

comment & opinion

THE SATURDAY ESSAY

More to being green than CSR brochures

Boosting biodiversity on farmland is a tangible environmental benefit consumers can believe in

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The year 2010 is the UN International Year of Biodiversity, when a concerted effort will be made to highlight the role plant and animal species play in buffering the adverse effects of climate change.

With 80% of the UK devoted to farmed land, it is clear there is a direct and important link between food and the biodiversity of the environment. The most serious environmental changes in the UK have occurred on farmland, signalled by a 70% decline in farmland birds since 1970. Globally this picture is repeated wherever First World agricultural technology is meeting new horizons, as it did in post-war Britain. Since then we have lost 97% of our herb-rich meadows – and with them 70% of our bumblebees.

More than 80% of FTSE 100 companies now have in-house corporate social responsibility teams, provid-

ing information and guidance on their organisations' environmental and social impact. But consumers are starting to disbelieve the ever-more complex justifications of company ethical performance told through colourful websites and sustainability reports. Research in 2006 based on TGI data showed a decline in those who believe company CSR from 68% in 2003 to 58% in 2006 – and this is set to dip below 40% by 2011. Ironically, as we profess to do more to protect the environment, the public believes us less – a fact not helped by the economic climate.

IGD data in 2006 revealed that 44% of AB shoppers had a propensity to purchase ethically. By 2009, price – ranked fourth as a driver of product choice in 2008 – was top. But the IGD's 2009 analysis of buying propensity found that despite the downturn, 31% of shoppers cited "knowing all ingredients" among the most important factors in choosing products; 20% considered "animal welfare"; and 14% still wanted "environmentally friendly" products. So a case can still be made for

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brands that maintain and articulate clear and responsible provenance.

One such example is Jordans. The cereal manufacturer works with British farmers through the Conservation Grade nature-friendly farming scheme to put biodiversity back into more than 60,000 acres of commercially viable farmland. This leads directly to proven increases in wildlife diversity over conventional arable farms.

At the core of Jordans' approach are sustainable long-term relations with British farmers trained in spe-

cialist techniques for integrating biodiversity on their farms and paid for by a small premium over market price. This premium is significant as looking at price alone inevitably results in ever-more brutal farming methods that push biodiversity out of farming for marginal economic gain. The alternative is to create commercial relationships where the relatively small costs of rebuilding a biodiverse landscape are shared throughout the supply chain.

In an increasingly cynical world we need tangible examples of how we can help, ones that consumers can both see and believe in. In 2010 more people than ever will look critically at the biodiversity commitments of food manufacturers and retailers, alongside factors such as food miles and carbon footprints. The MPs' expense claims fiasco and its aftermath in the EU elections reveal a fundamental shift in the British public's attitude: "Don't tell us you care, show us you care!" ■

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