

'Extensify agriculture to save farmland birds'

Biodiversity is in in the Netherlands. The conference Driving Force of Life in the WICC last Friday was the first in what is turning into a series of meetings on the question how to preserve and improve diversity in plant and animal life. The key question was how to maintain the plants and animals that live on farmland. The question is timely as the economic significance of agriculture is declining.

The biodiversity of farmlands is dramatically low. Dr Dan Chamberlain of the British Trust for Ornithology described at the conference how the vast majority of the farmland bird population in the UK has been plummeting since the 1970s. The number of tree sparrows has declined by 84 percent in the last 25 years and the corn crake has become nearly extinct. In the last decade the situation seems to have stabilised.

The main reason for this decline, Chamberlain pointed out, is the intensification of the agriculture in the U.K.. There are an increasing number of predators that live on birds, like the fox, the magpie, the carrion crow and the sparrowhawk, but the growing area of oilseed, winter cereal and silage products, and the increasing use of nitrogen and herbicides have more impact.

Chamberlain researched the problems for the skylark and the lapwing. The most common cereal grown in the UK is now winter cereal. Unlike spring cereal this crop is taller than thirty centimetres during the breeding season. The skylark and the lapwing



The tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*) is a protected species in the UK. This bird has undergone the greatest decline of all the common bird species in Britain. | PHOTO ANDREW HAY/JNCC

need vegetation shorter than thirty centimetres for their nests.

The answer to the dramatic impoverishment of nature on farmland is simple for Chamberlain: 'extensify!'. Professor William Sutherland of the University of East Anglia mentioned the potential threats from GM crops which will be herbicide resistant, but he also pointed out that agriculture is declining in economic importance in the UK. Production yields around £6.6 billion, but the sector receives £2.4 billion in subsidies and costs another £2.4 billion in secondary costs

such as for drinking water purification. The foot and mouth crisis last year in the UK cast another light on the economy of the countryside. The crisis led to losses of between £6 and £8.4 billion pounds, but the sector which suffered most was not agriculture, but the tourist industry.

Instead of spreading subsidies for agricultural nature management thinly among all farmers, Sutherland argued, it would be better to focus the money on specific areas which are worth the effort of saving. This will cost a fraction of the current agricultural subsidies.

"Recreating 16,000 hectares of habitats by 2020 will cost 3.3 billion euros annually in the UK. That is less than one percent of the current agricultural subsidies." | **M.W.**