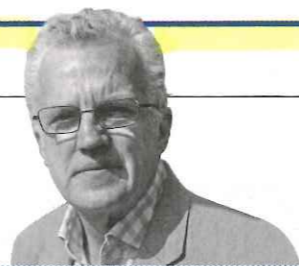


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NR's opportunity for a 'root and branch' vegetation policy

CHRISTIAN WOLMAR says proper vegetation management would provide obvious environmental benefits ... and good PR for the industry

SOMETIMES good results come out of bad decisions. When the now-departed Rail Minister Jo 'Hydrogen' Johnson announced a review of Network Rail's vegetation management policies last spring, it was greeted by widespread derision - not least from this commentator. We all had a good chuckle about how the poor fellow had no understanding of the railway, and how his announcement was just a knee-jerk reaction to a very necessary part of railway maintenance.

Johnson's announcement had been prompted by a rather silly 'exclusive' in the *Guardian* about how Network Rail had a vendetta against Britain's trees, with a secret plan to chop down "millions" while "thousands" had bitten the dust already. All this was dismissed rather off-handedly by the industry, which took the view that the railway has been doing this since the days of Stephenson and so Network Rail knew what it was doing.

In fact, it didn't, and we were wrong to shoot the messenger. The original story had been prompted by some tree felling around Twickenham and Richmond in south west London, which in the event was probably all done correctly. However, just north of London, at Hadley Wood, there was a much less-publicised bit of sheer vandalism.

Contractors, instructed to cut back vegetation

around the station, had felled a whole copse of mature trees up to 60 metres away from the track, leaving what looked like a First World War battlefield scene and a destabilised embankment. Only action from the Hadley Wood Rail Users Group, fresh from a victorious campaign to ensure disabled access to the station, prevented more trees from being felled.

When Network Rail managers, alerted by the Users Group, turned up at the site, their jaws apparently dropped. They could not believe that such a mess had been created and that the contractors had been so insensitive to

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the environment.

However, as the excellent and thorough report that has resulted from Johnson's intervention - *Valuing Nature, a railway for people and wildlife*, by John Varley - points out, it is hardly surprising that this type of incident occurred. That's because Network Rail has had no clear policy in relation to 'vegetation management' - the jargon expression for chopping down trees near the track. Varley found that "management of vegetation tends to be reactive and focused on minimising safety and performance risks as they are identified".

Essentially, Network Rail seems to have treated its huge lineside estate as something that was a bit of a hassle and needed occasional remedial action, rather than as potentially a huge asset which needs proper long-term management. Cutting back the trees and vegetation has essentially been seen as a response to emergency situations, rather than as a properly managed programme.

Amazingly, NR does not know how much it

Rail travel remains a good experience, but...

Over the past month or so, I have almost lived on the railways with journeys from my home in London to (among others) Newmarket, Pewsey, Taunton, Bristol (twice), Reading (twice), Leeds, Sheffield (twice) and numerous suburban trips. All but a couple of these trains have been on time, or at least within the official ten minutes for a long journey allowed by the official performance measure.

The worst trip, and it was one we went on deliberately because I was advising on a film for ITV (due to be screened on January 24), was a trip into Manchester in the rush hour. It was both crowded to the rafters and late.

The other bizarre crowding was on the last train back to London from Taunton on a Saturday night - at Bath it was invaded by several hundred largely inebriated (and surprisingly not young) people who had been out for a day in the town and an evening in the bars.

Apparently, this is a regular phenomenon - Bath has become a real honey pot for night

revellers, and the not sober woman who briefly perched herself next to me told me that on days when there is a rugby match, twice as many people get on. They all left at Chippenham and Swindon (though only because I woke the pair opposite me, otherwise they would have had an uncomfortable night on a bench in Paddington).

Overall, travelling by train around the country remains a good experience, despite the industry's recent travails. The worst bugbear is the use of recorded announcements.

On the new Hitachi trains on Great Western Railway, there is a particularly irritating woman's voice offering far too much information far too frequently.

On East Midlands Trains, it is the repetition of 'see it, say it, sorted' at every stop. When I queried this, I was told it was a legal requirement insisted upon by transsec, the railway's security committee. This is simply not true, as no other trains on which I travelled

make such frequent security announcements - LNER is particularly good at leaving passengers alone.

As I have written many times before, the train operators need to realise that they are providing a service. People may well have other ways in which they can make their journey if train travel is just so unnecessarily unpleasant.

The problem is that public perception has changed over the past year or so. The timetable change chaos, the strikes, the closures for the investment programme, and the generally passenger-unfriendly ethos that pervades many operators have all combined to lose the public's confidence in the railway.

This is something that the Rail Delivery Group and the rest of the industry needs to address as a whole.

Yes, passenger numbers went up in the last quarter for which there are figures, but I suspect (as Mystic Wolmar will predict in the next issues) that there is a slight overall trend in the wrong direction.



Members of the Hadley Wood community plant trees at the station on November 28. The event was attended by Rail Minister Andrew Jones and John Varley, author of the *Valuing Nature, a railway for people and wildlife* report. NETWORK RAIL.

spends on 'vegetation management'.

Even when a reasonably coherent policy did emerge in the form of *The Lineside Asset Management Policy 2017*, "it appears not to be well-known within Network Rail, or to be material to operational decisions on vegetation management". Moreover: "There are over 75 further relevant Network Rail documents provided to the Review which do not appear widely recognised or used."

One of the problems is our old friend 'outsourcing'. Network Rail routes, with the exception of London North Western, have no trained ecologists and so there is no one capable of managing the contractors effectively. Therefore, it is proving impossible for Network Rail to determine if the work is carried out effectively. That is how mistakes such as at Hadley Wood occur - according to Varley, it meant that Network Rail could not act as "an intelligent client".

In contrast, the Highways Agency seems to be doing a better job and has a clear remit from

government. This includes "the operation, maintenance and enhancement of the Strategic Road Network should move to a position that delivers no net loss of biodiversity. And, in the long term, the company should deliver a net gain across its broader range of work."

On the railways, there has been no such requirement from the Government. The High Level Output Specification makes no mention of vegetation, environment or biodiversity, but there is a vague and inadequate requirement from the Office of Rail and Road that Network Rail should "have regard to sustainable development".

This is a story that has a partly happy ending. The highly effective 'Treegate' campaign has borne fruit - or at least new trees. I went along to Hadley Wood last month to a little ceremony attended by Johnson's replacement Andrew Jones, to replant the first trees. It was used as a backdrop to launch the Varley report, which will be one of the few legacies of the now quickly forgotten Jo Johnson, but which has

highlighted a real gap in Network Rail's understanding of its role and must be acted upon - hopefully with some extra resources.

I am sure that some railway managers would groan if they were required to meet similar requirements to the Highways Agency, but it is perhaps the obvious solution. This requires the Department for Transport and Network Rail to work together to create an effective new policy.

I know that new Network Rail Chief Executive Andrew Haines has a lot on his plate, but this is an issue that has long been neglected and has significant impact on local people in many areas. It would, therefore, be (among other things) very good PR for the industry. **B**

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