



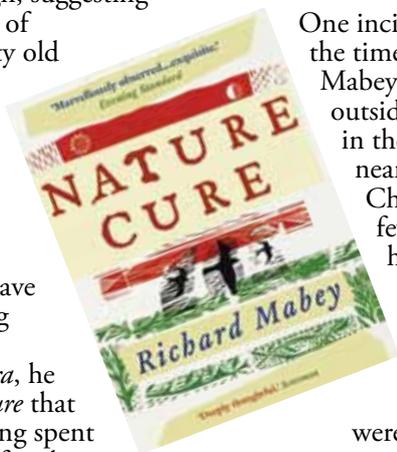
Nature Cure

For nature writer Richard Mabey depression came as a creeping sense of disconnect, a slow loss of purpose. His recovery is narrated in his 2005 book Nature Cure, as Alan Carter reveals.

For many of us, Richard Mabey is best known as the patron saint of wild food. His foraging book, *Food For Free*, coined an irresistible phrase and inspired a generation to go out and rummage in the hedgerows for sloes and wild garlic. But although *Food For Free* has been called the forager's Bible, in scale it is one of the gospels at most. Mabey's truly comprehensive, epic work is the *Flora Britannica*, a vast collection of folklore on the wild plants of the British Isles. The word 'folklore' doesn't really do the book justice though, suggesting as it does the collating of information from dusty old texts. The *Flora* is a record of the living uses, traditions and associations of plants gathered from almost 10,000 people.

While Mabey might have been justified at feeling proud or elated at the publication of the *Flora*, he confesses in *Nature Cure* that it mostly left him feeling spent and empty. We are all familiar

with the sense of drift at the end of a big project that has consumed our attention, but for Mabey it went deeper. The effort of bringing the *Flora* to fruition had followed the effort of nursing his mother through a long illness and, looking back, Mabey felt that along the way he had missed out on important rites of passage, like leaving his childhood home. Cataloguing the ties that bound people, plants and communities together, he had somehow failed to make his own.



One incident, meaningless at the time, came to symbolise Mabey's status as an outsider. Out walking in the Thames Valley, near his home in the Chilterns, he found a few remnants of the huge drifts of snake's head fritillaries that had once prospered in the wet meadows around the village of Ford before they were ploughed up. He was stopped by some locals who asked his business. It turned out that they remembered the fritillaries well – indeed they had rescued some clumps from the plough and transplanted

them. Yes, they were thriving – and no, they weren't about to tell Mabey where they were.

A new environment

On cue, Mabey's body began to supply physical symptoms to match his mental malaise, from mysterious aches and pains to non-threatening but highly alarming heart arrhythmias. Slowly he began to retreat from the world, living on his savings, venturing out only to read the paper in the local pub without taking any of it in. He was prescribed, and took, various medicines and therapies for depression without finding any great value in any of them. Worst of all, he stopped writing, his reflexive way of relating to the world since his youth.

Some of the very things that had given him meaning in the past now seemed to oppress him. Twenty years previously he had bought a wood, with high ideals of turning it into a community woodland and allowing it to develop as naturally as possible. Now he tortured himself with accusations of never having really let go of it. As the jealous owner and manager, he felt unable to be one of its denizens, one of its commoners. Eventually Mabey reached a crisis

Above: Snake's head fritillary. Photo: Flickr user Johan Hansson, used under a Creative Commons Attribution License.

point. He put his affairs in the hands of some old friends and took out the last of his savings to pay for some time in hospital where he was dried out and stuffed with medicines.

In the end, Mabey was saved by his friends, suggesting that he had made more connections than he realised. Neither his attorneys nor his doctors would countenance him being released from the hospital straight back to his old home, so he was packed off to stay with friends on the north Norfolk coast. The rest of the book unfolds in this new environment, the deep Chiltern beechwoods replaced by the open, watery landscape of East Anglia. Slowly, he finds his feet in this squelchy new habitat, falls in love and starts to write again.

Attention to nature

The idea of a ‘nature cure’ has an intuitive appeal to us, one that is now

backed by a thicket of research. One recent study [1] by Professor Richard Mitchell of the University of Glasgow compared people who took regular exercise in natural environments, like forests, to those who did it in non-natural surroundings, such as gyms. “I wasn’t surprised by the findings that exercise in natural environments is good for your mental health,” he says, “but I was surprised by just how much better it is for your mental health to exercise in a green place like a forest, than in other places like the gym. Woodlands and parks seemed to have the greatest effect, so the

message to doctors, planners and policy makers is that these places need protecting and promoting.”

I have seen it myself. The community park where I volunteer is used by a variety of groups, including those for people with various mental health issues. Time and again, I have seen people who turned up hunched and

leaden-faced, softening and opening up as they engage with an outdoor task. And I know that if I am feeling distressed myself, the best short-term remedy is to get my boots on and head into the forest or along the river. *Solvitur ambulando*, as the Roman saying went – work it out by walking.

In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*, the psychiatrist Oliver Sachs introduces us to patients who have had their minds fractured by events, such as strokes, that have taken away some part of their mental functioning while leaving others intact. Sometimes the losses are bewilderingly specific, almost whimsical, as with the man who gives the book its title. Despite remaining a talented music teacher, he has lost his ability to make whole his visual experience and can only see things as isolated fragments. Looking at a rose, he describes it as “a convoluted red form with a linear green attachment”. Asked to smell it instead, he exclaims, “Beautiful! An early rose. What a heavenly smell!”



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Some of the most poignant stories are those about people who have lost their ability to make new memories. Constantly dislocated in time, they are forever surprised – by their surroundings, by their own appearance in a mirror – and struggling to keep up. One man confabulates desperately, spinning out an endless, exhausting stream of unlikely stories to account for his situation. One recurring note in the book is the calm that these poor souls find when out in the hospital grounds. Nature does not require us to present ourselves – to have our story straight. Instead it invites us to be present, to be attentive.

In Buddhist meditation, one tries to keep the attention on one thing, such as the breath. There is no attempt to empty the mind, as some imagine it, but simply to notice every time that the mind wanders off and to return it to the object of attention. The idea is to bring some space and awareness into the mind's natural tendency to go galloping off, whenever it is given a stimulus, along habitual patterns of thought that are determined by our past experience and actions. There is something of this quality in attention to nature too – it has a way of taking us out of ourselves and away from the sometimes dysfunctional stories we tell ourselves about our lives.

Presence

From Richard Mabey, we gain a sense that being a nature writer can be a dangerous profession, for at times he appears to have bound nature up so closely with the habit of inner narrative that it has no power to rescue him. He seems to be casting around for an idea that will help him to clear the fog of ideas between himself and nature. He visits an area of fen, surrounded by intensive arable fields, that is being rigorously managed by a conservation group to return it to a 'natural' state, but finds himself alienated by the idea of humans as the managers of nature, even beneficial ones. Turning on the television, he sees this managerial, presentational approach everywhere, from television shows that make a spectacle of nature to the careful management of British public opinion by Tony Blair as he leads the country to war in Iraq.



Coming out as an old-fashioned, romantic anarchist, Mabey prefers the idea of nature as a commons and he traces the remains of the old East Anglian commons, now mostly obliterated by enclosure and industrial agriculture. We now, sometimes, imagine that common land was a free-for-all and use the phrase 'tragedy of the commons' to describe a situation where everyone is driven to over-exploit an unowned resource because if they don't, someone else will. In reality, the commons was an intricate system of ownership in which rights of use were carefully parcelled out and managed, often with complicated provisions to ensure sustainability and fairness. The difference between the commons and individualised land ownership is that commons' rights were obtained by presence – by living in an area – and negotiated with the rest of the community. Modern land tenure, a state-backed agreement that we can take with us even when we leave the land (or even if we have never even visited it) cuts these links between individual, community and place. Richard Mabey sketches out a vision of nature in which humans are commoners rather than lords, making our own distinctive contribution but accepting other species as actors too.

Mabey also questions our idea of wilderness as land which has never been touched by humans. From the eastern states of America, where huge nature reserves are founded on

abandoned, reforested dirt farms, to the agri-desert of East Anglia, Mabey discovers nature pushing wildness into whatever cracks we allow it, not retreating to remote, designated reserves.

In the end, Mabey's insight is that a nature cure is not effected by nature alone. Nature was always there when he was sliding into depression, but he felt unable to respond to it; he even felt it as a reproach that such wonder was being wasted on him. We have to meet nature half way, not so much begging it to take us out of ourselves as letting it come in and bring us back to ourselves, enlivening us and firing up our imaginations. For Mabey, the defining point in his recovery came when he picked up a pen and started to write again, re-engaging with the creative process that he had always responded to nature by.

If we want nature to cure us, we have to open the door ourselves and learn the art of letting it in, but even when we don't, we can be sure that it will be standing on our doorstep – and gently knocking.

References

1. <http://tinyurl.com/bp9ybcs>

Alan Carter is a forester and greenspace manager. His blog about forest gardening is at scottishforestgarden.wordpress.com

Above, Red squirrel. Photo: Peter Trimming, used under a Creative Commons Attribution License.