

Making a difference

The *Nature of Britain* presenter **Alan Titchmarsh** talks to Cavan Scott about otters, great crested grebes and how you can “get off your butt” to help the British countryside

“The problem now is that we’ve become so metropolitan based, everything we watch on the box seems to be set in the city. You know, if we went up in a helicopter right now we’d have a job to spot a town.” Alan Titchmarsh is in full flow and it soon becomes clear that when the gardener, once voted as the second sexiest man on TV, has a bee in his bonnet, nothing can stop him. We’re sitting in the beautiful, wood-panelled Oak Room of Hampshire’s Chawton House Library talking about his new series, *The Nature of Britain*, as Alan takes a break from the final week of a filming schedule that has stretched over one and a half years. You would be forgiven for expecting an ounce of weariness to creep into anyone involved with such a long project, but not Alan. The enthusiasm he radiates on screen is obviously not just for the cameras, especially when he’s talking about one of his pet subjects, the great British countryside.

Take pride in the countryside

“The reality is that seemingly 90 percent of our surface is green,” he continues, hardly pausing for breath, “and yet we’ve never had such a lack of understanding of how it works. My evangelical mission, if you like, is to get people to be proud of their countryside and to cherish it. We’ve lost the words ‘stewardship’ and ‘husbandry’, yet every bit of our landscape is managed in some way or another.”

This zeal was the inspiration for *The Nature of Britain*. In 2004, Alan turned landscape detective to chart the evolution of the United Kingdom in *British Isles: A Natural History*. When approached by the BBC’s Natural History Unit to visit the Costa Rican rainforest, he told them that he’d rather work on something about Britain. This comes as no surprise about a man who freely admits that he’s more interested in the native rather than the exotic. Born on Ilkley Moor in Yorkshire, Alan was spending

time in his grandfather’s allotment as soon as he could toddle. By 15, he’d left school to take up an apprenticeship at a local nursery, taking the first steps on a path that would lead to him studying at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and the eventual shift to the world of horticultural journalism.

His hunch that the public would be just as interested in the geology of the British Isles as they would about distant lands paid off, and more than six million viewers tuned in, despite some barbed comments from the critics.

“When I did the last series, it was a bit dispiriting that there were some snipes about ‘what does this gardener know about the countryside?’” he explains. “Gardeners are the only interactive naturalists. Bird watchers watch; gardeners involve. We get stuck in, we plant, we grow. I joined the local naturalist society when I was eight, before I took over my parent’s garden at 10. It’s that innate passion for nature that you want to pass on.”

The Nature of Britain is providing Alan with the mouthpiece to do just that, but I have to ask, is it too late? If we have, as he said, lost stewardship of our landscape, then how do we readdress the balance?

Changing attitudes

“Hopefully, through programmes like this,” comes the reply. “We need to wake up folk and give them that ‘get off your butt’ moment. Conservation in Britain seems such an enormous responsibility, but if everyone thought of their back yard as their little square and started to get involved right there, right now you’d end up with the squares joining together. We’d have a patchwork quilt of renewed and protected countryside. I don’t think this is wishful thinking. Several things,

such as Jamie Oliver’s food campaign, have proved that we can raise awareness in people and we can do the same with natural history. I’d love to get kids to understand the difference between 12 wild flowers rather than 12 X-Men.”

According to Alan all we need is a little positivism to start making a difference. “I will never forget watching wild otters in Shetland for the *Coastal Britain* programme. They change form when they’re in the water. Our cameraman, Gavin Maxwell, said they look like a bag of oil, which is a great description. But they’re also such a fantastic story. A couple

of years ago, I went back to the Wharfe in Yorkshire and found otter footprints on the sandy bank of the river. Now, when I was a boy growing up there, otters were something you only saw in zoos, they were rare, exotic animals. To find tracks on my old river was fantastic. These are the stories we need to hear. If you’re constantly told we’re losing this animal or that bird it’s too easy to give up. Give us a story of encouragement, like how the otters have come back from the brink of extinction, then you know the task is doable and it’s worth getting involved.”

Time and time again as we talk we return to Alan’s desire to inspire people to make a difference to our natural world in our everyday life. When discussing *The Nature of Britain* programme that focuses on farmland, another wave of excitement emanates from him.

“I hope it comes across in the programme how much we undervalue our farmers. They

are the people who really understand the landscape. I’d love to see us going back to seasonal produce and to having root crops in winter and juicy strawberries in May, rather than strawberries that don’t taste of anything in December. It gives an excitement to your diet. Seasonality brings variety and opens your eyes up to how farmland works.”

Responsible farming

“We need to start treating our farmers fairly. If we continue to make unrealistic demands on them, wanting more for less money, they are forced into bad practice. There’s not a farmer out there who farms because they’re avaricious. They do it because they are born to farm, either by birth or inclination. We should value that, making it worth their while and allow them to do it responsibly.”

So, if it is all about making a change in your own piece of the patchwork, I ask Alan what one major difference he would want to make. The answer comes back without a moment’s hesitation: “Litter. I went to Norway about a

month ago and suddenly realised how dirty we are. I would love to make us aware of the mess we’re leaving behind. We need to start thinking of practical methods of cleaning up the country.

“I often think a lot of the conservationists with an empirical view probably don’t do much at grassroots level, outside their back door. But that’s exactly where we can make a difference. Lots of people are doing it already and we should celebrate them. I mentioned the Wharfe

earlier – there’s a nature reserve there where I watched great crested grebes. When I was a lad it was an industrial site. Now the Wharfedale Naturalists Society has taken it on and they’re doing amazing work. The truth is, if you want to get involved and you want to make a difference, you can always find someone near you who knows what to do and who will help you to be a part of it.”

Alan travelled the length and breadth of the country for *The Nature of Britain*, including a visit to the wonderful Fair Isle, between Shetland and Orkney