The Climate Emergency: How BFPC Can Help.

1. The Background.

Building on the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, at the 2015 Paris Agreement 194 countries and the EU accepted the scientific evidence that we are experiencing an unprecedented increase in global heating. In other words those responsible for 87% of global greenhouse gas emissions now recognise that collective and international measures have to be taken to halt and mitigate this threat to humanity.

The UK is one of the signatories to the Paris Agreement and accepts that:

> *"Climate change is happening and is due to human activity"*[1]

Cornwall Council declared a Climate Emergency on 22nd January 2019, and has since published its *Climate Change Action Plan*[2]. This clearly states that the council has to reassess how it manages the county's environment:

> *"6.30 Reducing emissions, increasing carbon sequestration – we will work with Cormac to review how we manage our environmental assets to optimise the balance between management interventions that generate emissions and the opportunity for carbon sequestration* ***through increased vegetation growth or changed land management patterns."***[3]

In June 2019 Geoff Brown, the CC portfolio holder for Transport, stated that a directive had been sent out to Cormac emphasising that they:

> "*…now only cut verges for safety which includes the inside of bends, junctions and visibility splays. Where it is necessary to cut to maintain the road width then this should be minimal not exceeding 1metre from the verge."*

As a Parish Council in Cornwall these are the guidelines that we have to work within. The fact that many members of BFPC do have a strong personal commitment to these principles matters not. We are not pursuing a "personal agenda". We are adhering to policies that have global, national and local acceptance, and in many cases legal weight. As parish councillors, in June 2019 we unanimously accepted the need to address the climate change. In October 2019 we also unanimously declared a Climate Emergency.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/climate-change-explained

[2] https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/40176082/climate-change-action-plan.pdf

[3] https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/40176082/climate-change-action-plan.pdf, p.35

BFPC also organised a public meeting with guest speakers in July 2019 to raise awareness of this issue. As a result a group of residents have formed Botusfleming and Hatt Emergency Response Action Group (BOTHER) to explore ways in which the community can work together to tackle the emergency. BFPC has agreed to provide a small budget to support BOTHER for approved projects.

2. Low-tech Responses to the Climate Emergency.

There are numerous international and national proposals being proposed or trialled at the moment in an effort to respond to the climate emergency. Many of these require investment and technology that is beyond the scope of a modest little parish like ours. However, there are relatively simple measures that our community can take to contribute to solving this problem.

Amidst all the uncertainties that surround climate change, there is one that we can try to mitigate against here: how to predict exactly how much warmer or wetter the UK will become in the coming decades. The existing range of plants and animals (biodiversity) that we have here has been evolving since the end of the last Ice Age (c. 12,000 years ago). This has resulted in a high degree of interdependence between all the different species such that the disappearance of one will have a detrimental effect on a whole series of other organisms. That interdependence evolved slowly in the context of a mild maritime climate. This did vary over long periods of time with both colder and warmer periods. However, for most of these 12,000 years the human population of the British Isles was small. Our impact on the landscape and its fauna and flora was relatively insignificant. This meant that during past fluctuations in climate (none of which were as marked as those predicted now) the biodiversity here was sufficiently rich as to ensure that there would be a big enough reserve of species to allow the overall interdependent ecosystem to survive and bounce back.

However, since the industrial and agricultural revolutions began in the 18th century we have seen a dramatic reduction in the range of plants and animals here. We have one of the lowest percentages of forest cover in Europe at about 12%. France has 29% and Germany 32%. Our intensively farmed countryside has lost 97% of its wildflower meadows since the 1930's. Look over any field boundary in our parish, and all you see will be the ground densely covered by maize, barley, uniform acres of closely cropped pasture or grassland dedicated to hay or silage production. Apart from the odd buttercup, thistle or dock, you will rarely see any other plant life. The same will hold true in most other parts of the UK.

Why does any of the preceding paragraph matter? Well, one in three of the mouthfuls of food we consume are there thanks to pollinating insects. It's easy

enough recall that apple, pear and cherry blossom is pollinated by insects. But don't forget that apart from potatoes nearly all our vegetables come from the sowing of seed produced thanks to pollinators. That extra virgin rapeseed oil beloved of so many foodies is only in your frying pan because an insect visited the necessary flower.

I haven't mentioned bees in all this. That's because while honey bees are very important as pollinators, they're only one of a host of insects that help to ensure we have a varied and nutritious diet. Solitary bees, wasps, beetles, flies, butterflies and moths are equally important. In fact their numbers and contribution to food production greatly outnumber those of honey bees. Worryingly, a study published earlier this year reported a significant decline in bees and hoverflies since 1980. One of the key reasons for this decline seems to be loss of habitat, along with climate change and overuse of insecticides.

In the short to medium term this parish will only be able to have a limited impact on climate change. What we can do though is to ensure that our green spaces and hedgerows are better able to provide a rich habitat for pollinators. We can do this by encouraging a wide variety of wildflowers to thrive there. Most agricultural crops that need pollinating have a relatively short flowering period. When it's over the pollinators need an alternative supply of pollen and nectar to tide them over till the next commercial crop comes into flower. This mostly has to come from non-agricultural plants in the wild. Our verges and hedgerows can do this if they are more sympathetically managed. The traditional repeated mowing of them during the summer months kills off wildflowers before they have chance to bloom, act as a food source for pollinators and then set seed for the following year. The "Daily Express" newspaper of 16th November 2019 revealed that the British Beekeepers Association has reported that the 2019 honey harvest has been the best in a decade. They attribute this in large part to roadside verges being left uncut, which allows wildflowers to flourish.

3. The Local Picture.

Given that we, as parish councillors, have a role to play in helping to face up to the climate emergency, what can be done here in our parish? We are, I think, now all too aware that we are especially disadvantaged as a parish in as much that we own no land in our own right. This will hopefully change when we acquire the recreation field.

We do, however, have the option to make use of the grassed verges along the roads that run through the parish and the roundabout on the A388 in Hatt. These are

Cornwall Council assets and form part of the maintained highway. Cormac has already given the go-ahead to plant trees along a certain stretch of verge of the A388 provisional on the submission of a planting scheme. They are also of the opinion that allowing wild flowers and grasses to flourish on the A 388 roundabout does not constitute a hazard. Cormac does though recommend a metre-wide cut around its circumference. There will be times when the verges and roundabout look uncared for by traditional standards. They will not be cut to bowling green standards. Flowers and grasses will fade and turn brown while they set seed and die down till next year. This is a natural cycle which has enabled our planet to flourish and be habitable.

We forgot about this for too long. Now is the time to repair the damage so that future generations will be able to enjoy wholesome food and a landscape that inspires and lays the foundation for wellbeing. As a parish council we can help our residents to understand this and to take pride in the fact that this small part of Cornwall is a refuge for wildlife.

A future biodiversity report will share the key recommendations from the charity "Plantlife" for managing our grassland verges.[4]

Cllr Malcolm Fletcher

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[4] https://plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/roadvergecampaign