

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS GROUP

We ended our Autumn programme with a discussion on waste incineration. Currently there are two ways of disposing of waste that can't be recycled - landfill and incineration. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Incineration significantly reduces the volume of waste, and can even generate extra electricity for the grid. But if the incineration isn't done at a high enough temperature, it can release all sorts of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere. Landfill takes up a lot of space, can pollute rivers and groundwater, and generates methane, a greenhouse gas far more potent than CO₂. Methane can be captured from landfill sites, but this is an expensive process. So which is better (or at least less bad) for the environment)?

In an ideal world, we wouldn't produce so much waste in the first place (do we really need to send literally millions of disposable nappies to landfill every day?), and we'd recycle far more of the stuff we do have to dispose of. But however much we reduce the amount of waste we can't recycle, we're still left with a disposal problem. And both incineration and landfill, however necessary, are pretty unpleasant solutions. There isn't much to choose between them!

The topic for our February meeting (our first in 2026) was rewilding, led by Tony Harrison. Something like half of all wildlife species in Britain have been lost since the 1970s, mainly because of intensive agriculture (biodiversity in urban areas is actually increasing). Rewilding groups aim to reverse this trend. The Nature Friendly Farming Network is pledged to increase biodiversity on their farms by farming less intensively, adopting low till methods, and avoiding pesticides. Other groups have reintroduced species like pine martens, red kites and large blue butterflies. The Woodland Trust has been active in repairing damaged woodland and planting new native species. One of the most interesting developments is the transformation of Knepp Castle from a loss-making dairy farm into a nature reserve attracting an increasing number of eco-tourists. Large areas were seeded with natural grasses and wildflowers, and the land was left to go completely wild. Longhorn cattle, Exmoor ponies and Tamworth pigs were introduced and allowed to roam freely, browsing, grazing and trampling to create biodiverse habitats for a whole range of plant, bird and insect species. Thanks to the sale of high-quality organic meat, wildlife safari tours and other tourist activities, the farm now runs at a profit. Its example has inspired other projects around the country, such as Wild Ennerdale.

Thanks, Tony, for an interesting and well-researched talk.

John Eakins