

A comparison of Nature Conservation in the Czech Republic and England

by Grace Hall

Introduction

I am fascinated by the fact that in England we have so many different names for areas that we conserve for nature. Once you have studied nature conservation and have worked in this field (and spent plenty of your spare time in the field, quite literally!) you are able to understand the difference between different designations, and why they exist. But essentially, they are there for much the same reason - to provide areas of natural habitat for wildlife and wild places for people to visit. Places that cannot be built on, places that have plants and trees, places that are actually managed and paid for by humans as sanctuaries for wildlife and for themselves.



So what is the situation in other countries in the world? I am very lucky to have visited many different countries in the world, and each is different in terms of what level of nature conservation exists and the designations that they have. In August 2010 I spent two weeks in the Czech Republic on a Leonardo de Vinci funded conservation project in Ždánice, South Moravia. I worked with a very enthusiastic team of like minded individuals to try and eliminate scrub from a beautiful grassland valley and discovered the culture of the area through numerous fascinating visits in the local area. I also met some local experts who work in nature conservation, whom I frequently quizzed about nature conservation in the Czech Republic, and listened to when they were giving our group a talk. This and my personal observations is the basis of my report...

Nature Conservation in England

England has a long history of nature conservation, probably beginning officially with the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. However, the conservation movement had started way before this in the establishment of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts, all in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. Even before these, various wildlife protection laws and smaller conservation groups had already been set up throughout the nineteenth century. Nature conservation has been around in our country for nearly 200 years - no wonder we now have a plethora of government and non government nature conservation organisations and a huge range of protected areas of all sizes and characteristics!

Once set up, the RSPB, Wildlife Trusts and National Trusts began acquiring land as nature reserves. Throughout the twentieth century many other organisations were established and acquired land including The Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission, Natural England and local governments.



In the twentieth century, particularly in the last three decades, many new laws and acts have been passed in order to protect wildlife better and to help designate new areas of land, or to designate protected land differently/more effectively. This includes Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACS), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), National Nature Reserves (NNRs), Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Country Parks are another land designation that has been around now for over forty years. With around 400 of them in England this amounts to quite a large area of land that although is not primarily an area designated for nature conservation, most of them are of significant value for wildlife.

Nature Conservation in the Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is very different to England in terms of its social and political history, which is probably why the level of nature conservation is very different to that of England. It appears to be less developed than England, which is possibly one of the reasons for having less areas of land protected for nature conservation. There has been less pressure on the land for resources and space over time and for many years agriculture was not intensive, therefore farming and conservation went hand in hand as it did in England many years ago. However, 2010 shows a different story, certainly in the region of South Moravia where agriculture is fairly intensive and largely arable. With monocultures of crops and modern farm machinery, hedges and trees are few and far between. Farmers are currently paid for production by the government, but this is due



to change. The Czech Republic is due to begin a scheme similar to the Environmental Stewardship Scheme in England, in 2013. This will see farmers and landowners paid for conservation rather than for production, which should start to change the landscape.

Similarly to England, the Czech Republic has National Parks, which are large tracts of land that are largely undeveloped and represent significant areas for wildlife conservation. There are protected landscape areas and biosphere reserves, which are large areas also primarily for nature conservation. There are several different designations for smaller areas of land protected for nature: National Natural Reservations, Natural Reservations, National Natural Monuments and Natural Monuments. When the Czech Republic joined the EU in 2004 they were obliged to adopt the Natura 2000 policy, which led to a lengthy mapping programme across the country. Due to the identification of internationally and nationally important habitats and important sites for birds, the Czech Republic now has many SACs and SPAs. Many of these are already protected in the form of a National Park or other designation, but this adds extra protection for nature.



Interpretation board at Na Adamcich National Natural Monument

People and wildlife

One of my key objectives in taking part in the volunteering programme was to find out about peoples' attitudes to nature conservation in Czech Republic. This is something that fascinates me in my job as an Environmental Education Officer, because I meet and work with people of all ages and backgrounds, and am keen to get as many people enthusiastic about wildlife and the countryside as possible! In England alone there is a diverse range of attitudes towards nature conservation and being in the outdoors in general. The way people perceive the natural world and its relevance to them has a huge part to play in the strength of nature conservation, which hopefully is why in England we have so many protected sites, laws and conservation organisations.

The majority of people I meet and work with have a very positive attitude towards nature conservation and being in the countryside, but that might be because they have chosen to come to an event or walk in the countryside anyway. I meet people both professionally and otherwise though who do not enjoy visiting the countryside and feel it is irrelevant to them. As a nation however, I think that in England we take pride in our natural places and wildlife, and people from all walks of life are able appreciate our parks, reserves, and close encounters with wildlife! Going for a walk in the countryside in England is a very common activity, whereas I do not think it is in the Czech Republic.



In the Czech Republic although there are plenty of similarities to the UK (such as a love of beer), the culture is quite different to England. Because it is a less developed country many people share the same feelings of other nations I have visited. Many people feel unconnected to nature conservation and that spending time in the countryside is perhaps something that less wealthy people would do. People do not choose to spend their leisure time in the countryside or looking for wildlife, whereas this is a very popular pastime in England.

People in the Czech Republic have moved away from their more traditional lifestyles of growing their own vegetables and having a few animals and instead choose to work in cities and towns and buy their food from large supermarkets. Exactly the same thing happened in England and it still does. However there is now more of a trend towards having allotments, smallholdings and making your own preserves etc. but this is not the case in the Czech Republic yet.

There are very different attitudes to volunteering in the two countries. Many people choose to volunteer in England - especially for nature conservation, and it attracts people of all ages and backgrounds. In Czech Republic volunteering is not common in any field, due to the social history and economy of the country. Until fairly recently the people were controlled by a communist regime, and the country has only been member of the EU for six years. People are still feeling the effects of this and are just making enough money to live comfortably. Volunteering is probably something that comes when you feel you want to 'give something back', or when you have enough leisure time to do so maybe to make friends, get healthy or learn new skills. Most people probably do not feel that they are in a position to do this, and society is not at that stage yet. This is probably why many of the local people thought that we were a little mad coming all the way over to Ždánice to try and help their wildlife!



Maybe there is a change starting to happen though, and maybe the Eucan project has helped with this! Whilst we were working in Butterfly Valley several students, people from the village and some corporate groups came to volunteer with us, as shown in the photo on the previous page.

Another big difference that I discovered is how interested people are in wildlife and how much money the government and charities have and are willing to invest in nature conservation staff. In Czech Republic there are no jobs like mine as an Education Officer, and opportunities to work in nature conservation in anything other than the essential jobs such as an ecologist, researcher or a National Park Ranger are very limited. There are just a few paid rangers that look after the large conservation areas. The smaller conservation areas are often managed by local people that are paid as and when work needs doing by the government or by non governmental organisations and/or enthusiastic local people.

In England there are huge amounts of staff in comparison, not only rangers, wardens, reserves officers etc. that are conserving areas for nature in practical way but campaigners, ecologists, researchers and many more. There are also community rangers, education officers, project officers etc. that are working to engage people with wildlife and their local conservation areas. Much more money is invested in nature conservation both to actively manage nature areas and to engage people, and this investment is met with plenty of demand. People like me who engage people with wildlife are always overwhelmed by the response from the public, and there has been a huge rise in the popularity of wildlife events and activities in the last few decades.



Conclusion

The Czech Republic and England are at very different stages in terms of nature conservation and may always be due to differences in culture. However, whilst I was visiting the Czech Republic I met many enthusiastic people who were studying biology, working in nature conservation or just very interested in it! Hopefully this will continue to gain more momentum and nature conservation will become more popular. Now that the Czech Republic is part of the EU it has certain obligations to deliver a certain level of nature conservation. As they already had many different nature conservation designations voluntarily though, this shows that they were probably already committed

to conserving their wildlife. By being part of the EU people in the Czech Republic may also be influenced by other countries in terms of positive attitudes to nature conservation and being in the countryside.



Eucan volunteers from England and corporate volunteers from the Czech Republic

Nature conservation will probably need to have more people behind it and 'on board' to be truly effective. It would be great to see more investment in nature conservation in the Czech Republic, especially in terms of involving people more in their local conservation areas. By doing this, people can reconnect with the countryside and appreciate it and the wildlife that lives there. If this were to happen, places like the beautiful Butterfly Valley would survive long into the future as a valuable place for butterflies and other wildlife.

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