

Plumpton and East Chiltington Wildlife Group

'Back in the good old days....'

How accurately do we remember the past?

While we might remember big personal events, wars or even Covid-19, it's sometimes a little harder to notice gradual changes, not only in the way people, places and things look, but also in the general environment around us. CS Lewis said "Isn't it funny how day by day nothing changes, but when you look back, everything is different". This is really important when we look at the environment.

For example, can you recall how the number of garden birds has changed since you were growing up? Another example springs to mind –as a child, going to the West Country on holiday Dad would have to stop, two or three times, to clean the windscreen of dead insects. Children making the same journey today, would only know clean windscreens all the way down! In fact, a recent UN report, indicated that the number of insects has plummeted by between 9% and 25% per decade!

When biological change goes unnoticed, this may lead to 'shifting baseline syndrome' (SBS), a phenomenon based in psychology where we forget past conditions and believe current conditions are completely normal. Over several generations of environmental decline, a significant amount of change might occur without us realising, and we might not see the need restore it. This can potentially reduce support for conservation and lead to the setting of less ambitious targets.

To put it in its simplest terms, shifting baseline syndrome is basically the way in which humans, and every generation, lowers its standards over the course of time. These generations are not lowering their standards on purpose, or because they have any negative goal, but simply because they don't know any better. It all occurs underneath the surface level, with most completely unaware of what's happening. Expectations are lowered almost subconsciously, and so the damage to the environment keeps occurring on a broader and broader scale, as damage occurs so slowly that no one even sees it, unless they were to step back and look at things over the course of multiple generations.

There is evidence to suggest that younger people are less aware of past ecological conditions and that younger people are also less likely to prioritise conservation of species in decline. This points towards an interesting contradiction, that while younger people are increasingly emerging as pro-environmental and climate change advocates around the world, (many influenced by the Greta Thunberg phenomenon), younger people may be less able to perceive long-term ecological change. In order to prevent ongoing impacts of SBS, it is becoming clear that there is an urgent need to encourage more frequent experiences of nature, bridge the communication gap between generations and encourage the sharing of rich stories about the past...or *'Back in the good old days!'*

Carole Nicholson