

Oak processionary moth

We need a change of direction, says Patrick Mannix.

The unquantified cascade of death and disruption resulting from the spraying of OPM caterpillars is the complete antithesis of a statement by the Secretary of State in the Government's 25-Year Plan to Improve the Environment.

My objective, since acquiring Sandhurst Copse and Sheepwalk (84 acres of part ancient, mixed broadleaf, woodland in the Surrey Hills AONB) in 2000, has been to leave the woodland in better condition than when I acquired it, and at the same time to demonstrate that revenue can be generated on a sustainable basis without destroying its character. In the recently published Government '25-Year Plan to Improve the Environment', the Prime Minister echoed the same, saying "Ours can become the first generation to leave that environment in a better state than we found it and pass on to the next generation..."

In my article in the July 2017 *Forestry Journal*, I advocated learning to live with OPM, as opposed to wholesale damage of the environment by twice-annual spraying to get rid of it. This was with particular concern regarding non-urban countryside and old/ancient woodland.

Since then I have attended an FC/Defra OPM feedback workshop, and recently an OPM identification seminar in Richmond Park – both well-intentioned and useful events. The latter was particularly so in view of the location. My view has not changed; but there appear to be structural issues impeding progress.

In the last year I have had the opportunity for a short discussion with a senior executive in Defra and separately with a senior executive in the Forestry Commission. It appeared that they were driven by belief in the need to eradicate the problem and to protect the general public and their pets from the terrible havoc

wreaked by the OPM caterpillars!

However, it is unclear what the basis for this position is. It seemed to be based on an emotive reaction to pictures of the results of OPM contact, rather than any scientific analysis. Quoted examples tend to be repetitions of the same incidents.

THE FIRST LEVEL OF DEFENCE SHOULD BE EDUCATION

In the Government's 25-Year Plan, the Secretary of State says, "Respecting nature's intrinsic value, and the value of all life, is critical to our mission." Defra policy on OPM spraying is clearly in contravention of this. Spraying for one pest should not be undertaken without a risk assessment of the consequences for other affected species – those dependent on the food chain and other relationships, including those of the microbiome – that we cannot see and do not yet fully understand.

How bad is the OPM impact? The health impact should surely be assessed – not by Defra, but by the Department of Health. The Department of Health have the connections to find out how many deaths there have been, how many hospital referrals, how many GP visits, working days lost, or other metrics. The Department of Health is also the obvious route for communication with GPs so that they are aware of, and can deal with, the symptoms. How does it compare with ticks and Lyme's disease, of which the consequences are much more serious? Ticks typically coexist on sites with significant numbers of oak trees, but do not seem to be getting the same degree of attention.

There needs to be robust debate between those concerned and responsible for the protection of people and their pets and those concerned and responsible for protection of the environment from what may be long-term damage to biodiversity.

These two issues should be handled by different groups; the necessary public debate is not taking place.

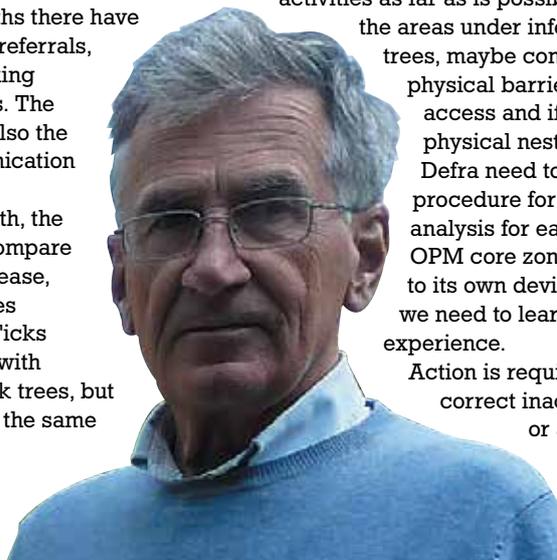
OPM is primarily a people health problem, not a tree problem. I had complete defoliation of oaks by winter moth caterpillars for several years around 2009; the Forestry Commission Plant Health unit at Alice Holt were not interested at the time. The trees recovered because of lammas growth later in the year. The photograph shows complete defoliation of an oak in May 2009.

Why does defoliation by OPM warrant such great attention – presumably because it is a public health problem?

Defra should be the defender of the environment. Defra's role should be to ensure that action taken does the minimum of harm. As a result of recent unofficial coverage in the press, contractors have been advertising their ability to carry out OPM control spraying; but there does not appear to be any process to ensure that this is carried out with proper consideration of the environment. Defra should be issuing guidelines on how to deal with OPM, with the environmentally damaging spraying as a last resort. The first level of defence, if a site has OPM, is education, and organisation of activities as far as is possible to avoid

the areas under infected oak trees, maybe combined with physical barriers to restrict access and if necessary physical nest removal. Defra need to lead with a procedure for risk-based analysis for each site. The OPM core zone is now left to its own devices, and we need to learn from that experience.

Action is required to correct inaccurate or alarmist portrayals



in the press. Recently there have been references to pheromone trapping of the moths as if it would lead to eradication. The trapping is only sample trapping to gauge population numbers. Rapid response and correction is required to such inaccurate reporting.

There may be no learned papers on the matter; but instinct and common sense tell you that if you spray to kill all caterpillars at a time when birds need them as food for young, the knock-on effects throughout the food chains may well be catastrophic, let alone the effects on other species in the vicinity and the impact of the residue on the ground on the microbiome of the soil, upon which all depends and about which we understand so little. In the absence of better data we should hold fire.

It seems there is a further obstacle. The Forestry Commission website reports that 'European Union legislation was introduced in October 2014 which recognises those parts of the UK that are outside the affected areas as a 'Protected Zone'. The Government now has a statutory duty to prevent infestation of the Protected Zone, and this has to be the focus of government-funded activity.'

So, if OPM arrives at my woodland (5-8 km from currently infected areas), the UK Government has to prevent infestation by aerial spraying without any consideration of the environmental impacts of such spraying. In the absence of better data we should hold fire.

We should not be coerced and bludgeoned into submission by those with short-term political or pecuniary interest in the outcome.

Complete defoliation of an oak.



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