Anas crecca*), grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*), great crested grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) and pochard (*Aythya ferina*), but also has large numbers of other animals, such as wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), coypu (*Myocaster coypus*), tortoise (*Emys orbicularis*), red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*).



There are many groups in the UK which are involved in conservation. Many are national trusts involved in conservation of many different taxa (such as the Wildlife Trusts and Natural England), whilst others are more (but not entirely) focused on one or two specific taxa (such as Butterfly Conservation and the RSPB). One of the things that these conservation groups have in common is the widespread use of volunteers.

This seems to be a major difference between conservation in the UK and France. There seems to be very little volunteer mediated conservation in France, at least in la Brenne. Admittedly, la Brenne is a very sparsely populated area, and as such it would be necessary to recruit from a larger area in order to achieve the same numbers as in more densely populated areas. Unfortunately, the same situation appears to be evident in other regions

of France. It has been suggested that in the volunteering and conservation situation, France is 20 – 30 years behind the UK.

The lack of a volunteer workforce unfortunately impacts on the conservation of the area. Clearly, if there are no volunteers working for free then the work must be carried out by those being paid to do it. This is a very expensive option as the quantity of work required would require a large number of dedicated workers, which conservation trusts (e.g. *Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux* {LPO}) simply cannot afford the costs. Due to the high costs involved, the majority of the work is not done. This leads to grasslands becoming scrubland (often blackthorn {*Prunus spinosa*} and bramble {*Rubus fruticosus*,}) willow (*Salix* species) encroachment and the eventual silting up of lakes and reed beds, and other similar succession events.

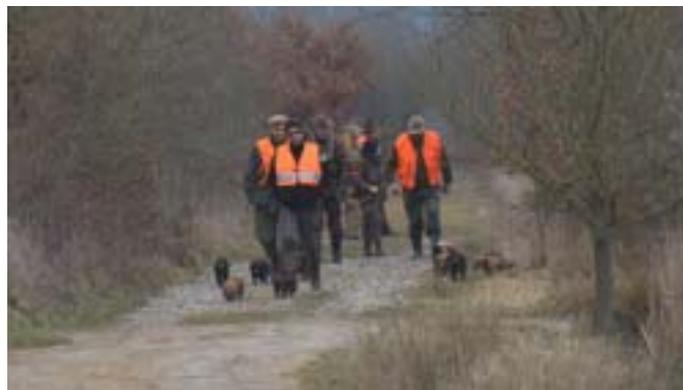


It is this lack of volunteers that EuCAN aims to help with. Firstly, EuCAN provides the opportunity for people from the UK to practise conservation techniques outside of the UK. Secondly, it aims to encourage locals of the areas visited to volunteer with organisations such as the LPO, as well as educating them that many people see the natural environment as a thing of wonder and beauty, that people enjoy watching birds, not only eating them. In an attempt to do this we worked with a group of disabled people a couple of times. It is a shame that there is not more interesting in volunteering with conservation organisations as it is a very enjoyable and rewarding thing to do.

As with all conservation, there is a certain amount politics involved. One particular issue in la Brenne is the conflict between the fish farmers and the animals and conservationists. The fish farmers want to produce a high yield from their lakes but due to the high density of lakes in the area there is also a large number of birds which require water (and the fish contained) to survive. The fish farmers do not appreciate having the fish eaten by the birds and many set up bird scarers, which scare away not only the fish eating birds but also many other species in the area. One particular bird which causes problems for fish farmers is the cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) as this species tends to be present in very large numbers, eating a large amount of fish.



Another problem in La Brenne is that of hunters. Hunting in the area is a very popular past-time. For those involved it can also be very financially rewarding as duck and wild boar (*S. scrofa*) are popular meats. Duck is a frequent target of the hunters. The big problem here is that they do not wait to identify the species of duck they are shooting, particularly when flying overhead. This is such a problem as there are many species protected under EU legislation. Many are protected as they are at risk of extinction to some degree and reducing numbers further through non-discriminatory hunting is not a good thing.



Whilst non-discriminatory hunting can have detrimental effects on the animals of the area, hunting specific species can have a positive effect if implemented effectively. Wild boar (*S. scrofa*) is currently abundant in la Brenne. Due to their habit of eating virtually anything, evidence of their foraging can be seen frequently in fields where they have dug through large areas of fields and ditches in search of worms, insects and roots. Hunting of these animals could protect grassland and other areas from being destroyed. At the same time, hunting would also help with the damage done to crops and the subsequent economic damage. Unfortunately, the hunters are paid by the number of boar they kill. This leads to the hunters primarily targeting the males so the sows can continue to reproduce, keeping the population up and allowing the hunters to hunt boar for longer. This is a similar situation to when coypu (*M. coypus*) was present in the UK. The coypu issue was eventually resolved

by offering a large reward if the coypu were exterminated by a given date. Coypu is currently also an issue in la Brenne. They are large, semi aquatic rodents which frequently feed on reeds and have been known to destroy entire reed beds. Unfortunately they are present in such high numbers that resolution of this particular conservation problem is highly unlikely.

During the trip to la Brenne we (the EuCAN group) assisted with conservation in the area. We worked primarily at the Réserve Naturelle Chérine at four different sites in or around the reserve. At one site (la Touche) we were clearing blackthorn regrowth in an area where Marsh Gentian (*Gentiana pneumonanthe*) had been found previously. This particular plant is known to be important for a particular butterfly species, the Alcon Blue (*Maculinea alcon*), as this is the only plant species which the caterpillar of the Alcon Blue eat. This is a perfect example of why grassland should be conserved. If blackthorn scrub is allowed to grow over the area then the Marsh Gentian will no longer be present and therefore the Alcon Blue will also disappear from the area.



Another site we worked at was once a quarry for Marl, a lime-rich mudstone. Marl was once used to neutralize acidic soil, however the job of Marl is now frequently done by mass produced chemicals or fertilizers. These particular quarry pits have not been used for many years and have largely become overgrown with blackthorn and bramble scrub. We spent a couple of days clearing away and burning the scrub. The aim of this conservation effort was to create habitat suitable for dragonflies (members of the order Odonata, suborder Epiprocta).

As mentioned previously, conservation work requires sustained effort to maintain habitats in a condition suitable for the conservation of the targeted species. It would be interesting to return to the sites in the future to see if the work is being done. It would also be interesting to know if the presence of EuCAN has any impact on the number of volunteers in la Brenne.

EuCAN was established in 2007 by the Kingcombe Trust based in west Dorset with funding from the Leonardo da Vinci section of the Lifelong Learning Programme. EuCAN is one of only a handful of groups benefiting from the Lifelong Learning Programme involved in environmental issues. Further details on EuCAN or the Kingcombe Trust (Reg. Charity no.

1054758) can be obtained from www.kingcombcentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).