



2010 has been declared the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB) by the United Nations. A good starting point to find out more is the Natural History Museum at www.nhm.ac.uk or its companion website www.biodiversityislife.net. Here it is stated that:

Biodiversity is the variety of life on Earth. It is essential for sustaining the natural living systems or ecosystems that provide us with food, fuel, health, wealth, and other vital services. Humans are part of this biodiversity too and have the power to protect or destroy it. Currently, our activities are destroying biodiversity at alarming rates. These losses are irreversible, impoverish us all and damage the life support systems we rely on. But we can prevent them. We need to reflect on our achievements to safeguard biodiversity and focus on the urgent challenges ahead. Now is the time to act.

The Web of Life

Roy Tindle asks, 'Where have all the bees (and flowers) gone?'



Biodiversity – the problems

Biodiversity may be better expressed as the 'web of life'. It's not just about individual species but about the complex relationships and dependencies that link them together. Some of those links do not please us, the bacterial and viral diseases that we suffer are one example, but the connections are complicated and often not well understood. Allowing or even causing species to disappear can be extremely dangerous.

No one would miss typhoid or cholera but the media have been presenting us with the rapid decline in the number of bees. Bees produce honey and, in so doing, they pollinate flowers and that is essential to many of our food plants. So, biodiversity loss is not something that only happens somewhere else, it's impacting on us, too.

God, in creating the laws by which the universe was born and our planet evolved, gave us great beauty. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us of the beauty that God gave to the world:

'And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these' (Matthew 6.28-29).

The teaching is about faith but Jesus clearly refers to the great beauty that God has created and which we cannot surpass. It is a teaching that we have ignored and one aspect of this is shown by the many ways in which we have degraded the environment, God's Creation.

For a sober estimation of what we are doing in Britain, look to Defra's *Biodiversity Indicators in Your Pocket*, a 54-page guide that can be downloaded from: http://www.jncc.gov.uk/pdf/Biyp_2009.pdf. These relate to changes since 1975. There are some reassuring statistics here, successes where habitats have been saved and where native species are beginning to recover, but the overall figures are very worrying. Farmland, woodland, water and wetland bird species are still dropping in



number. Butterfly species have declined drastically. You can read the rest of these depressing statistics for yourselves.

Professor Iain Stewart in the *How Earth Made Us* television series notes this as the Anthropocene Age, the period when human life has become the most significant influence on this planet's biosphere. Early agriculture, he suggests, brought about a major increase in the production of methane and, since methane is a potent greenhouse gas, this has prevented a further ice age. This could be considered benign as it has preserved rather than destroyed species but that's not the whole story. Nor is this just about herbicide and insecticide use, or even about fertilisers; it is the wider issue of the destruction of habitats. We have made this planet less beautiful and our actions now impinge on our continuing existence.

Much has been written about climate change and recently these waters have been muddied by media searching for 'newsworthy' stories. Climate change is something that will probably, perhaps almost certainly, impact on the totality of life on this world. The loss of biodiversity, however, has already happened and is already impacting on Creation.

But, amid this morass of environmental degradation, biodiversity is a problem upon which we can rapidly begin to make a positive impact.

Around our buildings

Our churches are two things at the same time; they are both buildings and the congregations worshipping within. Really, they are simply the people but let's first consider the buildings and how they may make a difference.

The 'Find a Church' website talks of over 30,000 churches in the UK. Now, if I put up a single bird box, I may help a little, but 30,000 bird boxes would make a very big difference. It's time to stop complaining about declining Christendom and to

appreciate just how big our numbers are. Small acts can aggregate to make a mighty change. So, let's just look at what changes we can make.

There are churches with a lot of space around them and there are others that are sandwiched between other buildings. The latter are more restricted but even they can play a part. Here is a list of simple actions:

If you have some area of green space:

1. Plant native plants; introduced varieties can be very attractive but they may not be food for birds and insects. Don't forget, you may think of insects as 'creepy crawlies' but many birds think of them as lunch!
2. Leave leaf litter from trees and bushes lying on the ground. You can sweep paths to make them safe but leaf litter provides a home to very many insects and other invertebrates.
3. Create a wilderness area where wild flowers and grasses can grow to maturity. Only cut them when their top growth has died back. If you have a good crop of wild flowers then collect the seeds and pass them on.
4. Make a woodpile out of discarded branches. Again, this will give a home to many species and will provide food for birds.
5. Now for a little expenditure! Bird boxes are inexpensive; bat boxes cost more but are easy to make. Don't worry, there is an information contact list at the end of this article! Think also of bird feeders, especially in the winter and in urban areas.
6. If your congregation is really adventurous and you have a safe place, then consider a couple of bee hives. There are local beekeepers' associations throughout the UK and these will provide you with all the help that you need. There are also some good books that I will mention at the end.

If you lack any green open space then

maybe you can find suitable places to fix bird and bat boxes and you will probably have accessible openable windows so that you can put up some kind of feeder. But read, also, the section on Congregations.

There is rather more to it than just following these rather terse notes, of course, and that is why we have set up the William Turner Project at St Olave's Church, in the City of London. Buried in our churchyard is a Reformation priest, William Turner. Twice Dean of Wells Cathedral, he was also a botanist, ornithologist and physician. His publication of the first herbal in the English language has led to botanists referring to him as the 'father of English botany'. It seemed a very good place to start, a nudge from God.

We are partners in the International Biodiversity Year and are bringing together a great range of experts so that what we don't know we can soon find out. At least, that's the aim! For example, for bees we have an experienced beekeeper who was an Anglican Diocesan Environmental Officer, someone who knows about churches, and also Britain's only professor of apiculture, Francis Ratnieks. For flowers we have Kew Gardens and the Royal Horticultural Society – and then there's the network of the 350 partners in the International Biodiversity Year, including the lead body, the Natural History Museum!

In our congregations

Well, that's fairly obvious. Every churchgoer can be asked to plant some native wild flowers, leave leaf litter, make a wilderness area and so on, if they have a garden. Even keep bees. Thus we begin to make a real difference, all through relatively small acts.

A last comment from Prof Ratnieks, Professor of Apiculture at Sussex University: 'Good luck. The church could play an important role given that it has a lot of land and a long time horizon.' ■

This article can only be an outline of what we may achieve so please do contact the author of this article. We want to share and learn from what you are doing.

Roy Tindle
E: roytindle@gmail.com

Some resources

Bees

A comprehensive list of local beekeeping associations is at: http://www.britishbee.org.uk/local_associations_about_us.php

If you are really interested then read *Guide to Bees & Honey* by Ted Hooper (Northern Bee Books) and *The Bee Friendly Garden*, Ted Hooper & Mike Taylor (Alphabet & Image)