

Contested attitudes towards wildlife in Britain

The terms city and country can evoke powerful images and have very different meanings to particular social groups within society. Raymond Williams explains some of the positive interpretations: “On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace innocence and simple virtue and on the city has gathered the idea of learning, communication, light”[1]. However, Williams also argues that there are negative associations with the city and the country: “On the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation”[2]. These ideas though are much generalised views which have been in existence for a long time; and after industrialisation the differing views became even more distinct because of the rapid growth of towns and cities resulting in unsanitary, overcrowded conditions during the nineteenth century. Anti-urbanism was a popular sentiment in this period as the poet William Cowper commented: “God made the country and man made the town, the former had made a pretty good job of it and the latter a frightful mess”[3]. So, the relationship between the city and the country has been subject to the changing values and ideals of society from pre-industrial Britain to the Twenty-First century and this in turn has impacted upon rural and urban views towards the countryside and British flora and fauna.

In this chapter I intend to examine rural and urban attitudes as well as intrinsic value judgements towards two of our most common mammals, the grey squirrel and the fox, chosen, because they both live equally successfully in the city and the country.

The fox and the squirrel are subject to widely differing opinions as to their perceived ‘value’, are they ‘pests’ which need to be controlled by trapping, shooting or hunting, or do they have a ‘worth’ to humans, economically, aesthetically or even as an amenity value? The historical context of both mammals is very important to the rural/urban debate even though they have had very different if not indeed chequered histories; this will give an essential dimension to the discussion, as their relationships with man over the centuries have been somewhat complicated.

The Fox, symbol of wild nature or continual persecution?

Of all British mammals it is perhaps the fox which generates the most vociferous debate as to its ‘worth’ or indeed its place as the most destructive ‘pest’ or ‘vermin’ in need of extermination. As Lovegrove argues: “Throughout the passage of time no animal in Britain has suffered a more schizophrenic relationship with man than the fox. On one hand it has been vilified since time immemorial and persecuted as one of the most despised of predators while on the other hand it has been protected with passion for man’s pleasure”[4]. The fox has been hunted relentlessly for hundreds of years and it could easily have suffered the same demise as the lynx, bear and wolf which were totally eliminated from the British Isles from the Roman period to the 1600s, the wolf being the last to disappear. However, the fox has survived mainly due to man’s penchant for the chase; hunting the animal for sport was popular in the middle ages and has continued unabated until the hunting ban came into force in 2005. The implementation of the hunting ban has been extremely contentious and has only served to highlight the widely differing views between the city and the country, which will be examined in more detail a little later.

Fox hunting has always been considered as essentially a ‘country pursuit’ and in the nineteenth century it was mainly country ‘gentlemen’ who took part in the sport. It was the perceived reputation of the fox as creating mischief and thievery which has ensured its place as vermin in the eyes of man. These doubtful traits justified the pursuance of the animal as Thomas comments: “The fox was a subtle, ‘pilfering foe’, a ‘conscious villain’ and the highly organised sport of fox

hunting could be seen as just vengeance on the midnight thief”[5]. As well as being hunted the fox was (and still is) persecuted by farmers and gamekeepers with snares, shooting, poison and trapping but even in the nineteenth century the animal did have its champions in the form of a professor of modern history, Edward Augustus Freeman. As a learned intellectual in 1869, Freeman attacked supposedly ‘civilised’ country gentlemen for the hunting and killing of foxes. In a now famous article Freeman supported his argument for the banning of fox hunting with the notion of the ‘march of civilisation’ and the changes in sensibilities towards cruelty to animals; in order to decry field sports, he also had to deconstruct cruelty as well as redefine the concept of manliness. The perceived masculine virtues of skill in riding, appreciation of good company and fresh air were denounced as “the functions of a butcher”[6] by Freeman and he went on to say: “The manly sport of fox hunting seems to me not to be manly at all, but to be at once cowardly and foolhardy”[7]. So, the seeds of discontent towards hunting with dogs were sown in the mid nineteenth century by historians such as Freeman with the difference in attitudes between town and country already in evidence. The sport still continued, though, with unbridled enthusiasm, and measures were even taken to ensure a steady supply of foxes for the chase such as importing ‘bagmen’, whereby foxes were brought into an area to be released and cubs were protected, and foxes were imported from France to establish new coverts. Also, of paramount importance was that the fox was only killed during the chase, while the curious act of vulpicide (killing the animal by other means than hunting) was very much frowned upon by the aristocratic hunting elite. As Thomas comments: “vulpicide became one of the greatest moral offences a country gentleman could commit”. [8] These sentiments were entirely at odds, however, with those of farmers and other country dwellers whose chickens and young lambs may have been destroyed. It would seem, therefore, that class was significant in terms of attitudes towards the fox in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Although from 2005 hunting with dogs was made illegal, fox hunting now takes place in a different form but it is still essentially a country pursuit and is open to more than just the aristocracy. However, some city dwellers would argue that class is still a divisive issue with only the ‘toffs’ participating in this sport. The meaning of fox hunting can be constructed in a variety of ways and class is a predominant feature according to the urban anti-hunt fraternity who argue that: “it is still a matter of class privilege, a question of whether or not the advantaged few should be permitted to continue a tradition that offends the majority (town and city dwellers)”. [9] Before the hunting ban came into force, the rural population as represented in the Countryside Alliance were beginning to mobilise protests against what they saw as a threat to their ‘country way of life’ in 2001, followed by 400,000 people who marched through London in 2002. Although hunting was top of the agenda, there were many other issues at stake such as rural employment, the closing of post offices in villages and the often inadequate transport system in the countryside, so the official stance was: ‘A march for Liberty and Livelihood’. The divide between the city and country appeared to be growing ever wider at this time and the Countryside Alliance set out some of the more contentious issues in a charter which: “says that country people need a countryside movement because their way of life is now under siege, opponents of country ways and values take issue with all aspects of the countryside’s management of animals, including live animal transport, hunting, livestock husbandry, shooting, fishing and national hunt racing”[10]. The claims for the retention of fox hunting by the Alliance ranged from the control of vermin, the provider of rural employment and other leisure activities involving up to one and a half million people a year as well as its role in the construction of a national identity. This was in stark contrast to urban anti-hunt people who saw hunting as a barbarous ‘sport’ involving extreme

cruelty to a wild animal. The 'value' of the fox in this context is that of a sublime wild mammal which is not harmful to humans, and to city dwellers is actually a source for the observation of nature at close quarters as opposed to having a 'value' in terms of sporting activities in the countryside.

As well as being an essential provider of 'sport' the fox was used by the Countryside Alliance as a symbol of national identity. The discourse of the relationship between British national identity and the timeless 'rural idyll' has a long history, and has been associated with allegedly essential British values such as social cohesion, continuity, and harmony. Especially in times of crisis, as in the two world wars, the British countryside was seen as 'what we are fighting for'. The Alliance attempted to use these values to foster the tradition of fox hunting as essential to a 'country way of life', so: "hunting can be deemed part of the very essence of nation, because.....'country', in the sense of nation, is closely bound up with 'country' in the sense of green fields"[11]. In this context fox hunting is seen as a national pursuit, which is the right of the 'English countryman' and: "by implication, supporters of the 'Hunting with Dogs' bill are cast not merely as anti-hunting, but also, more heinously, as anti-British"[12]. So, it appears that it is a kind of 'moral geography' which necessitates the control of the fox as 'vermin' in order to preserve a national way of life involving not just sport and leisure activities but sound economics in terms of providing much needed jobs in the countryside.

However, urban attitudes towards the fox are in some ways even more complex. Even though anti-hunt groups still protest vociferously against hunting, the idea of the animal being a 'cuddly creature' (visions of Basil Brush perhaps or Roald Dahl's 'Fantastic Mr Fox') is being somewhat dispelled in the present day. Recent media reports have fuelled a sense of 'moral panic' about the activities of the urban fox. In June 2010 the Guardian juxtaposed the urban fox with its country counterpart as: "This scruffy looking, bin raiding, lawn wrecking monster [who] is developing a different pattern of behaviour to its fluffier, warier country cousin. We have created a stereotype of the urban fox; while rural foxes are bushy tailed red beauties, the city dweller is a mangy, malnourished beast that emits blood curdling screams at night"[13]. This kind of representation by the media has been fuelled by the attacks in 2010 on two children in London who both needed hospital treatment, and since then there have been further attacks, one where a kitten was killed by a fox, and another (according to the Daily Telegraph) where a woman, again in London, claimed: "I woke up as a fox sank its teeth in my ear"[14]. These media reports created moral panics amongst people living in towns and cities, particularly London, to the extent that a recent survey by 'Opinions Matter' in association with London WildCare Trust revealed that: "the fox is now the second least popular (after the magpie) wild creature in the city; almost one in five said that foxes were a menace, vicious, and carried disease"[15]. It would appear that the urban fox is now a much maligned creature, and conservationists are concerned that people: "have become afraid of nature, especially in towns and cities where foxes have been blamed for making mess and noise"[16]. So, the cultural or aesthetic 'value' of the fox as a sublime symbol of wildlife and nature in town and city gardens has diminished to the extent that some city dwellers now see the animals as 'pests' which should be trapped and killed.

The Grey Squirrel: alien, destructive tree rat or friendly image of wild nature?

Unlike the fox the grey squirrel is a fairly recent import. It was brought to Britain from the United States, the earliest recorded introduction being a pair of squirrels which were kept caged at Henbury Park in Macclesfield, Cheshire in the nineteenth century and released in 1876 when the novelty value waned.[17] However, there are several other unrecorded introductions and

subsequent releases such as in Montgomeryshire in 1830, and Denbighshire in 1828 [18]. But by far the most important releases of the grey squirrel becoming established in Britain took place at Woburn Park in Bedfordshire; ten were released in 1890,[19] and the increase of the animals was very rapid as the British climate and environment proved to be an ideal habitat. It was the unprecedented success of the establishment of the grey squirrel in Britain which began to cause concern even as early as 1931 when the first comprehensive study was carried out by A D Middleton of Oxford University. He was particularly concerned with what he saw as the noxious habits of the grey squirrel such as: “The grey squirrel’s attack on birds is certainly carried out chiefly in the nesting season, by the destruction of eggs and young birds”[20]. However, damage to woodland is perhaps one of the most destructive habits of the grey squirrel; deciduous trees such as English Oak are destroyed when: “very large patches of bark are peeled, frequently girdling the tree and resulting in the death of the top or the whole of the tree”[21]. Another common site of damage is actually inside the roof spaces of houses where the squirrel is very adept at gnawing through quite thick pieces of timber such as roof joists as well as destroying electric cables thus causing quite serious damage, hence it acquired the name of a ‘tree rat’. However, the grey squirrel is also charged with destroying not only British flora but fauna in the form of the indigenous red: “grey squirrels are believed to be carriers of parapoxvirus, and, although the virus has no effect on grey squirrels, it causes disease that is invariably fatal in red squirrels”[22]. However, there can be other reasons for the scarcity of the presence of red squirrels such as habitat loss and, as Kean argues, “frequently the demise of the red squirrel was linked, incorrectly, to the spread of the grey squirrel”[23]. Also, what must be considered at this point is that the native red squirrel was charged with much the same destructive habits in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Lovegrove argues, the red squirrel “was regarded as a serious problem in regenerating woodlands and plantations”[24]. It was recorded that up to 2,200 red squirrels were killed annually in the New Forest from 1880 onwards, squirrel clubs were formed such as the Highland squirrel club in 1903 and were responsible for killing some 82,000 red squirrels on thirty to forty highland estates in the first thirty years (of the twentieth century), the price paid for tails varying from 3d to 4d[25]. What a difference a century makes, as the red squirrel is now the subject of massive conservation efforts in the relatively few small areas where it can still be found in Britain today, and ironically Scotland is one of the last enclaves where the red squirrel can be found.

City and country dwellers can have markedly different perceptions of both species of squirrel, especially the grey. Even before the last war the grey squirrel was viewed quite differently in the town and the country. In magazines such as *The Field* and *Country Life*, a very caustic attitude was taken towards the animal, with *The Field* suggesting: “We are confronted today, in short, with the opening stages of a plague; in a short time the whole face of England will have been invaded by a foreign rodent”[26]. These attitudes intensified in later decades and the Ministry of Agriculture and the Forestry Commission were instrumental in fuelling a campaign of extermination of the animals by offering financial incentives to farmers and others to kill greys. Every method was used, even explosives, against “a non native animal and a half-breed at that”[27]. It was the apparently sentimental attitude of city dwellers which was at odds with country perceptions, as Kean argues: “It was the very presence of grey squirrels in towns, that led, some argued, to their endorsement by those possessing that apparent city characteristic of sentiment. The grey squirrel was both alien, destroying the indigenous culture and liked by those seen as an anathema to the countryside people who lived in towns and the suburbs” Unlike the fox the grey squirrel has no real ‘value’ in terms of sport, but it could be argued that the animal has

economic value, especially if killed for its meat; there are now a growing number of organic meat companies specialising in squirrel meat, with even first class restaurants offering squirrel dishes. But this is of course at odds with the very people in cities who abhor the culling of the animal which they suppose is cute and furry! as these top-class restaurants are invariably situated within an urban setting.

Similar to the fox the red squirrel has been associated with the idea of nation and more specifically Englishness rather than Britishness, and has been used to represent the myth of the 'rural idyll'. Beatrix Potter's tale of Squirrel Nutkin epitomises the English idyll of Cumbria and the Lake District where she lived until her death in 1943. In the early 1960s another national icon was born when Tufty the red squirrel was invented by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. The Tufty Club was a road safety initiative for the under fives; by 1972, however, its membership had reached two million, with older children included.

It would appear that city and countryside attitudes towards both the red and the grey squirrel are extremely complex: the red is now an endangered species and almost revered as a national symbol whereas the grey is recognised by some as the 'alien tree rat' with only destructive intentions. It was the apparently sentimental perception of the grey squirrel in towns and cities that angered many country dwellers and further highlighted: "the division between town and suburb and the country".[28] A correspondent for *The Field* reported "seeing a group of six grey squirrels being admired by a crowd of people in London's Russell Square [and] when I ventured to suggest that I should kill them with my stick the whole crowd seemed horrified"[29].

What is the future for the fox and the Grey Squirrel?

It could be argued that human perceptions of both the fox and the grey squirrel are very contentious as they are the inevitable consequence of the differences between urban and rural society. These differences began in the late eighteenth century when the Romantics idealised the English countryside and this was mainly due to anxiety about rapid industrialisation which reached its zenith in the 19th century. Criticism of the 'dark satanic mills' and the need to return to a supposedly pre-industrial 'rural idyll' was promoted by poets such as Shelley, Keats, Clare, Blake and most of all the lakes poet Wordsworth. Historically both animals have been subject to changing attitudes which have depended upon the social and cultural mores of society at a given point in time. Even the red squirrel suffered the same fate as the grey squirrel does today, as tens of thousands were shot for alleged destruction of forests. The fox and the red squirrel have contributed to the national identity debate, and the country 'sport' of hunting is seen by country dwellers as a continuation of 'traditional values' which they believe belong to a timeless English past. This is of course in stark contrast to some urban perceptions of a class divisive rural pursuit which exists only for rich people who are intent upon promoting extreme cruelty to a wild animal.

The question of the future for these two animals, which are an integral part of the urban and rural British landscape, is probably best answered by referring to the concepts of 'use' and 'delight', which were first coined by the environmental historian, Christopher Smout. It is the perceived 'value' of the fox and the grey squirrel that raises more complex issues. Smout used the seal culls in Scotland and Europe during the 1970s to explain how the public viewed them to be too delightful for use and destruction. However, countries such as Norway continued with seal culls on the grounds of so-called 'traditional custom' but "their skins eventually became unsalable"[30], mainly due to high profile media publicity. According to Smout: "seals have developed an iconic appeal as a source of delight [which] is very real and highly politicised but as

often is the case those who show 'delight' are not those who are affected by policies to control or prevent 'use'[31]. These highly contentious claims can easily be applied to the fox and the grey squirrel in Britain. Foxes do have a 'use' to country dwellers as a means of following an apparently 'traditional sport' as opposed to some urban perceptions of foxes as delightful images of wild nature. The same could be said of the grey squirrel, 'use' being the culling for meat (sold at Budgens supermarket in London) as well as being a 'delightful' image of nature for city people to enjoy.

Smout's observations sum up the highly sensitive and problematic issues concerning the perceived 'value' of all wildlife, particularly by the opposing sides of the city and the countryside, as he states: "Nature is contested ground because the relationships and the confrontations between 'use' and 'delight' are real because one side's totem is the other side's pest and not all the arguments are on one side"[32].

However, in the future, maybe it will not just be the fox and the grey squirrel engendering these complex differences in attitudes between the countryside and the city, because other wildlife such as the muntjac deer, the mink and the badger also provoke fierce debate from both sides. Two of these animals (the muntjac and the mink) are imported, and are accused of destroying flora and fauna, but the indigenous badger is assumed guilty of an even more serious crime, that of carrying the deadly and highly contagious TB virus and transmitting it to cattle.

Attitudes towards badgers are of course very much in the news because of the proposed cull which is due to take place in the autumn of 2012. The debate as to whether the animals carry the deadly TB virus has been ongoing for some time, Defra are committed to the implementation of the cull as they argue that: "The disease forced the slaughter of 25,000 cattle in 2010 alone and will cost taxpayers around £1 billion over the next ten years if not effectively dealt with"[33]. Statements such as this are very contentious even though they are apparently 'science based' (according to Defra) but there are scientists who disagree with these views: "More than 30 prominent scientists have signed a letter, published in the Observer, claiming the planned killings will actually increase bovine tuberculosis among British cattle (and these include) eminent scholars such as Professor Sir Patrick Bateson, president of the Zoological society of London"[34]. So, it would appear that there are serious doubts with the claims of whether the iniquitous badger does actually spread the TB virus to cattle. However, there are obvious problems for beef and dairy farmers as a high incidence of the disease can affect livelihoods in the most extreme of circumstances as one farmer commented: "I was forced to watch dozens of (my) calves being shot because of bovine tuberculosis (and he) lost more than a tenth (his herd)"[35]. Non governmental organisations such as the RSPCA, RSPB and Rural England are not convinced of the effectiveness of a controlled cull of badgers but interestingly this highly charged debate is not just confined to rural against urban, it is also centred upon farmers *for* and *against* the cull, which has created an unusual fundamental disagreement between farmers in different parts of the country. These opposing views within the rural community are exemplified by a farmer in Gloucestershire whose farm is just outside the area of the proposed 'pilot badger cull'. David Purser is not persuaded by government intervention in sanctioning a cull, he argues that he and other farmers: "were very concerned that a cull would actually increase the disease through the 'perturbation' effect where infected badgers fleeing the culling spread the disease to surrounding areas"[36]. So, there are farmers who do not feel that a badger cull will eradicate TB but more likely it will actually spread the disease, this report was published in an edition of the Farmers Weekly.

This proposed cull of an instantly recognisable indigenous mammal has succeeded in dividing not

only urban and rural but extraordinarily, has also divided farmers within rural communities. Man's relationship with wildlife has been complex and subject to change for centuries but: "Are we capable of finding acceptable balances to satisfy human interests"[37] as well as ensure the sustainability of all of our native wildlife, only time will tell.

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