

Is birdwatching a model for sustainable consumption?¹

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Recently the social side of birdwatching has attracted much attention, with not only academic articles but also popular books published on the behaviour and habits of birdwatchers (e.g. Cocker, 2003; Wallace, 2004; Moss, 2005, 2011; Koepfel, 2006; Weidensaul, 2007; Winter, 2010). Although such accounts were also available earlier (e.g. Hickling, 1983; Gibbons and Strom, 1988; Samstag, 1988), the recent 10 years have seen a surge of such publications. This has been accompanied by a further selection of books reporting the cultural meaning of birds of which birdwatching is an important part (e.g. Cocker and Mabey, 2005; Gibson, 2005; Nozedar, 2006; Collar et al., 2007; Birkhead, 2008; Mynott, 2009). This clearly illustrates the growing popularity of birds and birdwatching, and at the same time the growth of birdwatching-related consumption. From being perceived as eccentric individuals, birdwatchers are becoming part of the mass society.

Birdwatching is a relatively new form of activity for the large spectres of society, emerging since the beginning of the 20th century. Before it was reserved to specialists (Bircham, 2007). The broader popularity of birdwatching was made possible thanks to the availability of optical equipment and books that showed how to identify birds, with Peterson (1934) as the progenitor of modern guides. The broad availability and popularity of optical and especially photographic equipment makes it possible for anyone to become a birdwatcher and even a birdphotographer.

Indeed, birdwatching now encompasses broad spheres of societies in several developed countries, in particular the USA and the UK. In the USA, in 2006, there were 48 million birdwatchers (21% of the population 16 years of age and older), who either took ‘at least one trip one mile or more from home for the primary purpose of observing birds and/or closely observed or tried to identify birds around the home’ (Carver, 2009). An earlier study suggested that in 2001, over 70 million could be considered birdwatchers in the USA – 33% of all who were 16 or older (Cordell and Herbert, 2002). In the UK it has been estimated that more than 6 million people enjoy birdwatching every couple of weeks (Kellaway, 2009; CBI, 2011). The above estimates include people with very different levels of knowledge of birds and involvement in the hobby, an issue which we shall explore later. This study concerns birdwatchers from countries where birdwatching has gained the largest popularity, the developed countries, in particular in the Anglophone world, where birdwatching has become a pastime for the relatively affluent, middle-aged people.

On the one hand, this broad interest in birds translates into support for conservation and reintroduction programs, membership fees in associations and other organisations of birdwatchers and supporters of conservation, reserves and other forms of protected areas, birdwatching, visiting bird areas. On the other hand, it brings about increased consumption of goods that are perceived as necessary birdwatchers’ attributes, such as optical equipment, books, participation in dedicated workshops and festivals, birdwatching holidays etc. Thus, two perspectives on birdwatching can be contrasted: an idealistic feeling of intimate bonds

¹ I would be happy to send the full working version of this paper to anyone interested in discussing it with me and providing comments on how to further improve it.

with nature; and mainstream consumption, where birdwatching is just another sector of the economy.

In promoting birdwatching the focus so far has been on the latter – trying to reach ordinary consumers and involve them in conservation. This has had counterproductive effects, providing a typical example of a rebound effect – with increased consumption-related environmental effects of what initially was supposed to be an environmentally preferable option. Meanwhile, few researchers actually looked at potential benefits and problems related to birdwatching on a broader scale (Sekercioglu, 2002). And yet birdwatching provides a useful framework for studying broader society–environment interactions.

As we shall see in section 2, birdwatching evolved from bird (and egg) collecting to collecting experience, thus reflecting the broader evolution of consumption patterns desired from the perspective of sustainability. What factors were necessary for this change to happen? And after all, has it been effective in moving from ‘consumptive’ to ‘non-consumptive’ use of nature? Section 3 addresses the distinction between consumptive and non-consumptive aspects of birdwatching. Section 4 relates birdwatching to sustainable consumption, investigating two different conceptual frameworks. Is birdwatching a consumption pattern that can be sustained into infinity, with future consumers being able to satisfy their needs in the same way as consumers today? Or more generally, assuming some substitutability between the different means of satisfying human needs, is birdwatching a consumption pattern that does not undermine other (not just this particular one) forms of consumption in the future? Finally, section 5 concludes with some remarks on how to promote the positive aspects of birdwatching from the perspective of sustainable development and minimize the negative ones. The ultimate objective here should be to promote birdwatching as a key to higher environmental awareness and the understanding of environmental consequences of one’s behaviour.

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