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An Interview with Dr. Martin Warren, Chief Executive of Butterfly Conservation

Peter Eeles

Pete:

Martin, many thanks for agreeing to be interviewed!

Martin:

My pleasure.

Pete:

So how did you first become interested in butterflies and moths and, from those beginnings, progress to become Chief Executive of Butterfly Conservation?

Martin:

My interest in butterflies started as a young boy, collecting caterpillars around my home on the edge of the Chilterns (near Dunstable). I would put them in boxes and rear them through, and discovering that some of them turned into beautiful things while some turned into flightless female moths! That was my initial instruction in the world of natural history.

I had a neighbour who was a tremendous ornithologist who encouraged my interest in natural history, and my parents put up with it! Later, as a teenager, I used to travel around the country looking mainly at butterflies, visiting (and camping at) sites such as the New Forest, where I'd find some rarer species.

Later still, I went to university and studied zoology and was very interested in environmental issues, but really left my entomology behind to concentrate on the bigger issues of the world. I did my degree in Zoology at Imperial College, and studied for an M.Sc. in Conservation at University College. I think that was the turning point because that was when I really decided I wanted a career in nature conservation.

I always had an interest in conservation but, in those days, careers in conservation were few and far between. But the University College degree was meant to be a "breeding ground" for people going into the Nature Conservancy Council; it was specifically designed and set up for that. We learned such a lot on that course and I just thought "this is fantastic".

At the end of the course I was looking for jobs, or a subject for a Ph.D., and I nearly worked on Red Squirrels. Then a job came up at Monk's Wood Experimental Station to research the Wood White. So I thought "I could do that; I know about butterflies, and I know about conservation now too". I also knew about Monk's Wood, and had met people who worked there. So I applied and got the job!

So I spent 3 years studying the Wood White which was really fantastic, and I worked with the most amazing people like Ernie Pollard, Jack Dempster and John Heath. The Biological Records Centre was running there. Kenneth Mellanby and his team were there, who found out that pesticides caused thinning in the shells of birds' eggs. There was a real buzz about the place and about environment issues.

> "There was a real buzz about the place and about environment issues"

Jeremy Thomas had just left there and gone to Furzebrook, so I just missed him as a day-to-day colleague, but he was available as a mentor. He'd just started his work on the Large Blue, and I bumped into him at meetings, and we met regularly to exchange views.

So that was a fantastic 3 years and after that I did 2 years pretty-much self-employed, scratching around trying to get grants to work on Heath Fritillary. The Large Blue became extinct in 1979, and everyone said that the next one on the list was the Heath Fritillary; it was down to a few sites and nobody really knew the future of those sites.

So I got a few small grants and spent most of my time on the dole, while actually working on the Heath Fritillary and, of course, found out that it was pretty-much on its last legs, and a lot of sites were threatened. That developed into a 3 year project with the Nature

Conservancy Council based down in Dorset, at Furzebrook Research Station. That was a fantastic project because it enabled me to really put my knowledge into practice and I wrote plans for huge woodlands to get them managed for a butterfly, which was virtually unheard of; people didn't manage for butterflies in those days. But because everyone was really rocked by the extinction of the Large Blue, people began to take an interest. "We don't want the Heath Fritillary going the same way. You tell us, you're the expert, you tell us how to do it". So that's what happened.

> "I wrote plans for huge woodlands to get them managed for a butterfly, which was virtually unheard of; people didn't manage for butterflies in those days"

Then I worked as a specialist for the Nature Conservancy on butterflies, giving advice on hundreds of sites across southern England. I also did a spell being self-employed, doing consultancy work when this contract finished. Then a job came up with Butterfly Conservation and I thought "that would be interesting and a real challenge".

Pete:

So how long have you been with Butterfly Conservation?

Martin:

So I've been with Butterfly Conservation since 1993 - 13 years. I started off as the only conservation member of staff, with nobody else working with me, working from my living room. We then got money to employ someone else, so there were 2 of us working from my living room! And then we got a part-time admin person. So there were then 3 of us working from my living room, and my wife said "that's too many!" And so we found an office down here at Lulworth and it grew and grew as we got more funding, and people realised that butterflies and moths were so seriously threatened. I think we've been very successful at applying for grants, but our need is great and funders have thankfully responded. Now we've got 50 staff in Butterfly Conservation, of which 36 are front-line conservation staff. In 13 years it's grown from nothing on the conservation side to 36. It shows an increasing awareness of conservation issues. One of the things that has changed radically over time is that what was considered to be a fringe activity (conserving a threatened species) is now more mainstream. So it's no longer so difficult to raise funds for species conservation work, though its still requires great skill to satisfy ever more demanding funders.

> "One of the things that has changed radically over time is that what was considered to be a fringe activity (conserving a threatened species) is now more mainstream"

That's been a huge change because when I started it was virtually impossible to get any money to work on species conservation. Everyone thought that if you conserve the habitat then the species would follow. However, we all know that that doesn't work because species have specific requirements and a generalist habitat approach often misses them.

Pete:

Given the amount of time you've spent with BC, and other initiatives before that, what results are you most proud of?

Martin:

I think building up that team of staff at BC. It's the biggest team of experts working on butterflies and moths in the world, we have some really excellent and dedicated people. Also harnessing the tremendous enthusiasm of Butterfly Conservation members and all the volunteers that contribute to the recording and monitoring schemes.

> "Butterfly Conservation is the biggest team of experts working on butterflies and moths in the world"

Although volunteers were still around previously, it was a bit haphazard and uncoordinated. And now I think we've got this fantastic "fighting force" of volunteers working with professional staff, producing things like the Butterfly Atlas which is widely-seen as the leading work in its area, and the best of its kind on insects anywhere in the world. And that is really the result of that winning combination.

Pete:

How can the general public help with Butterfly Conservation's goals?

Martin:

An obvious thought would be making your garden more butterfly-friendly, providing nectar sources for the adults, and even foodplants for their larvae! Moving from there, you can promote the conservation of any wild places in your area and join BC and support our campaigns. For example, volunteers can help with our surveys and monitoring programmes, which cater for all levels of ability.

Pete:

Some questions from the UK Butterflies visitors: the first is how Butterfly Conservation works with other organisations, since there are quite a few out there promoting similar causes.

Martin:

I think one of our great strengths is that BC staff are very good at networking so that we "punch above our weight". We have good contacts with all the senior people in the RSPB, the National Trust, the Wildlife Trusts and so on. We know them all and meet with them regularly

and collaborate with them closely both on day-to-day issues, such as managing RSPB reserves, to big policy issues where we're lobbying for change in government, such as the new agri-environment scheme. We also work together formally through an organisation called Wildlife and Countryside Link. We contribute to working groups and produce policy documents which we then submit to government to make a change, such as better land use policies. The coordinated response is vital to ensure a powerful, united lobby.

> "We punch above our weight. We have good contacts with all the senior people in the RSPB, the National Trust, the Wildlife Trusts and so on"

Pete:

What do you think BC's main challenges are moving forward?

Martin:

Ongoing funding is always an issue. But in terms of the change we need to make - our biggest problem is that the problems of butterflies and moths are very big, just as big as birds, for example. There are big environment issues and, as an organisation, we're still quite small, even though we have grown and are quite influential in our own sphere. But some of the problems out there are so big that, as an organisation, we haven't quite got the leverage to make the difference on the ground. That is why working with other organisations is so important. I think the one thing that will really make a difference is to get butterflies and moths adopted as indicators. We're at the point of getting butterflies adopted in England and in the UK and, if we can get them adopted across Europe then a lot of things will happen since people will see butterflies as worth conserving. They will also use butterflies as a measure of overall conservation and land use programmes.

> "I think the one thing that will really make a difference is to get butterflies adopted as indicators"

Pete:

This, then, is one of the reasons for setting up Butterfly Conservation Europe?

Martin:

Yes, that was one certainly one of the reasons. Another was that it was driven from "grass roots" opinion. We were lobbied by a lot of Butterfly Conservation members saying that we ought to be doing more in Europe. So we had some discussions with our colleagues in Europe and set up Butterfly Conservation Europe, but it is just in its infancy. It's at the same stage that Butterfly Conservation was in the 1970s. It needs to grow slowly and carefully so that it doesn't overstretch itself in the early days. The big issue is that it has no funding, which we're looking for. If butterflies are adopted as indicators across Europe, that would really help us obtain funding.

Pete:

I asked the UK Butterflies visitors for their questions. The first is to know if Butterfly Conservation has a policy on reintroductions.

Martin:

We do have a published policy on reintroductions which we keep under review. The policy basically says that, as long as the reintroduction is part of an overall strategy for the species then that's good. What we don't really want is people releasing butterflies all over the place because it potentially disrupts conservation efforts. Let me give you some examples.

> "What we don't really want is people releasing butterflies all over the place because it potentially disrupts conservation efforts"

For example, the Large Blue project is a planned reintroduction of a globally-threatened species, and we now have now got one of the largest populations in Europe. It's a fantastic success story. There are other species like the Heath Fritillary, where we're involved in 2 or 3 planned reintroductions - another rare species. We've got a reintroduction originally on our own reserve in Lydford in Devon, which has been very successful for a small population. That colony has been used for a restoration project in Cornwall where, ironically, it died out a few years ago and was the original source of the population in Devon! In general, we have a flexible attitude to reintroduction, so that if a particular species is in particular peril such as the Heath Fritillary, then we have to use every means possible to ensure its survival.

I think the subject of reintroduction is trickier if you have a species such as the Chalkhill Blue that is still fairly widespread. Someone might have a small patch of Horseshoe Vetch and think that it would be a good idea to introduce the species. Of course, the site may not be big enough; the species might survive for a few years but then peter out. Does that really add to conservation? That's where we'd ideally like to plan the reintroduction so that we make those judgments before the release; is the site big enough? Will it make a lasting difference? Will it cause problems if we do it?

On the other hand, we also believe that there are a lot of unauthorised releases going on. For example, with the Purple Emperor. This is seriously confusing the natural situation. We know that people are rearing and releasing them in their hundreds. These individuals are then recorded as genuine sightings! The point is that we think that the Purple Emperor is actually spreading naturally, but because of the releases we can't tell for sure. Other than if they turn up way outside their range - which they have done - and we then know it's a release. But such unplanned releases are confusing the natural spread.

There is a real downside to this. There was a wood where Purple Emperor had been recorded, and the wood was under threat. The planning department concerned found out that people were releasing Purple Emperor and immediately dismissed any Purple Emperor records as

releases. So, suddenly, Purple Emperor became an unimportant species on that site. It's now very difficult to defend that site. So that's where releases can be very damaging to site protection.

I don't think any releases are done maliciously - people just like to see the species, and so do I! But there are sometimes unexpected consequences. So we would rather things were done in a more planned way and all the various players informed.

Pete:

How can ordinary BC member's observations extend our knowledge? What unexplored areas are there?

Martin:

I think every species has unexplored areas - that's one thing! For example, Red Admirals - a common species that everyone gets in their garden. But where do they breed? Do they survive the winter here, given that this is changing with global warming? Where do they roost for the winter? Answers to these questions would be interesting. But you can go through any species and find unexplored areas. Even for the most well-known species there are still unanswered questions.

> "Even for the most well-known species there are still unanswered questions"

I'd also advise that you'd need to spend a long time making field observations, so finding a species close by would probably be best. Information should be collected systematically, so that there is some scientific basis for the information. Rather than a series of anecdotes, such as a Red Admiral roosting in a telephone kiosk and assuming that this is where they all roost! A certain volume of data is required!

The species we'd really like to know more about are the widespread species that seem to be declining at the moment, such as the Wall, Small Heath or Small Copper. For example, where does the Small Copper breed? There is surprisingly very little data on this.

Pete:

How can very local habitat specialist species, such as Heath Fritillary or Mountain Ringlet, be conserved given the effects of global warming?

Martin:

Global warming is going to change the distribution of a lot of species, and cause a big upheaval in the way we look at nature conservation. However, the medium-term scenario for climate change is for 1 or 2 degrees warming. So that's going to change some habitats, but not radically change them. So our conservation strategy would be the same. So Heath Fritillary is always going to feed on Cow Wheat, and always need clearings in woodlands. If it gets a bit warmer they should do a little better since the climate is a little better for them. But they'll still need those habitats and we'll still need to manage them.

> "Global warming is going to change the distribution of a lot of species, and cause a big upheaval in the way we look at nature conservation"

If the climate gets warmer then the niche that they live in might expand a bit and they might move to new areas; there might be new opportunities for them. That's the knowledge we should obtain so that we can cater for it and maybe take advantage of it. For example, as the climate gets warmer some sites in "middle" England might become suitable for the Heath Fritillary. But it would only be sensible to move it there if there were some problem with the existing sites, such as succumbing to drought.

We might have to rethink our strategies if the climate gets 3 or 4 degrees warmer.

Pete:

I suppose for some species, it's not going to be possible to save them? Such as the Mountain Ringlet since they can't move any higher once they get to the top of the mountain!

Martin:

I think the biggest problem of all will be for drought-prone species. I'm slightly more confident of the future for mountain species since there are certain behavioural things they can do; breed in longer vegetation for example. In the Lake District the Mountain Ringlet is a north-facing slope species. In Scotland it's a south-facing slope species. So I think they can move to cooler areas on a mountain.

I think most species have certain flexibility. But what, of course, they don't have flexibility in is if their habitat completely dries up, becomes completely unsuitable, and they have nowhere to go. So the drought-prone species are the ones I'm most concerned about.

> "The drought-prone species are the ones I'm most concerned about"

And it depends a lot on how quickly their habitats change - which is what we don't know. We don't know how quickly downland will dry up in the summer. If it gets 1 or 2 degrees warmer, we might just end up with larger populations of butterflies! But if it gets hotter still, and drier, populations will crash, as they did after the 1976 drought.

Pete:

Does Butterfly Conservation provide guidance on small-scale projects that community groups (parish councils, schools) might undertake to provide habitat for butterflies such as the Dingy Skipper and Small Blue which can still just about be found away from nature reserves?

Martin:

We do indeed and would be delighted to help. The first port of call would be the local BC branch. Most of our branches would have someone that would be able to give some free advice. We have leaflets and materials on how to encourage butterflies, how to manage brownfield sites and urban sites, for example.

If it became more technical where the branch felt it didn't have the knowledge, then they could bring in the relevant staff member. We now have national offices in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as most regions of England, so there should be someone to help on important issues. Especially for species such as Dingy Skipper and Small Blue, which are quite high up in our priorities since they are declining so rapidly.

Pete:

Who do you most admire in this field?

Martin:

I admire lots of people. I admire people who are optimistic and don't "down tools" because it all seems hopeless. There are a lot of reasons to give up, but I'm an optimist and I think we really can do things to reverse decline and save threatened species. So I admire anyone who thinks that too and is prepared to do something about it.

> "There are a lot of reasons to give up, but I'm an optimist and I think we really can do things to reverse decline and save threatened species"

In terms of individuals, I've been very fortunate to meet a lot of inspirational people in entomology, such as Jeremy Thomas, John Heath, and Ernie Pollard (who set up the Butterfly Monitoring Scheme). These people are superb researchers and I admire them because they brought the scientific rigour to conservation without which, we could all be wasting our time.

> "I admire them (Jeremy Thomas, John Heath, and Ernie Pollard) because they brought the scientific rigour to conservation without which, we could all be wasting our time"

But the people I admire the most are all those people out there that beaver away counting butterflies, doing their bit on their local patch because, without that information, the scientists, and people like myself who try and look at the bigger picture, wouldn't have a bigger picture to look at! So I admire all those people who give up their weekends. I know they enjoy it, but I admire them because they go out and document what they're looking at and bother to fill out the forms at the end of the day; they capture their knowledge and send it through to someone. Without which, it would all be lost. I truly admire that commitment.

> "The people I admire the most are all those people out there that beaver away counting butterflies, doing their bit on their local patch"

There are also lots of local coordinators we work with, who give up days and days every week, putting pen to paper, and sending the data through, and making sure it's accurate. There are hundreds of them who are vital to underpin our conservation work.

Pete:

Finally, what's your favourite butterfly?

Martin (without any hesitation!):

Red Admiral! It's a childhood thing, really. I can remember seeing them on buddleia bushes. If they were rare, wouldn't they be a fantastic thing! Outrageously coloured! They're just lovely.

Pete:

My favourite is the Peacock for similar reasons. Perhaps we could have an argument!

Martin (starting the argument!):

The thing I like about Red Admiral is the contrast between the velvet black and the red - it's just extraordinary! But it is also the childhood thing.

Pete:

OK! And your favourite moth?

Martin:

Actually, it's a caterpillar, and it's the Pale Tussock moth. Again, it's because I remember finding it as a kid, and thinking "what an amazing

caterpillar", rearing it through and being disappointed with the moth! But the caterpillar is just stunning.

Pete:

Dr. Martin Warren, thank you.

Martin:

Again, my pleasure!

Butterfly Conservation is a UK charity taking action to save butterflies, moths and their habitats. To find out more about Butterfly Conservation and how you can get involved, please visit their website at www.butterfly-conservation.org.