CREATIVE CONSERVATION

Grant Luscombe and Richard Scott

Making a start

Since 1975, Landlife, an urban wildlife charity based in Merseyside, UK, has taken a new approach to creating urban wildlife habitats, developing the philosophy of creative conservation. Creative conservation is creative in a literal sense, creating new ecological landscapes, but also creative in the sense of celebration and inspiration. It can be defined as making places for wildlife to flourish and for people to enjoy (Scott 2004). From Thoreau in the mid-nineteenth century to young musicians in 2018, people have celebrating the value of nature in the city and their contributions to bringing it there:

What are the natural features which make a township handsome? A river, with its waterfalls and meadows, a lake, a hill, a cliff or individual rocks, a forest, and ancient trees standing singly. Such things are beautiful; they have a high use which dollars and cents never represent. If the inhabitants of a town were wise, they would seek to preserve these things, though at a considerable expense; for such things educate far more than any hired teachers or preachers, or any at present recognized system of school education.

Thoreau (1861)

I wake up and I see all the possibilities
I see, I see, I see
I live life like a lucid dream
Revolution, evolution
I make my own history
I dream, I dream, I dream

Adam Ali and Eddie Toomer-McAlpine, Brighter Sound (2018)
(Selected lyrics from Tale of Two Cities song ‘Revolution Evolution’
produced by young musicians in response to creating extensive wildflower landscapes in both Liverpool and Manchester, funded by the UK Big Lottery as Kew Gardens ‘Grow Wild’ England Wildflower Flagship)
Creative conservation evolved to overcome the problems of degraded open spaces with poor, often partly contaminated, soils in run-down neglected industrial areas. It was needed because few resources were available and people’s lives required the stimuli that colorful, flower-rich landscapes provide. It was a case of thinking the possible and trying an idea to see what would work.

Ecological studies in old urban centers across northwest England and the British new towns, particularly in the largest and most recent, Milton Keynes, showed that relatively little was known about how to create new habitats for wildlife. In this context, creative conservation was considered to be an aspect of ecological engineering, concerned with exploring opportunities to create new habitats and to rehabilitate degraded habitats, for the benefit of wildlife (Yoxon 1977).

Most traditional UK conservationists find the creation of new ecological landscapes unnatural, but the British landscape has undergone radical change due to agricultural practices since the Bronze Age. Although the first British description of a hedge was in 547 CE (Pollard et al. 1974), hedges only became a dominant feature of the English landscape, which is sometimes called a ‘Georgian Landscape’, in the eighteenth century following the Enclosure Acts. At that time they were seen as alien features and eyesores, but now they are cherished as part of the countryside. Many prized and protected UK habitats are semi-natural, having arisen from obsolete farming practices. In towns and cities the changes have been even more dramatic, stimulating a new vision and understanding of nature conservation practice.

Some authors consider the UK spiritual home of urban ecological landscaping to lie somewhere between the Liverpool organization Landlife, Warrington New Town, and Manchester University School of Landscape (Kendle and Forbes 1997). The bold innovations of these pioneers transformed green deserts and derelict urban and industrial sites into multi-functional spaces delivering ecological, educational, recreational, aesthetic, health, and economic benefits. This new thinking encompassed the core principle that creative conservation must never be a substitute for preserving existing habitats. It developed ideas about disturbance and opportunity in nature, and a wider definition of habitat as a place that supports, or has the potential to support, biodiversity.

Landlife, the first urban wildlife group, set out on this journey of discovery in 1975, driven by the energy, enthusiasm, and optimism of local communities. It was a progenitor of the Groundwork Trusts that were originally established to strengthen local communities and reclaim derelict land by environmental projects and are now a UK charity supporting communities through local environmental action (Nicholson-Lord 1987). Landlife focused on simple starting points rather than the complex end points that drive traditional nature preservation and conservation. It recognizes the role of people in shaping the world, and nature’s dynamic response. Creative conservation draws on ecological knowledge to initiate natural processes that respond to change, can cope with stress and chaos rather than aim at stability and routine. It considers the rural/urban divide to be an artificial construct in relation to biodiversity. Creative conservation also creates new opportunities for wildlife to flourish, and engages with people to give nature a helping hand.

Landlife wrote the concept of ‘people as a part of nature rather than apart from nature’ that was included in the first urban nature conservation strategy which it prepared for the Nature Conservancy Council (Urban Wildlife Unit 1983). During the 1980s similar policies were adopted in Birmingham, London, Bristol, Leicester, and Sheffield and by organizations such as both the Birmingham Urban Wildlife Group and Operation Groundwork in St. Helens. A set of guiding principles (Landlife and Urban Wildlife Partnership 2000) designed to encourage
good practice on sites of little value to wildlife, emphasized the importance of carrying out survey work, as the ecological value of a site may not be immediately apparent. For example, areas of little botanical interest or derelict appearance may be very important for local insect populations.

By 2000, accelerating ecological losses and the threat of climate change highlighted the importance of reversing these trends through action-based programs of habitat creation as well as conserving historic biodiversity. The evolution of the new habitats would allow species distributions to change. Although not accepted by all, creative conservation has become increasingly valued by the urban communities it has helped.

**Taking the opportunity**

Creative conservation applies good scientific methodology and lateral thinking to yield elegant solutions for a conservation benefit. Nature is about opportunity, so ecological theory linking species diversity to different environmental stresses and disturbances (Grime 1979) can be applied creatively. This means inert wastes that are low in nutrients and high pH can be used to promote good biodiversity by sowing seeds of the appropriate mix of species. Using such inert wastes, establishes a virtuous circle in the locality, recycling discarded materials into a landscape asset. This saves transport of waste materials away from sites, and avoids the importation of costly topsoil with its associated problematic weed seeds. Although these richer soils produce greater biomass productivity, such high nutrient conditions favor domination by a few grass species, unless they are checked by management or disturbance. Thus, on these nutrient poor substrates, wildflower seed mixtures, without grasses, are shallow sown at low rates. The grasses will colonize the area over time, once the wildflowers have become established.

Practical examples on the ground (Table 55.1) illustrate the diverse nature of creative conservation. Sites on colliery spoil, wastes, and urban landfill (Figure 55.1) have all demonstrated the benefits of wildflower establishment. Specific UK examples of successful biodiversity creation include the Olympic Park in east London and a site of special scientific interest on a former landfill in Shropshire (Table 55.1). All these creative conservation projects involve an imaginative engagement with the site and with the people who live nearby. Such sites do not have fixed outcomes and are designed to inspire people, perhaps to replicate the process for themselves and their own community. The National Wildflower Centre also catalyzed work in China with Chinese native species released from the Kunming Botanic Institute and collaborated with groups in Nantes, France and Warsaw, Poland (Table 55.2).

**Green roofs: a special case of creative conservation**

One special type of site for creative conservation is the green roof, which involves creating a complete habitat from the substrate to the plants. Interest in this technique in the UK grew from advocate Dusty Gedge of the London Biodiversity Partnership, working initially on conserving the black redstart using brown roofs and brick rubble (Frith and Gedge 2000). This work culminated in the formation of Livingroofs.org, the UK’s first independent green roof organization which has since worked in other UK cities such as Manchester, Bristol, and Birmingham. Many groups have now come together to form the European Federation of Green Roofs, which is influencing the green infrastructure debate.

The way these ideas are permeating architectural green infrastructure planning internationally was shown in 2018 at the Festival of Urban Landscapes at Hilltop Gardens in Essex, UK where creative ecology advocates discussed the use of creative urban substrates such as ceramic
waste, and other inert demolition wastes which are now making major contributions to practical and sustainable biodiversity. There was much enthusiasm for linking the vertical forests (the Bosco vertical) in Milan by Laura Gatti (2015) to international green roof advocacy and the greening debate.

**Developing new techniques of revegetation**

*Hay strewing:* After 1960, debate in the Netherlands about naturalistic planting in parks and on land no longer used for agriculture saw the development of new ideas about allowing any type of plant to grow and letting things evolve. Louis Le Roy saw the possibility of nature invading housing areas, in a vision of what are now termed biophilic cities (Chapter 7) (Woudstra 2004). This laid the foundations for new ways of introducing species on to prepared bare soil. One such technique was hay strewing that was later applied in Wolverhampton (Table 55.3).

*Soil inversion:* One initiative to expose low nutrient soils to possible wildflower colonization saw Landlife pioneer a soil inversion technique in peri-urban areas. This simple intervention turns a meter of soil upside down, burying the nutrients and weeds, and bringing low fertility subsoil to the surface. Best suited to lowland agricultural soils, the technique has been applied across the UK with 17 partners to create a variety of new habitats at a landscape scale (Luscombe et al. 2008). It was cited in the UK’s response to the *Global Plant Strategy* as a means of addressing eutrophication.

By 2018, many of these UK sites, including Alvanley in Cheshire, Hedley Hall in Gateshead, Londonthorpe and Prees Heath in Shropshire had all become extraordinarily diverse (Table 55.3), while similar work at Huyton, Merseyside had helped in the conservation of the Marsh Fritillary Butterfly (*Euphydryas aurinia*). In Huyton, the topsoil was stripped off and sold to fund the project. Eight years after it was sown with 16 wildflower species, Landlife recorded...
64 new species resulting from natural colonization. Grassland specialists thought the site resembled MG5/MG6 grassland (Rodwell 1992). This process may introduce species new to the area, a process well documented on post-industrial land. In nearby St. Helens, for example, glass waste supports maritime communities despite being 20 km from the coast.

Table 55.1 Sites and substrates used for creative conservation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of site/ process</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colliery spoil</td>
<td>Collier’s Moss (formerly Bold Moss Colliery, St Helens, Merseyside, UK)</td>
<td>Working with the existing substrates and local demolition materials, the Groundwork Trust created a mosaic of natural colonization and introductions. The woodland creation was notable for the successful spread of bluebell and primrose populations introduced from seed.</td>
<td>St. Helens Groundwork Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wastes</td>
<td>Liverpool UK</td>
<td>Using theories of ecological stress, freshly exposed, low productivity substrates sown with wildflower seeds demonstrated that sustainable landscapes, rich in biodiversity could be created. They might have lower biomass production than grassed over areas. Substrate materials tested include crushed concrete, brick rubble, shell sand, cockleshells, quarry wastes, and recycled clothing waste.</td>
<td>Landlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reclaimed industrial land</td>
<td>Olympic Park, Stratford, London</td>
<td>The creation of species rich ecological landscapes created much new interest in urban ecology among both the general public and planning and landscape professionals.</td>
<td>The Olympic Delivery Authority and LDA Design Consulting Limited</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brownfields for carbon capture</td>
<td>Newcastle, UK</td>
<td>Use of less than 12,000 ha of brownfield areas as carbon capture meadows could remove 1 million tonnes of CO₂ from the atmosphere each year.</td>
<td>Newcastle University SUCCESS project</td>
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<td>Urban landfill</td>
<td>Pickerings Pasture, Widnes, Halton, Cheshire UK</td>
<td>A former industrial and household waste tip, the site, one of the first wildflower sowing projects on an industrial location, comprises distinct spring and summer meadow areas, and is notable for displays of introduced cowslips, which have naturalized across the site.</td>
<td>Halton Borough Council</td>
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### Creative conservation

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Roads</td>
<td>Urban highways</td>
<td>The use of wildflower seed mixtures along transport corridors, rather than implementing stand-alone engineering or topsoil solution, has been widely adopted on roads leading into cities, saving topsoil resources and working with underlying subsoils to reflect the distinctive geology of the regions concerned.</td>
<td>UK Department of Transport; Highways Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing estates</td>
<td>Clapton Park Estate, Hackney, London UK</td>
<td>Replacing former herbicide zones around fence lines and school boundaries with flower borders using a selection of annual and perennial wildflower species was part of a public land management scheme with strong social aims and outcomes that was awarded a Silver Gilt medal at the 2007 Chelsea Flower Show.</td>
<td>Grass Roof Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Green Roofs</td>
<td>Laban Dance Centre, Deptford, London, UK</td>
<td>Establishment of three mosaic habitats on new roof spaces included a sedum mat to give instant green cover, shingle areas for invertebrates and calcareous grassland to provide structured vegetation to encourage use by black redstarts in response to the London Biodiversity Action Plan (Frith and Gedge 2000; Grant 2006).</td>
<td>London Biodiversity Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wetlands</td>
<td>Barnes, London</td>
<td>42 ha site comprises areas of standing open water, grazing marsh and reed bed created on the site of artificial reservoir basins constructed in 1886, which became redundant in 1989. By allowing development on 25% of the site, US$14.3 million was raised to create one of the best wildlife habitats in the country, attracting more than 150 different bird species, 20 dragonfly and damselfly, six bat and over 300 butterfly and moth species each year (Trzyna 2014).</td>
<td>Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust</td>
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</table>
Special purpose habitats; targeting invertebrates, especially pollinators

Using creative conservation to provide habitats for invertebrates has had special attention from UK charities, such as Buglife (The Invertebrate Conservation Trust: www.buglife.org.uk/), and projects like ‘urban buzz’ aimed at pollinators. In gardens with a long tradition of ‘wild gardening’, such as Great Dixter near Rye, Sussex, UK, biodiversity audits have found large numbers of species and high abundance of invertebrates results that surprised ecologists. Thus

**Table 55.2** Examples of the benefits of urban wildflower planting from countries other than the UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Nantes</td>
<td>With 1,050 ha of public greenspace, including 180 ha of protected natural area, the city combines exceptional cultural investment with a strong green philosophy aiming at a long-term impact. It has a Natura 2000 zone, Petite-Amazonie, a neglected 18 ha of marshy floodplain land that has naturally acquired high plant and animal biodiversity, located in the city center.</td>
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<td>Poland</td>
<td>Warsaw</td>
<td>The Laka group established over 40 urban meadows across Warsaw along unique Natura 2000 floodplain grasslands using Wildflowers Work (Luscombe and Scott 2004) as a key text for practical action. This work is being extended into Krakow and Gdansk.</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Kunming</td>
<td>Wildflower work with the Kunming Botanical Garden.</td>
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**Table 55.3** Applications of the techniques and processes of creative conservation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of process</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hay strewing</td>
<td>Wolverhampton, West Midlands, UK</td>
<td>Establishing a series of meadows utilizing green hay strewing techniques from nature reserves outside the borough. The hay, spread over prepared bare soil, resulted in a patchwork of meadows.</td>
<td>University of Wolverhampton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soil inversion</td>
<td>Prees Heath, Shropshire, UK</td>
<td>What was a potato field now has dense heather, and exploding populations of silver-studded blue butterflies Plebejus argentus and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (Natural England 2014).</td>
<td>Landlife and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil inversion</td>
<td>Huyton, Merseyside, UK</td>
<td>Just 10 g of devil’s bit scabious (Succisa pratensis) seed introduced onto a two hectare subsoil site in Huyton’s outer estates, resulted in over half the area being covered in the plant ten years later. The significance of this scheme relates to the Marsh Fritillary Butterfly (Euphydryas aurinia) whose larvae feed on this species.</td>
<td>Landlife</td>
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efforts to create new wildflower habitats are one response to the widespread concern about the decline in bees and pollinators and its influence on biodiversity loss.

Urban greenspace strategies should recognize that sown wildflowers and background weed species are important for pollinators (Hicks et al. 2016). Successful projects like the ‘Northern Flowerhouse’ in Liverpool and Manchester (Figure 55.2) have delighted local communities, created greater awareness and drawn pleasing reactions from passing motorists (Table 55.4). All pollinators, not just the honey bee, are important, with both native and non-native contributions to urban biodiversity being significant. Such wildflower planting has also contributed to the debate about native plants in urban landscapes in terms of wider ecological planting philosophy (see Chapter 78).

**Wider benefits of urban habitat creation**

UN-Habitat’s New Urban Agenda (2016) and many other international recommendations (see Chapter 65) highlight these benefits of urban habitat creation. In the UK, the government department dealing with the environment (Defra) chose Manchester, with its wildflower work, as part of its Urban Pioneer program that promotes and evaluates the interaction between communities and green infrastructure in great detail (Defra et al. 2017; see also Chapter 9).

Creative conservation has wide benefits in terms of mitigating climate change as the Newcastle idea of creating wildflower meadows on 12,000 ha of brownfield sites to maximize calcite formation...
and thereby remove 1 million tonnes of CO₂ from the atmosphere each year demonstrates (Table 55.1). The UK has 1.7 million ha of urban land. If 700,000 ha of this were managed proactively it would meet 10 percent of the UK’s annual CO₂ reduction target (Nilon et al. 2017).

**Rewilding and creative conservation**

A new energy is connected to ‘rewilding’ which is about letting nature take care of itself, enabling natural processes to shape land and sea, repair damaged ecosystems, and restore degraded landscapes. There is no defined end point for rewilding. It therefore has affinities with creative conservation. In January 2019 the Cambridge Conservation forum conference ‘Rewilding and its effect on nature and people’ cited examples like Knepp in West Sussex, as documented by Isabella Tree (2018). Three of Europe’s best known rewilding sites are located in densely populated areas: the Oostvaardersplassen Reserve in the Netherlands; the Brandenburg Wilderness (12,000 ha) located on old military training grounds outside Berlin;

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**Table 55.4 New habitats for invertebrates**

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<th>Target insects</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Invertebrate</strong></td>
<td>Sheffield, South Yorkshire, UK</td>
<td>Applied ecology and landscape design combined with studies of garden wildlife and greenspace management championed broad notions of ecological value including the use of non-native species for aesthetic and invertebrate purposes. This work shattered many conservation garden myths by applying scientific method to what insects really find attractive.</td>
<td>Sheffield University and Sheffield City Wildlife Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pollinators</strong></td>
<td>English cities e.g. Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Ipswich, Leeds, Plymouth and York</td>
<td>The importance of sown wildflowers and the significance of background weed species for pollinators (Hicks et al. 2016) has led to many urban wildflower sowing projects in England.</td>
<td>Buglife; Newcastle City Council, Forest Research UK; Nottingham Wildlife Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pollinators</strong></td>
<td>England and Wales</td>
<td>A project using innovative techniques to create 840 ‘Buzzing Hotspots’ in England and Wales for declining pollinators. By transforming mown and unused areas of land, more than 210 ha of rich and vibrant habitat are being created.</td>
<td>Buglife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pollinators</strong></td>
<td>Liverpool and Manchester, UK</td>
<td>The National Grow Wild Programme from Kew Gardens dedicated significant National Lottery funds to wildflower sowing projects (2014–2018), including The Tale of Two Cities England Wildflower Project between Liverpool and Manchester which has evolved into the ‘Northern Flowerhouse’</td>
<td>Kew Gardens; National Lottery</td>
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and Millingenwaard (350 ha) created on agricultural land between the winter dike and the River Waal near Nijmegen. In the UK, 800 ha of a former coal-mining area outside Leeds (Jepson 2016); a 400 ha aggregate quarry near Birmingham; and a former chalk quarry at Chinnor, Oxfordshire (Figure 55.3) have been restored as nature reserves. All three could have been candidates for experimental rewilding sites. If this peri-urban rewilding exists, a case can be made for linking its ideas to the twentieth-century urban ecology experience, dating back to Jacobus P. Thijsse (1926) who aroused interest in using wildflowers in landscaped parks in the Netherlands in the 1920s, Sukopp (1976) who encouraged letting nature take over derelict industrial areas in Berlin the 1970s (see Chapter 3), or Oliver Gilbert (1989) who directed attention to urban habitats in Sheffield in the 1980s.

Rewilding energies could help break down urban–rural divides by using creative conservation with its people and cultural perspectives to safeguard and improve urban environments and wildlife. One way of assisting this process would be to use development biodiversity gain levies to enhance the benefits to urban communities from having accessible wild nature in new suburban and inner city housing areas.

**Time for change**

It is not the strongest of species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.

*Anon. (1997)*

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*Figure 55.3 Chinnor chalk pit
Source: Photo by Ian Douglas*
Why is creative conservation important? Both because the climate is changing, and in a wider context, because it is vital to the way people think and act in the world. Creative conservation provides a flexible framework that can respond to change and adapt to the inbuilt chaos of natural systems.

Natural England’s *State of the Natural Environment* report (2008) concluded that England’s natural environment is much less rich than it was 50 years ago, particularly outside protected sites. The *New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora* (Preston et al. 2002) analyzed nine million records over 40 years; one of the conclusions was that plants are as mobile as birds and butterflies! Species introduced in ancient times and plants with a northerly distribution had decreased in frequency, while species introduced since 1500 CE and those with a Mediterranean or widespread distribution had increased. Such changes suggest that habitats are moving northwards at the rate of 50 to 80 kilometers per decade (DETR 1998). In the face of climate change, nature conservation in Britain will have to adapt particularly through creative conservation techniques including building wildlife corridors through urban areas.

Warmer winters may partly explain the increase in frequency of Mediterranean species in the south of England. More changes will occur, London by 2071 being likely to have a climate similar to that of northern Portugal today (Kopf et al. 2007), with summer rainfall decreasing by 50–60 percent and winter rain increasing by 20–30 percent (Defra 2002). This climate shift and associated extreme events make it difficult to sustain existing fragmented habitats. Creative conservation interventions will be needed to create wildlife corridors that enable species to move through both urban and rural landscapes as they migrate to cope with climate change.

**How common is common**

Creative conservation is focused on using common core species of native origin that occur widely across the country. It is an opportunity to put back simple habitats suited to soil type, for people to enjoy: the buttercup meadow, the poppy field, and the cowslip bank. However, such wildflower spectacles are less common than they are supposed to be. Few have seen them. Fewer are there to be seen. One of Plantlife’s *Common Plants Surveys* (Plant Talk 2010) found that 121 out of 524 sites contained none of the 65 common or familiar wildflower plant species. Often the ranges of these species have been declining the most rapidly. This means that the priorities for conserving Britain’s wildflowers in future will have to be re-focused, with more concern for commonplace plants.

Introduced wildflower species can change in less than a decade through adaptive variation, resulting in local characteristics that reflect the dynamic nature of natural processes (Silvertown et al. 2006). This can be expected on new creative conservation habitats, as nature works to obliterate evidence of human actions.

Introductions of small numbers of common wild plants in urban areas have evolved to resemble natural plant communities, delivering Biodiversity Action Plans that benefit wildlife. In time, future generations may well view such places as natural as the countryside. Working from an understanding of simple starting points, such living seed banks have, as in the Ascension Islands, created the ‘accidental rainforest’ (Pearce 2004). This also would apply to creative conservation approaches aiming to sustain future landscapes, whether urban or rural.

**Start points not end points**

Creative conservation provides a start point by preparing the ground and sowing seeds. It allows the plants to develop and evolve naturally. Other UK attempts to improve sites for
Creative conservation

nature have often used the National Vegetation Classification to identify end-point target habitats and specify seed mixes, but the result is often a substantial area of grass. As nature is always in a state of flux, practitioners should perhaps be more concerned with creating the right foundations to enable a site to reach its full potential, rather than predetermining a desired end point.

Creative conservation techniques reduce timescales involved and can lead to lasting diversity. It is not just about survival of the fittest; it is also survival of the luckiest (Baker 2002). By incorporating an element of chance and disturbance into the system, nature periodically deals the opportunist a stronger hand.

Environmental justice

Creative conservation, as practiced in northwest England has helped to meet the most urgent environmental needs of people who have a poor quality of life, and live in depressing environments – close to polluted brooks, bland parks filled with litter and green deserts of rarely mown grass. The highly favorable reactions of some people are shown by the way two-thirds of social housing residents in Kirkby, Merseyside, tower blocks went out more often as a result of a wildflower meadow created on what had been mown grass (Cube Space 2006) (Figure 55.4; Table 55.5). Similar comments were made by people about projects in similar northwest England residential areas of Everton, Liverpool and Hulme, Manchester (Table 55.5). Local health specialists have confirmed the benefits gained from the increased

Figure 55.4  Cornfield annuals in Kirkby

Source: Photo by Richard Scott
outdoor activity, emphasizing that the natural environment is our natural health service
and contributes to improved health outcomes (Dawe and Millward 2008) (see Chapters 47
and 48).

Among inner city audiences there is a hunger to see wildflowers. The early wildflower
projects in Kirby and other parts of Merseyside and Greater Manchester transformed areas
of mown grass and derelict sites into visually stunning displays (Figure 55.4). They also
were the catalyst for new residents’ groups through activities that included painting events,
buttonhole days, aromatherapy and massage sessions, brass bands, kite flying, tai chi, storytelling, and teddy bears’ picnics. In some respects, this makes creative conservation activity
part of a new urbanist approach linked to sustainable development, common ownership,
and the arts.

Ecological science and the arts have to work together if projects are to be noticed by the
public. Landlife’s influential Tale of Two Cities project across Liverpool and Manchester won
the National Lottery ‘England Wildflower Flagship’ by a public vote. It showed a daring link
between creative conservation and set standards for a new kind of cultural ecology. It combined
environmental and social justice; linked them to arts, music, and creative language to promote

Table 55.5 Examples of the perceptions of inhabitants about urban wildflower plantings

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kirby, Merseyside, UK</td>
<td>Two thirds of respondents in Kirkby tower blocks went out more often as a result of a wildflower meadow created in the vicinity: The Kirkby Times (2008) reported: ‘Of all the changes in Northwood, Kirkby, the wildflowers in the woods were perhaps the most eye-turning of all changes. The wildlife, and the people, made a return to the woods, with the wildflowers being a focal point, and a talking point.’</td>
<td>Landlife</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hulme, Manchester, UK</td>
<td>A subway which people found intimidating and rushed through became a different place when sown by the local people, as described by local resident Robert Docherty in 2016: ‘I’ve been using the underpass for years and I’ve never felt particularly secure when doing so. With the wildflower planting, that feeling has changed. It just seems so much nicer walking under the Mancunian Way with all that color and it feels more secure, more cared for and more like a usable public space.’</td>
<td>Landlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everton, Liverpool, Merseyside, UK</td>
<td>Ken Rogers describes the impact of wildflowers in marking and celebrating the demolished street, in a area of mass demolition and community upheaval in the 1970s: ‘It was a wonderful thing to see people coming back in their droves to remember the way it was while being inspired by the wildflower street corridors that represented Everton’s ongoing regeneration. A former English Civil War site, one of Liverpool’s original villages and the birthplace of big time football on Merseyside, Everton Park can tell many stories, but last summer’s wildflower extravaganza (2015) has now become integral to that folklore.’ The Author of Moth Snowstorm Michael McCarthy (2016) walked in the Everton Park common land of colorful wildflowers, and heard poetry and music proclaimed by the local community and declared it a truly inspirational experience.</td>
<td>Landlife</td>
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the joyful landscapes as a signal to what is possible; but remained acutely aware of the need to make these natural greenspaces accessible.

**Accessible nature**

New creative conservation projects should be seen as part of accessible urban nature and contribute towards meeting national minimum standards for the provision of natural greenspace (Harrison et al. 1995; Chapters 9 and 70). Unlike many nature reserves (such as the Woolston Eyes Nature Reserve in northwest England discussed in Chapter 25) which are totally or partly closed to the public, urban creative conservation sites should be freely accessible (Figure 55.5). To achieve this, new sites will need to be created in consultation with local communities, through the types of participatory activities described in Chapter 53.

Every child is a nature lover and teachers have cited language development as the greatest single benefit resulting from exposure to nature. So fundamental is contact with nature that many UK primary schools have their own nature tables or even wildlife ponds in the school grounds. Denmark goes further, engaging children in nature exploration prior to school admission. Routes to learning using creative conservation sites in the UK were led by William Curtis Ecological Park in London and the National Wildflower Centre located in a Merseyside public park. Further educational opportunities arise to combine teaching maths and physics using phenomena such as the Fibonacci sequence and Brownian motion, scientific concepts that can be readily demonstrated using wildflowers.

Figure 55.5  New meadows: making townships handsome again

Source: Photo by Richard Scott
Liberty in the system

Joan Ruddock MP, the then UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Environment acknowledged in 2008 that some habitats could be restored, but was less optimistic about reversing historic biodiversity loss, arguing that the clock could not be turned back, in any comprehensive sense (Ruddock 2008). Halting biodiversity loss should not be an end point for biodiversity conservation. New patterns of biodiversity should be allowed to evolve into the future. Urban-based creative conservation provides a testing ground for such future biodiversity evolution. Even though it has long been argued that rigid rules for what habitats should be created where should not be set (Holdgate 2003), in the UK, Biodiversity Action Plans and the rigid adherence to the National Vegetation Classification by many urban-based ecologists are working against this. Policy developments and action programs in the UK since 1950 have failed to stem the alarming loss of all major habitat types. Nonetheless, urban creative conservation activists are delivering a new vision and innovative approaches that deliver biodiversity gains.

In a biodiversity policy review, Paisley and Swingland (2007: 19) wrote: ‘Projects like Landlife, the Eden Project and a host of other creative conservation and rewilding initiatives are achieving great things. These initiatives are pursuing the Scottish notion of environmental justice: the access of all people to nature and the need to strengthen and celebrate the links between wildlife and local communities. Such projects should have full UK government support.’ When challenged about whether the target should be creating historic or new habitats in the face of climate change, John Rodwell, architect of the National Vegetation Classification, stated that what was needed, was ‘some liberty in the system’ (Rodwell 2002). Thirteen years later his keynote address at the Society for Ecological Restoration’s 2015 World Ecological Restoration Conference was entitled the ‘Tyranny of Typologies’, and he spoke of the need for creative and joyful approaches and cited Landlife’s work as important in this regard.

Sadly, after 41 years of highly successful creative conservation, in 2016, Landlife’s National Wildflower Centre closed its doors after it ceased to receive further funding. Because of its long record, a fellow Millennium Project cousin, The Eden Project, protected this legacy, and in 2017 gave it a new home to continue the work. This marks a new step in linking transformative futures, demonstrated by the restoration of the once bleak China Clay waste of the Eden Project itself, and many spaces nationally with a wildflower intent, to challenge notions of what green infrastructure can be, and make sure it is full of life and color and connects to people and place in equal measure. Placing the notion of a ‘Northern Flowerhouse’ against that of a Northern Powerhouse of economic thinking alone makes people smile. The work of the National Wildflower Centre continues in a new joyous frame to carry this legacy in a new form, linking the rural to the urban, in the continuum of nature that knows no boundaries, and needs to be given more than half a chance. The lesson is that so many creative techniques have been born out of urban ecological approaches and have had an independence and a ‘beg to differ’ attitude, to traditional approaches to conservation, these are now transferable across the board, to really make a difference in connecting people and nature, in a real land ethic for the future.

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Grant Luscombe and Richard Scott


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