

Are we really blind to plants?



“There, look!” I said and pointed towards the rare orchid that I had spotted in woodland on the farm that my brother manages. The creamy-white flowers of the White Helleborine stood out clearly against the gloomy understorey but my brother couldn’t see them. Or rather, he could, but didn’t for one minute consider that they were the source of my excitement. My brother’s failure to ‘see’ the orchids is an example of “plant blindness”. The idea that we perceive plants as less important than other life forms was mentioned in last month’s column and I thought I would explore it further.

The human brain works by detecting differences. Plants barely move, grow close together and are similar in colour so we see them as a non-threatening “green wall” that we can safely ignore and quickly move on from. Visual memory tests have shown that we are less able to recall plants amongst a rapid sequence of images. This innate visibility bias is then re-inforced by our animal-centric education and training, from mini beasts and bug hunts at nursery to limited plant content in biology courses at university. On a geological time-scale we are taught about, and remember, dinosaurs and woolly mammoths rather than ferns, cycads and other primitive plants.

Why do conservation charities use charismatic animals such as tigers, elephants and pandas in their fundraising efforts? It is hard to imagine WWF ever replacing their well-known panda logo with that of an endangered plant species. Even our own Wildlife Group has a buzzard as a logo! It is easier to feel an emotional connection with, and a desire to conserve, another sentient being. Carl Linnaeus, the “father of modern taxonomy”, who introduced the formal system of scientific names for all biological organisms, believed that plants, unlike humans and other animals, did not move, or feel or sense their environment. But now we know that plants do move – albeit on a much slower time scale to animals – and do feel and sense their environment, perhaps we can start to appreciate that they are not a lesser or inferior life form. In fact, it would be better if we cared about, and understood the need to conserve, whole ecosystems rather than individual species of animals or plants, no matter how cuddly or attractive they may be. Sandy Knapp, a botanist at the Natural History Museum, argues that it is not so much plant blindness that is the problem, but human disregard for any living organism that doesn’t have eyes and a backbone like ourselves.

Another element of “plant blindness” is the failure to recognise the importance of plants in our lives. Children growing up in increasingly urbanised societies do not have any experience of growing or harvesting plants for food. School gardens can help to overcome this but we still need to make the link to the global food system, and educate our kids about industrial agriculture and the alternatives. More rural communities, and those in which human-plant links are stronger, may be less plant blind. Increasing awareness of the benefits of nature connection, and of green spaces in our cities, holds out hope that we may begin to correct, if not cure, plant blindness.

Interestingly, there was little indication of plant blindness in the entries submitted to our photo competition last year. Of the 63 images, 18 were of plants, 17 of birds, 20 of insects, 3 of other animals and 5 of habitats/landscapes (see below for details of this year’s photo competition).

Photo competition

Lockdown gave many of us more time to observe our local wildlife, with an increase in sightings submitted to the Wildlife Facebook group. Have you taken any photos any photos of birds, butterflies, bluebells, big trees, bugs or other wildlife that you are particularly proud of? Why not enter them in the Wildlife Group 2020 photo competition. Photos must have been taken within the parishes of Plumpton or East Chiltington. You may enter up to three images. The winning entry will be announced at our virtual AGM on Nov 9th. Email your photos to plumptonwildlifephotos@gmail.com by 31st October 2020. Browse last year’s entries here:

<https://plumptonwildlifegroup.weebly.com/photo-competition-2019.html>

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