

24. A letter to Derek Ratcliffe

from *Richard Lindsay*

I have three regrets concerning Derek Ratcliffe. First, in all the years I worked with Derek, I never spent a single day in the field with him. Second, I once shouted at him, quite loudly. Third, I did not come to appreciate what an amazing man he was until it was too late. Each of these regrets, while offering little that is positive in terms of my own character or powers of perception, nevertheless throws a revealing light on the kind of man he was – and ‘kind’ is a word which sits very naturally with my memories of Derek.

I first met Derek after David Goode brought me down from Cumbria to the Nature Conservancy Council’s (NCC) Great Britain Headquarters (GBHQ) in Belgrave Square. David was then the Chief Scientist Team’s (CST) Peatland Specialist. I was to work for him on a project cataloguing losses of raised bogs and also, it gradually emerged, to be his informal assistant. On the day of my arrival, David said that he would introduce me to the ‘Chief Scientist’, who had apparently expressed a desire to meet me. The only person with a similar-sounding title I had heard of until this point (given that this was the late-1970s) was the mysterious, shadowy head of the Russian Space Programme, known only as the ‘Chief Designer’. This image was in no way dispelled when David led me into the Chief Scientist’s office because sitting behind a desk was someone who exactly fitted my image of what the Chief Designer must look like – balding, side-tufted eyebrows, firm set of the mouth, but a twinkle in the eye. I half-expected his first words to be in Russian – “Welcome, comrade!” or something similar. Instead, I was greeted with: “Ah, Richard, I’ve been so looking forward to meeting you! Tell me, how is Glasson Moss?”

I should explain that in the previous year (the blazing-hot summer of 1976), while I had been working in the NCC’s Lake District office, Glasson Moss National Nature Reserve (NNR) had suffered a catastrophic fire which burnt from July until November. Glasson lies just to the west of Carlisle and close to the Solway shore. It was one of

Derek's favourite raised bogs from his youth⁽¹⁾, rich in the beautiful, golden bog moss *Sphagnum pulchrum* (Fig. 24.1), and offering up an especially distinctive birdlife. Derek had heard about the fire with a mounting sense of loss as the news trickled through during the summer, and now he wanted my opinion of just how bad the damage was. I did not know anything about Derek's schoolboy affection for the place⁽¹⁾ so I described the bog as I had last seen it – a smoking, charred wreck with the stench of burnt peat still strong in the air over Carlisle – but I also pointed out that some areas of good bog vegetation, including areas of golden bog moss, had survived the fire entirely. Derek shook his head and said gloomily: "I think the site is probably lost. I don't think it will ever recover." I was to learn that Derek was prone to occasional prognostications of gloom and doom on conservation matters. After a mutual silence while we mourned the place, Derek rallied and asked me a series of very kindly questions about my time in the Lake District, about whether I had found somewhere to live in London, and about my planned work for David. I left the office thinking that he was a very kindly man, but I still had no clearer picture of what a Chief Scientist actually did. Based on the premise of the Chief Designer, it was probably something pretty awe-inspiring.



Figure 24.1. Some of the *Sphagna* recorded from Glasson Moss NNR, Cumbria, and also from the Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland. *Sphagnum pulchrum*, Isle of Skye, 1968 (top left); *S. magellanicum*, Yorkshire, 1965 (top right); *S. fuscum*, Isle of Skye, 1968 (lower left); and *S. papillosum*, Galloway, 1966 (lower right). Photos: John Birks

Over the next few months in GBHQ I met Derek fairly regularly, our meeting venue generally being the tea room. Tea-breaks at Belgrave Square were eagerly anticipated, scheduled affairs, from 10:30–11:00 and 15:30–16:00. An egalitarian roster of

volunteers set up the snack counter, then prepared and served tea to the rapidly-growing queue as various people emerged from their offices hidden away in the extraordinary warren of basements, attics, and ballrooms that was 19–20 Belgrave Square. The snack-bar was located in a basement room with a table around which senior staff tended to congregate, thus leading to its general description as ‘the monitors’ table’. ‘Other ranks’ tended to sit on the stools and easy chairs in the room next door. Derek and David both normally chose to sit with the ‘other ranks’ and so, when not serving behind the counter myself, I would find myself chatting with Derek over a cup of tea about the mysteries of *Dicranum undulatum* (*D. bergeri*) (Fig. 24.2), *Campylopus shawii* (Fig. 6.4), and different species of *Sphagnum* (Figs. 24.1 & 24.2) – at least they were mysteries to me, but Derek was elucidatory and patience itself, describing their particular ‘look’ in the field and the likely places to find them.

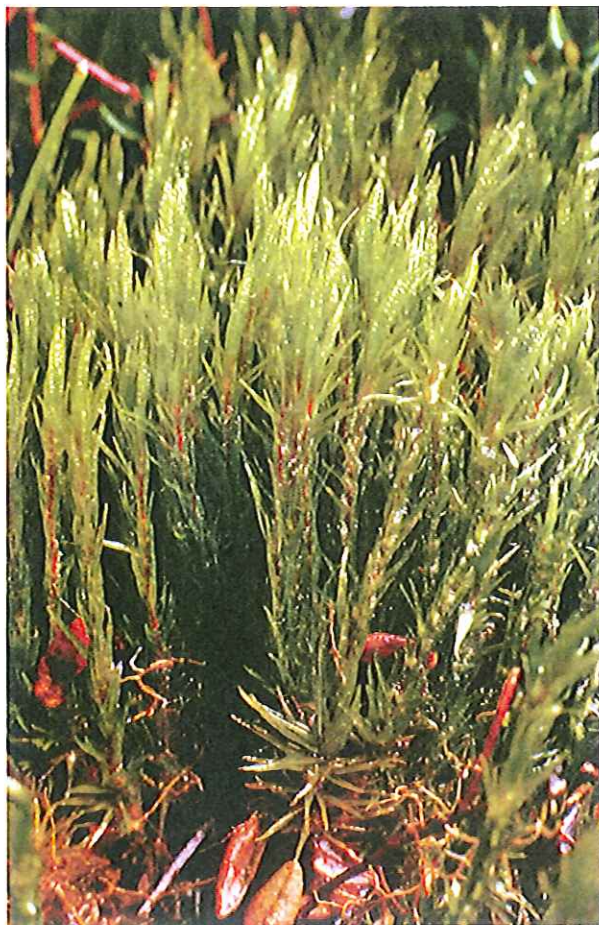


Figure 24.2. *Dicranum undulatum* (*D. bergeri*), Cheshire, 1965 (left) and *Sphagnum cuspidatum*, Yorkshire, 1965 (right). Photos: John Birks

Conservation was not doing well at the time⁽²⁾, and we had several tea-time conversations about the failings of existing legislation, the losses which were occurring, and the actions – or inaction – of “those buggers” (one of Derek’s very few swear words, but a favourite when he was annoyed; it was applied equally to certain politicians, landowners, farmers, big corporations, civil servants, or even colleagues). I had seen the effect of this weak legislation first hand in the Lake District – creeping behind a hedge on a narrow lane with Stuart Lane, the Assistant Regional Officer, to establish whether reports

of an old flower-rich meadow being ploughed were true, then bumping into the farmer, who demanded to know what we were doing, and after explaining that we were checking on the condition of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), being bluntly told: "Well, you'll not stop me from doing my farming!" What I did not have, which Derek by now had in abundance, was an understanding of where nature conservation sat in the pecking-order of civil service politics. He would listen patiently to my naive comments about what needed to be done, even agree with some points, and then gently steer the conversation towards things which had a realistic chance of being achieved.

Derek had amassed a huge number of field notebooks over the years⁽³⁾, and so it was decided that someone should be employed to transcribe these and disseminate their contents to the operational staff in the regions. Consequently Katherine Hearne joined the contract staff (at that time consisting of myself and Sue Rowe) down in the 'basement lab' as it was known, and spent her days surrounded by banks of notebooks. Every now and then, Katherine would burst out laughing because Derek had written some wry comment in the margin, or she would exclaim in amazement and read us some extraordinary entry. That Christmas, we organised an unofficial Christmas banquet in the lab and invited as many colleagues as we could squeeze into that modest-sized room. I have what I think is an accurate memory of Derek sitting at the table, sporting a party hat from a cracker, while chatting cheerfully and amiably with his neighbours. In the only photos I have of the event, that part of the table where Derek sat is not in view, but the memory of him being there is strong, and, perhaps more importantly, it says much about him that his presence at such a somewhat anarchic, enjoyable event is entirely feasible.

During our tea-breaks, and subsequently after Derek was transferred to the Huntingdon Office, during his regular visits to Belgrave Square, he was always interested to hear what we had found on our peatland surveys. He made the effort to talk to each and every member of my small but slowly-expanding survey team. Whenever we were able to report something interesting or unusual, that slow and slightly reserved smile of his would develop, followed by questions, and then he would often chuckle with delight, or let out a deeply satisfied sigh, before congratulating whoever had been telling him about it. Derek always managed to leave the bearer of such information with the impression that he was envious and delighted, and that he doubted whether he could have achieved as much. Given that this was the 'Chief Designer' speaking, it tended to leave the recipient more than a little giddy.

At the outset of the 1980s, initially encouraged and supported by David Goode, then, after he left to become Ken Livingstone's ecology guru at the Greater London Council, supported directly by Derek, I set in train a broad-scale programme of survey across the peatlands of Britain. By now I had been given much more responsibility, and my purpose was simple enough – to identify the best remaining peatland sites before they vanished beneath the plough. Fire-brigade survey, we called it, because it was becoming increasingly evident that thousands of hectares of blanket bog were being damaged at an ever-increasing rate by drainage in the form of agricultural moor-gripping and afforestation⁽⁴⁾. We regarded Caithness and Sutherland as one of the key places for such survey because Derek had described the great "flow country" of these northern Scottish districts in Sir John Burnett's edited tome *The Vegetation of Scotland*⁽⁵⁾. Derek had first visited the area in 1958 and revisited what he called the "mysterious *terra incognita*"⁽¹⁾ many times in search of birds and wildness. David Goode had also shown me

some of the bog systems in Caithness, emphasising that the Nature Conservancy and the NCC had only looked at a tiny fraction of what was there. Crucially, Derek was also becoming deeply alarmed about the increasingly aggressive spread of conifer forestry on to deep peat following a series of trial plantings undertaken by the Forestry Commission⁽⁴⁾, made possible by the development of the Cuthbertson plough in the late 1940s.

We spent nearly five years surveying the enormous expanse of the Flow Country (Figs. 24.3 & 24.4), though it was not widely called that then. As time went by, however, we also found ourselves racing against the forestry ploughs. This was because the full financial opportunities of the Forestry Grant Scheme soon came to be realised by a number of clever accountants acting on behalf of those who found themselves in the super-tax bracket. The story of the battle for the Flow Country is told elsewhere in this book^(2,4), but I would like to highlight one particular part played by Derek, and also ultimately by Derek Langslow (Derek's lieutenant), in this seminal conservation battle.

This particular story begins with my first real regret. In those days, surveys of the Flow Country (Fig. 24.3) were not easy undertakings. At the opposite end of the country from our London headquarters, it was a near-trackless waste, with only two main roads (for 'main', read single-track) passing northwards through the heart of the area. In many cases, the only feasible way to access the peatland systems we planned to survey involved walking in from the road for a day and then camping (Fig. 24.5). There, we would subsist in the flows for three days, surveying everything around us, before breaking camp and trekking out. Sometimes the experience was simply awful, with day after day of relentless, soaking, driving rain or thick, soaking cloud (Fig. 24.6), but sometimes things were good, even extraordinary, and all the more richly memorable for that. One particular midsummer's eve amidst the Forsinard flows will stay with me forever – Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) drumming, distant Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) trilling and hoarse-whistling, a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) hunting below us, and a spectacular lenticular cloud capping Ben Griam Beag. That very scene was to vanish the following year, replaced by ghastly deep furrows and seedling trees, and now all we have are the memories and data sheets recording what was lost. My real regret, recalling that whole experience now, was that we should have shared these magical moments with Derek, but I did not realise it at the time.

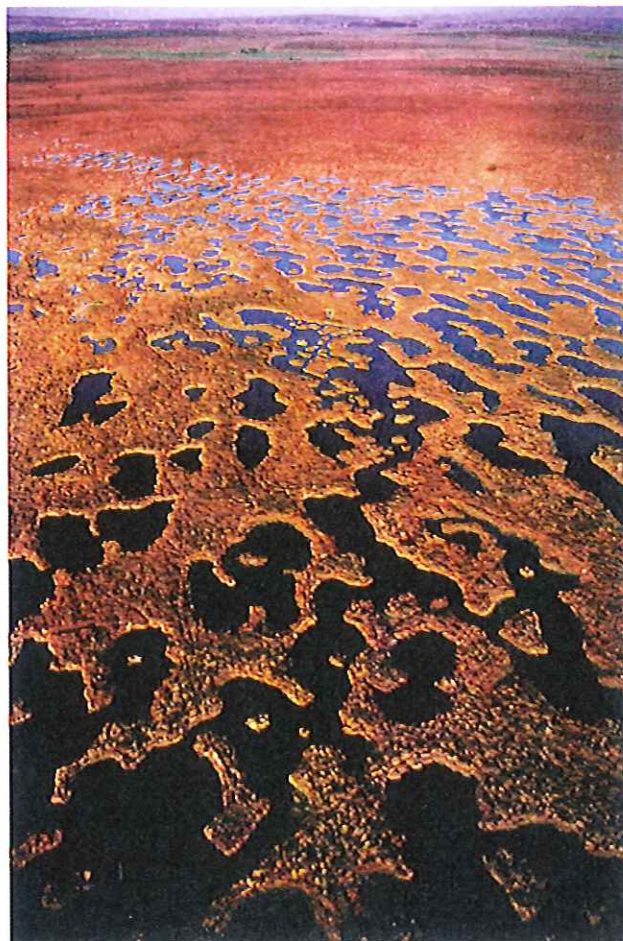


Figure 24.3. Low aerial view of the extensive bog pools at Shielton Bog, Caithness Flow Country. Photo: Steve Moore and Richard Lindsay

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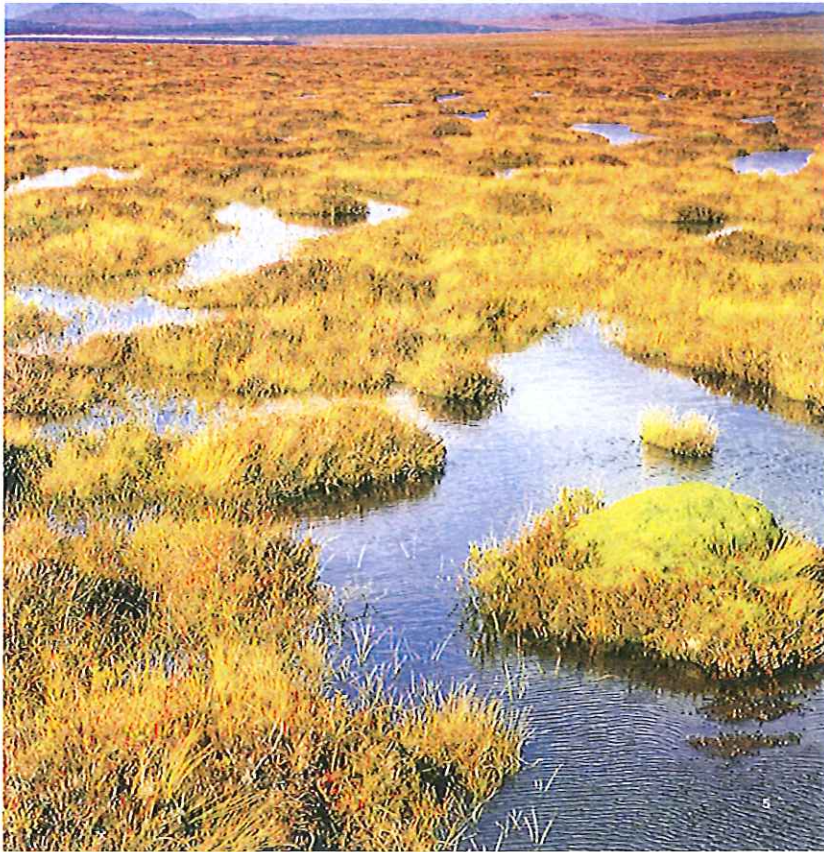


Figure 24.4. Pool and hummock patterning on Badanloch Bogs, Sutherland Flow Country. Photo: Richard Lindsay

Every two weeks during the field season we would return to London and re-group, do our laundry, prepare the next set of field sheets, catch up with any other matters emerging during our absence, and I would usually meet up with Derek at some point, often in the tea-room. He would ask how things were going, what we had found, and I would tell him our latest news from the far north. We would discuss our findings, what we should look for, and where we were going next. Derek would become quite excited by the whole thing, but he never once suggested that he might join us. I did not expect him to because I knew that he was always desperately busy, but I realise now that Derek's diffidence probably prevented him from, as he would see it, 'imposing' on us. I can see now that some of his remarks were probably oblique suggestions that maybe he could join us, at least for a few days. If I had said: "Right Derek, I still can't identify *Campylopus shawii* to save my life, would you mind joining us for a day or two?", he might well have jumped at the chance. Alas I mistook his diffidence for business elsewhere. He was the Chief Designer: he had rockets to build! To have spent even just a couple of days with Derek in those far northern flows would, I suspect, have been quite something. Indeed I learnt much later from my uplands colleague Des Thompson, who trekked with Derek across the flows recording birdlife during fortnightly expeditions in the late 1980s, that Derek repeatedly remarked "Wouldn't it be great if Richard and his team were with us?" Sadly it just never happened.

Then we come to my less-than-honourable moment and my second regret. While we were surveying the Flow Country and, amongst other things, persuading the NCC's Scottish Advisory Committee to agree several very large new SSSIs as a stop-gap measure, the plight of this special place had become a *cause celebre*⁽⁴⁾. The spotlights of the media and several major non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were on us and our work.



Figure 24.5. John Riggall, Fiona Everingham, and John Ratcliffe setting off to camp and survey the Flow Country in 1981. Photo: Richard Lindsay



Figure 24.6. Sarah Garnett and Richard Lindsay at their tents while surveying the A'Mhoine peninsula, Sutherland in 1981. Photo: John Riggall

Political pressure was bearing down from a great height. We had amassed an absurdly large volume of survey data for the area. Now we needed to analyse and write up the data into a case which, as Dick Steele, then Director General of the NCC, said must be "absolutely bomb-proof" – an instruction which left me feeling physically sick with the weight of responsibility. The NCC, now with its HQ in Peterborough, had never tried to conserve two whole Scottish districts before, so our task involved acutely real and hugely daunting challenges.

David Stroud and his ornithological team had done a brilliant job in pulling together all the bird data and a summary of the peatland data for the area and in 1987 published them in *Birds, Bogs and Forestry*⁽⁶⁾, which was enormously effective in raising the stakes concerning what was there – and thus what would knowingly be lost. But the pressure was now on to publish a more wide-ranging report which drew on the massive volume of habitat data we had, as well as for the first time identifying in detail the international importance of the area, derived from the literature and from a welter of scientific and conservation contacts throughout the world. Frankly, we were flagging and were still far behind in terms of analysis and writing. Pressure was mounting to produce this grand companion to *Birds, Bogs and Forestry* and my team, consisting at that stage of John Riggall, Terry Rowell, Fiona Everingham, Dan Charman, Fiona Burd, and Rachel O'Reilly, had been working flat out for almost a year – assembling the data, carrying out analyses on pretty rudimentary computers, and toiling as we wrote up the results. Our NCC Chairman, Sir William Wilkinson, was by now decidedly agitated about the whole affair. He had to tell ministers that the much vaunted and promised report was almost there, and that it would decisively present the compelling case for site protection. The stakes were high. The NGO sector, strong on birds, relied massively on our habitat expertise and experience⁽²⁾. It was put to us quite simply (and starkly) that no-one else could make the case. We knew that our small team stood between failure and making a difference for nature.

Physically and mentally we were by now close to the end of our tether. Early in 1988, Derek called me into his office to review where we were. When I explained the unfinished state of things he sighed, then said that perhaps he would need to take the work from us and arrange to have it finished some other way. Alas, at this point, I erupted. I shouted a number of things which I still deeply regret to this day. For the first (and last) time in my life I saw Derek genuinely angry on a personal level, actually shouting, albeit in a strangely restrained way. I yelled some more and then stormed out.

Five minutes later I was back, but before I could even open my mouth to apologise, Derek slowly, kindly, and deliberately sought to make amends for the pressure I had been put under, the fact that it had come to this, and promised that from here on he would do everything he could to help us. I could have hugged him, except we would both have been extremely embarrassed. There followed deeply-felt apologies between us, and then we hatched a plan – because we had to. Derek mobilised a number of his national and international contacts (including John and Hilary Birks in Bergen) to provide critical referees' comments and further information for the text as it came along. Derek took on the daunting job of co-editing the text as referees' commentaries poured in, often by fax. With his expert skills and judgement on birds, plants, habitats, ecosystem functions, invertebrates, and conservation, Derek came into his own. He masterfully wove the tapestry, just as he had done earlier in assembling *A Nature Conservation*

Review^(7,8), and how he relished it. Des Thompson has since told me how, during their montane and Flow Country trek of June 1988, Derek and he would work on the text each evening, with Derek emerging the following morning clutching beautifully hand-written annotations and screeds of text which had to be posted to Peterborough, first class! Each night, Derek must have spent further hours shaping the text of the final chapter into a coherently persuasive conservation case. All of this allowed us to integrate the information coming in from the bird, freshwater, and peatland surveys and thus to generate a composite view of overlapping conservation value which appeared as *The Flow Country: The Peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland*⁽⁹⁾.

To cap it all, when it came to discussing the title page, authorship, and other details, Derek suggested that those of us who had undertaken the survey, analysed the data, and written the drafts, should be the main authors. He and Philip Oswald (who meticulously proof-read and edited the entire document) would be listed as 'Editors'. And in a move so characteristic of his humility, Derek made it clear that the reference citation should explicitly give the main authors' names rather than the names of the editors, and he himself always referenced it thus⁽⁸⁾. On reflection, for us to have shared authorship of such a work with Derek Ratcliffe is something which I think we would all now have treasured, but at the time it just seemed like a neat solution. What an extraordinary person to work with. My third regret is that I did not realise this at the time.

Of course, Derek had his weaknesses, especially given the often politically-motivated environment in which he found himself having to work. In meetings involving aggressive but politically-astute individuals, Derek did not always shine because he was frequently left so aghast by the way that people were prepared to state something with certainty while knowing it to be a lie, but a lie which was politically acceptable to the powers above. Such behaviour often received the appellation of 'those buggers' after the meeting, but during the meeting Derek was often at a loss to know how to respond, given his own strong beliefs that truth and facts are what make a sound scientific argument and consequently a solid conservation case. At such moments (and there were some particularly sticky ones during the Flow Country story), Derek Langslow was able to deflect or neutralise these blatant and occasionally aggressive attacks with an impressive combination of factual detail and political nous, thereby turning the argument round in NCC's favour. Derek Ratcliffe, on the other hand, tended to become visibly cross and frustrated over such blatant lies, which just played into the other side's hands ('the conservation case is evidently being driven by emotional arguments', they would sneer), though he would then pursue an evidence-based argument just at the point when the decision-makers in the room did not want to get 'bogged down in detail', and it infuriated them. What they wanted was a politically acceptable way forward. What Derek Ratcliffe wanted was for everyone to understand the facts because for Derek the facts made clear what action was needed.

Derek Langslow was Derek's Assistant Chief Scientist, and a highly adept scientific administrator, manager, and committee man. They made a formidable team, and Derek Langslow, Mike Pienkowski, David Stroud, Rob Soutar, Des Thompson, Margaret Palmer, and others working in the Chief Scientist Directorate all deserve a great deal of praise for their work in this battle.

While he was no political Machiavelli, Derek Ratcliffe was nevertheless a superb strategist, as displayed by his strategically successful publications for the NCC, which

include the masterful two-volume doomsday book *A Nature Conservation Review*^(7,8) (the NCR), the revision of the SSSI Guidelines⁽¹⁰⁾ into a robustly coherent case, and the two key NCC strategy documents, *Nature Conservation in Great Britain*⁽¹¹⁾ and *Nature Conservation and Afforestation in Britain*⁽¹²⁾. Uniquely for such a senior figure in the public sector (and, as David Stroud once pointed out, a characteristic shared with the Duke of Wellington), Derek saw and articulated the bigger picture without being distracted by the clutter of bureaucracy, staffing, and resourcing matters (topics which Derek Langslow administered with relish and energy). But the fundamental principle which Derek Ratcliffe encouraged, supported, and impressed on his team, and indeed the key ingredient for the icing on his own richly layered writing, is that scientific understanding of our ecosystems can only truly be attained through extensive first-hand experience in the field.

Surprisingly enough, Derek appears to have lacked confidence in his own ability to turn such understanding into scientifically-sound and practical conservation science. Just a few years before his death, Derek wrote a typically kind and heartfelt letter to my wife and me when he heard that we had suffered a sad event. I wrote back to thank him, and also to tell him that the evaluation principles which he had set out in the NCR formed a key part of what I was now teaching my students in relation to site evaluation, and that they thoroughly enjoyed practical exercises which involved using these principles. The NCR criteria⁽⁸⁾ also continued to underpin my own conservation guidance to colleagues in other countries, who embraced them with similar enthusiasm. Derek replied to say that he was glad to hear this, but also to say that he had never really got over the criticism of these principles which he had received from someone in Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (ITE) following the NCR's launch. Even after so many years, this clearly rankled, and still led him to question whether he had produced something which was as good and scientifically-sound as it could have been.

Being Chief Scientist meant that Derek also had to run the Chief Scientist Team (CST) (later a Directorate). Thinking back on the CST, I find that I am drawn to make some comparison with the codebreakers at Bletchley Park during World War 2 – a somewhat individualistic, even eccentric, group of highly effective specialists dedicated to a common aim (and amid such experts I always felt a bit of a fraud, really). Derek managed the team to make the most of its collective strengths, and many of the publications associated with his name are, as Derek readily acknowledged, collaborative works which drew on the collective expertise of the team (e.g. 7,10–12). His approach also meant that Derek did not 'run' the Chief Scientist Team and its meetings, but instead rather encouraged us to share ideas, support each other, and be creative in our thinking. I do not ever recall an edict coming from Derek formally instructing us to do something. His memos, often long, tended to be requests urging or encouraging us to do certain things, but generally also explaining why it was important that we did so.

The highlight of the CST year was the Research Review Meeting, during which the allocation of funding for research was discussed and (generally) decided. Given the significance of this meeting and the consequences arising from it, one might have expected it to have been a somewhat fraught event, but under Derek's guidance they became more of an inter-disciplinary brainstorming session ranging across the whole spectrum of conservation science. It was an exhausting, sometimes frustrating, but ultimately strangely exhilarating experience because, although there were inevitably

winners and losers in the final allocation process, every bid was given a fair hearing and, as the day progressed, a broader picture steadily emerged, offering a view across the issues affecting the natural heritage of Britain as a whole and a sense of how each research bid fitted into this overall picture. The broader view was clearly what Derek sought and what guided him in his contributions to the discussions. Nonetheless, he also took an active interest in each and every bid, offering well-informed, valuable, and often uncomfortably penetrating observations across an astonishingly wide range of subjects.

I still miss the Chief Scientist Team, and that strong sense of common purpose. And I miss the remarkable man who led us. Both the work, and legacy, of the 'Chief Designer' have indeed proved to be pretty awe-inspiring. I feel privileged to have such vivid recollections of working with Derek Ratcliffe, and there is no question in my mind that my formative years of work, and those of many others, were shaped and immeasurably improved by working in his long and kindly shadow.

Acknowledgements

Having acknowledged Derek Ratcliffe's part in all of this, I would also like to extend my grateful thanks to all those who formed part of the Peatland Team during those eventful years. In particular, my thanks go to John Riggall, who cheerfully and calmly kept the show on the rails whenever I was flagging or failing, and to Fiona Everingham, who ensured that we never arrived on a site unannounced and that we always knew where the fuel for the stove was packed. I am enormously grateful to everyone else who, at various times, also formed part of that team during the events described here, namely Jane Smart, Bob Missin, Sara Oldfield, and Sarah Garnett in the early years, David Stroud, John Ratcliffe, Fiona Burd, and Sylvia White in the middle years, and Dan Charman, Rachel O'Rielly, Terry Rowell, and Colin Wells in the later years. Extraordinary times, extraordinary people.

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Nature's Conscience

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