

O B I T U A R Y

The Hon. John Vincent Weir
8th February 1935- 15th February 2014

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The Honourable John Vincent Weir, known to the conservation world as Vincent Weir, was a big man, both in stature and in his breadth of vision and determination. Shy and modest, he resolutely went his own way, doing what he thought needed doing and avoiding publicity. This has meant that his work has not been appreciated as widely as it deserved and his name is not widely known, but few of the well known names have done as much for wildlife as Vincent did.

It was as a school boy in Malvern that Vincent was attracted by a painting by Peter Scott and developed an enduring love of wildlife. Through first shooting, then studying, wildfowl Vincent discovered otters and was hooked. From 1969 he would spend long, cold hours, smoking to keep awake, in hides in Norfolk and Suffolk, studying and attempting to discover the causes of the otters' decline. During one of these vigils he heard a bittern booming nearby but could not spot it anywhere. As he looked a spike appeared at the window in front of him and gradually rose until he could see the bittern's head and one eye peering at him. Man and bird eyed each other sardonically, then the bittern slowly descended as it had come. Vincent never forgot that bird.

Realising that his efforts alone could not save his beloved otters, Vincent founded The Vincent Wildlife Trust in 1975, employing first two lobbyists to campaign for the otter's inclusion on the forthcoming Wildlife and Countryside Act. His initial idea was a two pronged effort to get legal protection and to research and reverse the causes of the otter's problems. To establish baseline data on otter populations in the British Isles the VWT employed surveyors to cover England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. By the time the first otter surveys were complete over 11,000 sites had been surveyed using common methodology. This time consuming and expensive project laid an invaluable basis for otter studies in the UK. The national otter surveys have been repeated at seven year intervals since 1977 giving a unique history of changes in an otter population over nearly 40years. Vincent did not restrict his efforts to British otters, but sent out his employees to carry out preliminary surveys over most of Europe and North Africa and trained visiting groups of otter people from Europe. Having established a population baseline, the VWT diversified its activities to address the problems facing the otter in Britain. The Otter Haven Project was established to promote otter conservation and habitat improvement. Studies on the effects and distribution of pollutants were undertaken, together with ground breaking radio tracking work in Scotland. Work on the impacts of eel fisheries, marine fish farming and creel fishing followed, resulting in the supply of thousands of free fyke net guards to licensed eel trappers. Long term study of otter road mortality provided the background to the development of mitigation measures to limit this major form of unnatural mortality.

As the otter population gradually recovered from its low point it became clear that injured and orphan otters were becoming more common, so a rehabilitation centre was established giving rise to veterinary studies and reintroductions. By 2000 the British otter population had recovered over most of its range and the need for concentrated

work was considered to be over. Vincent had seen his vision fulfilled. He had long had other interests and had been extending the operations of the Trust over the years. In the early days red squirrels were surveyed on the Isle of Wight. Bats were early beneficiaries, and practical as always, Vincent not only funded research, but bought and preserved the roosts of rare bat species, later becoming the main sponsor of the Bat Conservation Trust and endowing the Vincent Weir Scientific Award which has funded many students. Great crested newts were another early beneficiary, leading to Vincent becoming the founder and patron of the Herptological Conservation trust, later the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust. The reserves bought by the VWT for bats and newts also had threatened butterflies and wild flowers, so began the sponsorship of the Butterfly Conservation Trust and Plantlife. Vincent's first love for freshwater life was reflected in sponsorship of the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust and in the VWT's timely work on water voles, which Vincent had enjoyed during his early otter studies, but by the 1980s were disappearing from British waterways. The otters' relations and other carnivores were not forgotten with ongoing work on pine martens and polecats and study of Scottish wildcats in the early 1990s. British animals were not the only ones to benefit from Vincent's generosity as he regularly contributed to projects on species throughout the world. Increasingly the Trust became a less hands on organisation and more an enabling body. Vincent was very aware that many small charities were forced to spend more time fundraising than pursuing their conservation goals. Several of our most successful wildlife charities owe their success in part to generous endowment which put their funding on a secure footing.

Jim and I began working for the VWT in 1977 with the first Scottish otter survey and stayed with the Trust for 18 and 23 years respectively. As an employer Vincent could be quixotic at times. We grew to treat the early morning 'phone calls that meant Vincent had been thinking in the bath with some trepidation, as he thought an abrupt change of direction in the middle of a project could be accomplished overnight. But these were minor problems compared with the enormous opportunities working for Vincent opened up. How else would we be paid to travel all over Scotland, have numerous fascinating encounters with wild otters and care for nearly 150 otters? Vincent had a great sense of humour and gloried in sheer silliness so the quarterly trust meetings were often hilarious. His party piece was an imitation of a steam train, but we could not often get him to do it. In 1979 one of the Bank Line ships, the Roachbank, picked up a sinking boat load of Vietnamese refugees, at a time when there were commercial penalties to such humanitarian acts. Vincent took an interest in his boat people visiting them and entertaining the children with his steam train. One wonders what the traumatised children made of the giant of a man making train noises for them.

Few people can have done so much for the conservation of wildlife and habitats and yet be so little known. From the 1970s, when otters in England had slipped almost unnoticed to the verge of extinction, to the present day when otters are present through out the country, Vincent showed his love for them in intensely practical ways. He took pride in being able to respond at once to urgent need. Those of us whose lives were influenced by Vincent or who love otters will remember him with affection and gratitude, but he will not get the recognition his work deserves, which is probably the way he would wanted it.