

IN THE NAME OF PROGRESS

ECOLOGY : HRH THE PRINCE OF WALES

Sustainability at Highgrove.

I AGREED TO the BBC Natural History Unit's request to film at Highgrove throughout an entire year because I hoped it would help to illustrate to the viewer what an intricate and delicate tapestry the countryside is. Above all, it is important to understand what, in my view, Highgrove represents. It represents an attempt to repair, restore and recreate *something* of what has been lost, or abandoned, throughout the twentieth century: a century which has seen the persistent unstitching of that delicate tapestry — all in the name of 'progress'.

And yet, is it actually 'progress' to have lost, for instance, over half our ancient woodland, or 90% of chalk downland, or to have seen the traditional hay meadow — one of the most cherished of habitats — reduced to just 2% of its original area? These meadows were home to an astonishing variety of beautiful wild flowers with such beguiling names as sawwort, knapweed, adder's tongue fern and green-winged orchid. Sadly, such sights are now a real rarity.

Is it 'progress' to witness the near extinction, or the actual extinction, of native breeds of sheep, cattle, pig, horse and poultry — all of them intimately connected with the counties of this country and all of them a vitally important repository of genetic diversity, disease resistance, climatic and geographic adaptation? In the 1960s it was discovered that twenty breeds of livestock had become extinct since the turn of the century and it was feared a further forty would be lost by 2000. Since the establishment in 1973 of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, of which I am patron, no breed of farm animal has been lost.

Likewise, is it 'progress' to lose

the rarer vegetables and fruits, which are also an important gene bank, representing what should be part of the insurance policy for our descendants? Did you know, for example, that during the past thirty years almost 2,000 traditional varieties of vegetable have disappeared from cultivation, due to a combination of excessively bureaucratic regulations and commercial pressures? Rather late in the day, it is perhaps somewhat ironic that people are only now beginning to realise that as well as having superiority of taste and other qualities, the seeds of these older varieties may also contain information of vital importance to future conventional plant breeders, such as disease resistance. The same applies to ancient varieties of wheat and oats. After the Second World War when there was an understandable rush towards self-sufficiency at all costs, farmers naturally responded to the clear economic signals they were given at the time. The resulting intensification and reliance on monocultures meant that the value of traditional systems based on mixed farming and genetic diversity was ignored. To depend on too narrow a gene bank, however, is to make oneself vulnerable to disease and changing conditions of climate. And many of the older varieties had a distinctive and enhanced flavour.

And, finally, one cannot help but wonder if it is really 'progress' when the imperatives of marketing and fashion, the desire for 'new' varieties, and the practicalities of bulk cultivation have led to the loss of many plants unique to British gardens. This diversity is important not only as a genetic resource for the future, but also because of the cultural links that plants have with our

past. If it weren't for the crucial role played by a remarkable organisation formed twenty-five years ago, called The National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG) and dedicated to conserving the unique collection of garden plants in the British Isles, the situation would be far worse. As it is, there are now 630 collections, half in private ownership, each representing a specific genus, and in excess of 50,000 garden plants are thus held secure for the future. I am also patron of this body.

I MENTION ALL this by way of describing what I have been, and am, trying to do at Highgrove — in other words, to restore and recreate what has been lost. Some people like to say that this is all part of a wealthy man's indulgence. They are entitled to their opinion. But I see it more as a duty to do what I can in my own area and to draw attention to what is possible. I may be lucky enough to pursue these ventures, but my aim is to make a long-term investment in what I hold to be genuine sustainability for the future. Returning for a moment to the loss of the traditional hay meadow, at Highgrove I have been working with the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust to try and recreate the species-rich habitat of the past through, for instance, adjusting the management of the meadow area in the garden to reduce fertility and open up the sward, and we have introduced a number of typical hay-meadow species. There are now thirty-nine wild-flower and grass species present, including ragged robin, pignut, salad burnet and sainfoin. Since 1999 we have been working on two other fields on the farm where changes to the management have allowed species such as bird's-