

## Earley Environmental Group

### Chairman's report to AGM 2008

Well, it's been quite some year on the environmental front, both internationally and locally! Just a day or two after we held our last AGM at this time last year was the G8 conference in Davos, at which climate change was a major agenda item, concluding with the rather depressing news that the nations had failed to come to a consensus on controlling CO2 emissions, both India and China refusing to slow down their economic growth and/or scrap plans to build some 500 new coal-fired powered stations over the next two years unless they saw leadership from the rest of the world. Little chance of that happening, we probably thought, especially from the USA's current administration, yet something must have had an effect as it was only a short time later that President Bush announced that the USA would now commit to reducing petrol, sorry, gasoline, usage by 20% by 2017. So it wasn't all completely negative.

Fast forward to the start of December and the news is more positive, or at least less negative. All 187 nations at the United Nations summit meeting in Bali have agreed a deal on curbing climate change after days of bitter wrangling. Agreement was reached after an apparent U-turn from the USA, surely a great step forward. The agreement is to institute a 2-year process of negotiation designed to agree a new set of emission targets to replace those in the Kyoto Protocol.

The whole process may seem painfully slow and for every 2 steps forward there will undoubtedly be 1 step back. But the important thing surely is that at long last the state of our precious world environment is being taken increasingly seriously, and the realisation is finally dawning that if we don't take care of it then Mother Nature will do it for us, and the consequences will be very unpleasant indeed for us. A possible example of this was brought home to us right here in Berkshire when so many folk were washed out of their homes by the terrible floods brought on by the torrential rains in July, and are still feeling the consequences. Although it's impossible to prove, the scientific consensus suggests that this could well be a foretaste of what's in store for us if we simply sit back and do nothing to prevent the wholesale and ill-considered exploitation of the natural environment.

It's easy to get despondent and to think that despite all our best intentions and efforts we here in Earley can have no effect on world affairs and that what will be, will be. I would contend that that is emphatically not the case! It's all about informed persuasion. Someone, somewhere, not necessarily a scientific "megabrain", must have said something to President Bush to make him change his mind over petrol, sorry gasoline consumption reduction targets – for all I know it might have been one of you sitting here this evening!

To that end, in our small corner here in Earley, one of the stated objectives in the Constitution of the Earley Environmental Group is "To promote education and interest in natural history, the environment and the activities of the group". I think we can look back over the past year and modestly claim to have gone some way to achieving this worthy objective. We started off in February by holding a nestbox making session here in the Interpretation centre, which was attended by a dozen or so

youngsters, and great fun it was, despite the nestbox-maker-in-chief having to cry off at the very last minute and which probably nearly gave Anne (Booth) apoplexy when she had to ring around half of Berkshire and Oxfordshire to find a replacement! But despite the problems it was an immense success and a great opportunity to sow the seeds of interest in the natural environment in our local youngsters.

Then in March, members took part in a local litter pickup, as part of the large RESCUE event run by Reading Borough Council, and over the day collected a whopping 68 sacks of rubbish! We have to thank Jean Hackett and her husband Brian for organising this, the importance of which can't be overstated – not only is the local area so much more pleasant as a result, but “ordinary” (please don't be offended!) local people, such as your good selves, are actually seen by the rest of the community to be doing their bit for the environment and I'm sure that has a great deal more effect than any amount of talking.

In April we were treated to an excellent talk by Des Sussex on dragonflies, complete with superb photographs. I thought I knew a bit about dragonflies until I heard Des' talk – he could identify even the nymphs almost at a glance, something I wouldn't have thought possible. However Des clearly wasn't satisfied, and liked us so much that he came back in October and gave us another excellent illustrated talk on a quite different subject “Farming and wildlife”. This was very close to the hearts of those who have lived in Earley since its rural days and was a fascinating and knowledgeable insight into how good farming practice can actually increase the diversity of wildlife.

Caring for the environment is a fine example of where professional scientists and amateur volunteer enthusiasts can, and do, work for the common good and we were indeed fortunate in September to have as our speaker Michael Keith-Lucas, an environmental scientist from Reading University who explained clearly and lucidly the scientific basis and evidence for climate change, both man-made and natural causes, and its effects, both current and predicted, on wildlife. I think we all felt so much better informed after his talk, very important when trying to get the conservation message across.

The eagerly-awaited talk on birds, “Now you see them, now you don't” sadly but understandably had to be cancelled at very short notice because the Speaker Ray Reedman's mother was taken very seriously ill. However we were extremely fortunate in that at just a couple of days' notice a member of the Wokingham Literary Society, Marie Fry and her friend Ray gave us a memorable and highly unusual illustrated talk on “Birds in Literature”, starting aeons ago with the Raven and the Dove on Noah's Ark in chapter 6 of Genesis (we never did know what happened to the raven!), then on to birds in Egyptian hieroglyphics; later came the earliest known song that we all know was written in Reading Abbey “Sumer is icumin in, loud now sing cuckoo”, through Shakespeare and so on to the present day, fascinating. And again we owe a debt of gratitude to Sheila Crowson for bringing that talk to us under very difficult circumstances.

You'll be pleased to know that we have a full programme of events planned for the coming year, including some talks by very highly-respected speakers. They really are worth listening to so please make every effort to attend and bring your friends!

The Wednesday volunteer group continues with its practical work, doing its bit to improve the local environment. Sensibly, this is done in conjunction with Earley Town Council under the direction of Grahame Hawker – we are so fortunate to have someone with such great practical knowledge combined with apparently boundless enthusiasm. There have been many and varied tasks this year but probably the most noticeable, and the one that has probably provoked the most comment, was the planting of the new hedge of native shrubs along Lakeside. The planting of, this by sheer bad luck, coincided with the one hot dry spell we had during the year and conditions could hardly have been worse for planting young shrubs but it had to be done or the newly-purchased plants would have died. So the group sent out an SOS for assistance to all the members of EEG, roped in a resident or two from Lakeside and the response was sufficient to enable the job to get completed without disaster – in fact I think I'm near the mark when I say the survival rate was over 99% - the plants that is, not the members! A great example of the community pulling together for the common good. But the benefits went further than that – the hedge, along with the reed bed and wildflower meadows have become great talking points with the local community, often with difficult questions being asked – and answered – another way in which EEG is succeeding in “promoting education and interest in natural history and the environment”.

On a slightly wider scale, the Veteran Tree Survey, which I know is particularly close to the hearts of a lot of you, and which was contracted out to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers has unfortunately ended. However, the good news is that it has been taken on by the Wokingham District Veteran Tree Association which has obtained a lottery grant to purchase technological and software equipment and to pay a small honorarium to personnel to run it. So the recording of veteran trees will continue.

Sadly not everybody is able to get out and about to attend our talks, meetings or other activities although I know from talking to them that they'd dearly love to. And that is why I consider that our Newsletter and Website are such vital parts of our structure. The number of times, when delivering newsletters, that I've been greeted with “Oh good, I'm glad that's come, I always look forward to reading it, it's really enjoyable and I loved the bit on the website about A, B and C. Keep up the good work!” Personally I think that both are superb examples of their craft and we should be very grateful to Sheila Crowson and Paul Beckett and their helpers for producing something of such a high standard. They deserve our support so can I urge you to support them by submitting items for inclusion as and when the opportunity presents itself?

There is so much more I could say about the group, almost all of it positive and good but I have to stop somewhere even though I know a lot of things have gone unmentioned. However, running a group like this does involve a lot of work behind the scenes that could hardly be described as environmentally-friendly! I must thank the members of the committee for all the hard work and dedicated work they put into the running of the group – I daren't mention them all by name lest I inadvertently omit someone but we also need to extend grateful thanks to those folk, both members and non-members of EEG for their comments, support and encouragement. Even if they don't always agree on our way of doing something at least they are taking an

interest in what we are about which is, I'm sure you'll agree, 100% better than mindless indifference!

I'm greatly encouraged by the positive response that the group has had from the local community – our membership is now up near the 300 mark, if it hasn't passed it already. I'm quite certain that the group is making its mark on the local community's attitude to our local environment and with the continued support, professionalism and enthusiasm of both the committee and the membership we undoubtedly have the capacity to make a significant impact.