

Prince Charles's political neutrality under the spotlight

Barristers representing the government were due to go to the supreme court in the latest attempt to keep secret a series of letters written by Prince Charles to government ministers. They argued on 24 November that the then attorney general, Dominic Grieve, acted lawfully when he overrode a court two years ago to veto the publication of the letters written by the Prince to influence official policies. For nine years, the Guardian has been pressing the Government to release the letters under the Freedom of Information Act, but ministers, supported by the Prince of Wales, have refused.

Previously, the Guardian has revealed how Charles is set to reshape the sovereign's role by making "heartfelt interventions" in national life if he becomes king. At issue in the supreme court hearing are 27 letters exchanged between the heir to the throne and government ministers in seven Whitehall departments between September 2004 and April 2005. In view of Prince Charles's involvement in hunting with dogs this would almost certainly have featured in the exchange of letters and we would be very concerned about any attempt by the Prince to influence the democratic process on this issue.

Economic benefits of nature based tourism.

Research carried out for Scottish Natural Heritage has identified walking as the most popular nature based activity for UK residents holidaying in Scotland. In 2009 "Visit Scotland" identified 47% of total UK visitor trips (5.7 million trips) involved some form of walking activity. Walking for this study included walks of more than one mile, rambling, hiking and mountain sports including hill walking, mountaineering and climbing. The total value to the economy of walking tourism was £533 million per year. Wildlife tourism such as bird watching and whale watching generated a further £127 million, which included all who enjoy wildlife as only part of their holiday. The mountain hare would almost certainly be included in this category and an annual walk to see them is organised in the Derbyshire Peak District. Hence, in part, our study into the feasibility of re-introducing mountain hares to Dartmoor.

Eminent ecologist issues dire warning about the fate of the planet

Humans are turning the world into a "lonely planet" depleted of its rich biodiversity and there could soon come a point when the mass extinction of species turns into a irreversible spiral of decline, according to a leading ecologist. Professor E.O. Wilson, a world authority on biodiversity at Harvard University said the rate of extinction of species was between 100 and 1000 times higher than in pre-human times and that we are on course to lose half of all animal and plant species by the end of the century. We're making a lonely planet. More than that, if we continue to destroy the biosphere it becomes a very dangerous planet, Professor Wilson told The Independent on a recent visit to Britain. If you wiped out enough species, all of those say in South America, then you may be at a tipping point where you get enough changes globally to begin a downward spiral. A tipping point will come, but we don't know when. However, the important thing is that it will come and maybe sooner than we thought.

Steve Connor

Science Editor of The Independent Drones update

We have been contacted by Harper Adams University, formerly Harper Adams Agricultural College, concerning our proposed use of drones to detect hares and other wildlife concealed in crops. Drones are now finding a rapidly increasing number of applications in agriculture and it may be possible for us to cover the cost of our system by offering services to farmers such as crop disease monitoring. Alternatively, it might be possible to offer farmers free, drone based, services in return for a commitment to hare conservation measures on their land. Since the goodwill of farmers is crucial to hare conservation all opportunities to work with them to mutual benefit are to be welcomed.

