Early conservation efforts in Britain were concerned with the protection of particular species (sea birds, seals, etc). Habitat conservation came later and its origin should be credited to two very different people: Charles Rothschild, a banker, and Frank Oliver, Professor of Botany at University College London (and second President of the BES). In 1899, Rothschild purchased Wicken Fen and donated it to the National Trust, with the stipulation that it be managed as a nature reserve; he was convinced of the need to manage ‘good spots’ as nature reserves (Rothschild & Marren 1997). Then in 1912, he formed the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (SPNR), whose aim was to identify and preserve “areas of land which retain primitive [i.e. ancient and semi-natural] conditions and contain rare and local species liable to extinction owing to building, drainage, disafforestation, or in consequence of the cupidity of collectors” (Sands, 2012). In the same period, Oliver, together with his junior colleague Arthur Tansley, began taking student parties to study littoral habitats at first inBritanny and then at Blakeney Point in Norfolk – which he bought in 1912, helped by a substantial donation from Rothschild.

The following year, Oliver spoke at the Winter Meeting of the BES, recording the establishment of the SPNR and calling upon ecologists to consider the function and management of nature reserves, noting that the few nature reserves in England formally recognized at the time existed more by accident than any deliberate policy, perhaps because “the country districts of England are not obviously and seriously threatened, hence the Nature Reserve movement lacks any background for a strong public appeal” (Oliver 1914). Rothschild was not so sanguine, and the SPNR consulted widely, producing a list of 273 areas “worthy of protection” which it submitted to the Board of Agriculture (Sheail 1976: 127-31). But there was little response and Oliver became increasingly concerned about the need for action (Oliver, 1928). SPNR itself became less proactive after the premature death of Rothschild in 1923. It was offered St Kilda for £3,000 in 1927, but could not afford it. Most debate in the inter-war years centred on the establishment of large national parks which were supposed to take nature conservation on board, but doubts were repeatedly voiced that this would be adequate. Edward Salisbury (BES President 1928-30), who had succeeded Oliver at UCL, declared that “the survival of a large proportion of plants and animals
depended upon ‘active control’ and ‘informed imagination’, and ‘a properly constituted body was needed for that purpose’” (Sheail 1995).

The situation began to change in the 1930s with the recognition by a Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population (which reported in 1940) of the unevennesses in urban developments and at the same time, an awareness of the need to plan for reconstruction after WWII ended (Sheail 1998: 10-12). In the Presidential Address of his second BES presidency, Arthur Tansley expressed irritation and frustration at the premature termination of long-term ecological observations by external interference. He argued that there was a "need to have access to areas of varied vegetation which are absolutely safeguarded " (Tansley 1939; Ayres 2012). This was more formally recognized in 1941 when the SPNR initiated a Conference on Nature Preservation in Post-war Reconstruction which confirmed the need to incorporate nature reserves into any national planning scheme. The Government accepted the recommendations of the Conference, but prevailed upon the Conference members to develop a detailed scheme. A Nature Reserves Investigation Committee (NRIC) was constituted in 1942.

The BES decided to back the work of the NRIC with its own Nature Reserves Committee (all of whose members were also on the NRIC) by putting forward a list of “places suitable for preservation, with relevant information about them”, and furthermore, urged on by Arthur Tansley, “to consider and report on the whole question of nature conservation in Britain”. The BES Report, largely drafted by Tansley (its chairman) was published (unusually) in both the Society’s journals. It emphasised that the most important aim of the preservation movement was “the maintenance for enjoyment of the people at large of the beauty and interest of characteristic British scenery... (touching) the deepest source of mental and spiritual refreshment, both conscious and unconscious”; the scientific, educational and economic values of preservation were essential but secondary to this. The Committee listed 49 national habitat reserves, 33 scheduled areas, and 8 sites where wildlife was already protected. It recommended the establishment of an Ecological Research Council to take charge of nature reserves, to undertake surveys of biota, and to establish an “Institute of Terrestrial Ecology”; in other words, a Research Council paralleling the existing Agricultural and Medical Research Councils (Tansley 1945).

The BES Report differed from the NRIC Report in insisting that any Nature Reserves Authority must have its own scientific and support staff, separate from any organization acting with or alongside a National Parks Authority. Charles Elton was a key figure in developing this idea, based on his positive experience in directing the rodent control research of the Bureau of Animal Population in Oxford during the war (Sheail 1987: 140). The Reports of the NRIC and the BES Committees were taken on by Government-appointed Wild Life Conservation Committees (chaired for England and Wales by Julian Huxley, and by James Ritchie for Scotland), as subgroups of the committees to plan for a National Parks Commission.

The Huxley Committee reported in 1947 and the Ritchie Committee in 1949. They accepted that reserves should be chosen primarily for their scientific value, to include “both the unique and the typical, the common and the rare, in such proportions as will best provide a foundation for a sound ecological study of wildlife conditions in this country.” The Nature Conservancy received a Royal Charter in 1949, a Research Council in practice but not in
name because of objections from the Royal Society and the Agricultural Research Council. Its role was to provide expert advice on nature conservation, designate and manage a series of national nature reserves, and to undertake such research as was relevant to those functions, over and above the more fundamental, long-term research expected of a research council. At the Golden Jubilee of the BES in 1963, Bill Pearsall (1964) described the formation of the Nature Conservancy as the most important post-war development in ecology. The Institute of Terrestrial Ecology was split from the Nature Conservancy in 1973 and became part of a newly formed Natural Environment Research Council, the Conservancy retaining its conservation functions and some research responsibilities under the name Nature Conservancy Council. There is no doubt that the existence of the Nature Conservancy had a synergistic effect on the growth of interest in ecology in Britain (Smout 2001).

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