

## **Climate Solutions Discussion Group - October report by Kate Bailey**

Coincidentally our group met just after the 300 year old 'Sycamore Gap' tree had been felled, in what Northumbria Police have called "*a deliberate act of vandalism*". An outpouring of outrage and grief has come from people all over the planet. On the same day, the '2023 State of Nature' report stated that "*the UK is currently classified as one of the world's most nature-depleted countries*". "*Evidence from the last 50 years shows that intensive farming and the continuing effects of climate change are the two biggest drivers of nature loss.*" These news items led us to consider the distressing lack of respect of humans for the natural world and also the indifference that most of us in Teesdale display towards the current reality of mass extinctions.

Our group had previously decided that our main topic for discussion would be around farming practices, past and present. Government statistics (June 2023) state that the "*utilised agricultural area accounts for 68% of the total area of England.*" A 2019 book by researcher Guy Shrubsole estimates that 65% of the land in the UK is owned by 0.36% of the population and that the rest of us have "open access" to only 10% of the total area.

We are aware that, over many generations, farmers have been driven by the demands of governments and supermarkets to produce cheap food. In intensively managed monoculture fields herbicides and pesticides are used to control the 'unwanted' plants and insects that provide breeding and foraging habitats for small animals and birds. Reliance on oil-based fertilisers and other agro-chemicals that have dramatically increased crop yields has resulted in huge damage to wildlife and to our soils.

"*The UK is 30-40 years away from 'eradication of soil fertility', warns Gove*" was a headline in 2017. But since we left the Common Agricultural Policy in 2020 many of the environmental gains that the EU funded, for example 'set-aside' land, uncultivated field margins and 'Beetle Banks' and the valuable habitats that they hosted, have been eradicated.

Always looking to discuss positive ways that u3a members can help to undo some the damage that humans have caused, and are continuing to cause, to the global systems that make Earth habitable for our species, we talked about the growing importance of 'regenerative farming practices'. These seek to improve the health of depleted soils and thus the nutritional value of seasonal crops.

Measures involve mixing crop rotations with livestock production, 'no-dig' cultivation to reduce soil erosion and keep carbon in the ground, minimising herbicide, pesticide and antibiotic use, replanting hedgerows and managing field margins to increase species diversity and improve water quality in rivers and streams. We concluded that we can take positive steps to support farmers like these by choosing to shop locally, in farm shops and outlets that sell local produce where we can, by buying fewer imported food products and avoiding plastic packaging, and by growing where we have space, and eating, seasonal fresh food. Hopefully we'll become happier and healthier !



Above - 'Sycamore Gap' tree - photo Rob Cowen

Below - 'Sycamore Gap' tree felled - screenshot from Sky News website

