

Statement to Planning Inquiry

Introduction

My name is Simon Leadbeater and I live on the edge of the village of Ayot St. Lawrence, approximately 5 miles west of the airport and directly under the flight path of all westerly borne flights following easterly take-offs.

I also live on the edge of a woodland called Priors Wood, having committed to living here just before the last expansion was approved in December 2013. I therefore speak not just for my partner and I, but for the wood itself, for all the wild denizens who know the woodland as home. I also take it upon myself to speak for forests across the world in connection with this inquiry. Someone needs to. This may sound a peculiar way of introducing myself, but sharing a patch of landscape with nonhuman beings compels me to adopt this stance. The representations today will be couched within human-centred, that is, anthropocentric, discourse, pitting concerned people like me against the imperative of jobs and economic growth, resulting invariably in the latter being the victor. Thinking in these terms is entrenched, unconscious even, and dates back to Plato and Aristotle, who inaugurated a profound transition in which nature, a subject once revered, was converted into an object to be used. Or, in the case of this application to increase flights by about 10 a day, for nature at best to be ignored. Thinking like this makes us purblind to the all-around signs of unfolding catastrophe. Most don't notice, but of course I do, because I live in a woodland. My philosophy is quite simple. Anything which harms the woodland is bad; anything which enhances is good. Luton Airport's expansion proposal represents bad on bad, and is a prelude to what our MP has called an 'existential threat,' namely the increase to 32 mppa.

The other reason for not just speaking for myself is that the fate of the woodland is actually far more important than me. I will explain. But first let me go back to 2013, just before Christmas, when I felt we may as well have sung carols for all the notice the planning committee on that day took of the concerns residents expressed.

My experiences since the 2013 expansion

People might say I should expect noise as I live near an airport. This is a little like saying I should not complain about the construction of a motorway on my doorstep as I live on a single track lane. I never liked the noise of 8 mppa, but it was not for all of the time. Now, most days, I experience continual industrial noise with the occasional peaceful interlude. When the expansion was approved I was angry, because it was obvious to me that councillors did not understand the implications of what they were voting for. But officers, and I remember a legal gentleman in particular, spoke of expansion being controlled until noise controls were in place. At the time, that assuaged my fears a little. I now realise how naïve I was, as the Council immediately began incentivising expansion before newer, quieter planes came into service. The Council then subsequently failed to enforce its own planning conditions, and thereby betrayed any trust the community should have had in them. I also, of course, know rather more about the impact of aviation on woodlands than I did, and had I known then would have emphasised the peril that expansion to 18 mppa posed.

Let me give you a flavour of a typical day living in the shadow of Luton Airport. The word 'noise' comes from the Latin *noxia*, which means to injure or hurt. And it does. From 6 a.m. flights begin, and almost always wake me up. The explosive roar of the tailpipe noise of westerly departures make us feel we live just behind the front line of a war zone, yet curiously with that first rude awakening I relax and feel relief; I know planes are unlikely to fly over our wood that day. What I dread - I use the word advisedly - are quiet spells of weather or high pressure, when otherwise the wood would be at its most beautiful. Such weather heralds easterly departures. Then, I can just about hear the planes take off, growing in volume as they fly to the north of us, becoming fainter as they pivot and turn over Knebworth, before pointing to the west. Then the searing screeching becomes louder and louder reaching a crescendo just above us. In this way – when planes are immediately above - I am woken multiple times every morning; it is veritably tortuous. I find it more distressing than I am willing to communicate here. When I finally rouse myself, how do I feel, aside from exhausted? I feel bereaved, but unlike that for loved ones a bereavement that is swelling inside of me as I know the impact of the airport can only ever grow in subsequent years and decades. With ever more flights, being able to continue living in the woodland will become increasingly tenuous, and hence my ability to care for it. Of course that upsets me. But that is not it. I feel a drawn-out bereavement because my woodland is dying, and I am powerless in the face of such insuperable odds. Is Luton Airport solely responsible for this? No, but in part, and the officers and councillors, Luton Rising Managers, wish to accelerate and increase their contribution to the harm being caused.

This attempt to further expand the airport could not be worse timed. In July 2022 the UK surpassed 40 degrees for the first time in recorded history, and declared a drought. There was, to quote the BBC, an “intense series of heatwaves... paired with unusually dry conditions, [which] led to a summer of extremes with records in terms of temperature, drought – the worst in 500 years - and fire activity in many parts of Europe” (McGrath, 2022). The portents suggest worse is to come, as after the pandemic CO₂ emissions rebounded and reached their highest in over 4 million years (Roston, 2022; IEA, 2022). What does that mean, what am I seeing? A few days ago I saw a woodpigeon building a nest; as if by some awesome switch, from frog and toad spawn spilling out of puddles and the ponds we have created, two years ago this vernal magic suddenly vanished. We no longer have resident badgers in the wood. Once upon a time planting trees in November, giving them time for their roots to grow a little before the dormant period, was enough to mostly ensure their survival. With dry springs and searing summer heat, I have to water them, wheeling gallons of water 100s of metres through the wood in my attempt to keep trees alive. The arrival of autumn is a relief, except, where are the toadstools and other fungi we remember from 20 years ago, cloaking the woodland floor and covering all the deadwood, standing or fallen. Now, mostly we get a few Fly agarics, the red spotted mushrooms most of us recognise as toadstools. This represents perhaps my greatest fear. Everyone here will have heard of the wood-wide-web, but most won't know that the relationship between mycorrhizal fungi and their trees is an obligate one, that is, without one there cannot be the other. No toadstools equals no trees. Writing in 2000 Paul Stamets, the notable mycologist, stated these types of fungi had declined by 50 per cent already. What is it that kills these essential fungi? Nitrogen deposits. A publication in *Nature* earlier this year suggested levels above a certain point negatively impact forest mycorrhizas, and Luton Rising's own data suggests local woods already have nitrogen levels above this threshold. I was not exaggerating when I said our woodland was dying. I can feel it. The signs are there. Is it any wonder that I hate Luton's planes flying over our wood.

The plight of forests globally

When councillors approved the expansion to 19 mppa they had, according to the FOI response I received in March 2022, not received any training on climate change.¹ How can it be right for people to make decisions on projects worsening climate change to have had no special training concerning the implications of those decisions. For that reason alone the expansion should not be permitted. As, however, this is a subject close to my heart let me convey a taste of what is to come. Forests cover one third of the Earth, down from two thirds. If humanity carries on progressing with carbon intensive economic growth, forests as we know them, will be eliminated by a combination of disease, pests, drought and fire. Hitherto their main threat has been logging, but there are signs climate change will become the main cause of their demise. The cycle of natural fire and recoveries are being disrupted, meaning that woodlands are beginning to lose their age old ability to regenerate themselves. If becoming an established pattern this would have incalculable consequences for all the Earth's inhabitants including us.

Wildfires are also becoming bigger, hotter and more frequent. Reichter, et al trace the growth in wildfires from 2001 to 2021 resulting in the apocalyptic vista of swathes of Russia, the north Americas, and southern Australia, all on fire, the latter of whom lost forests on the scale of Florida between 2019 and 2020 (Welch, 2022: 49). The world really is on fire!

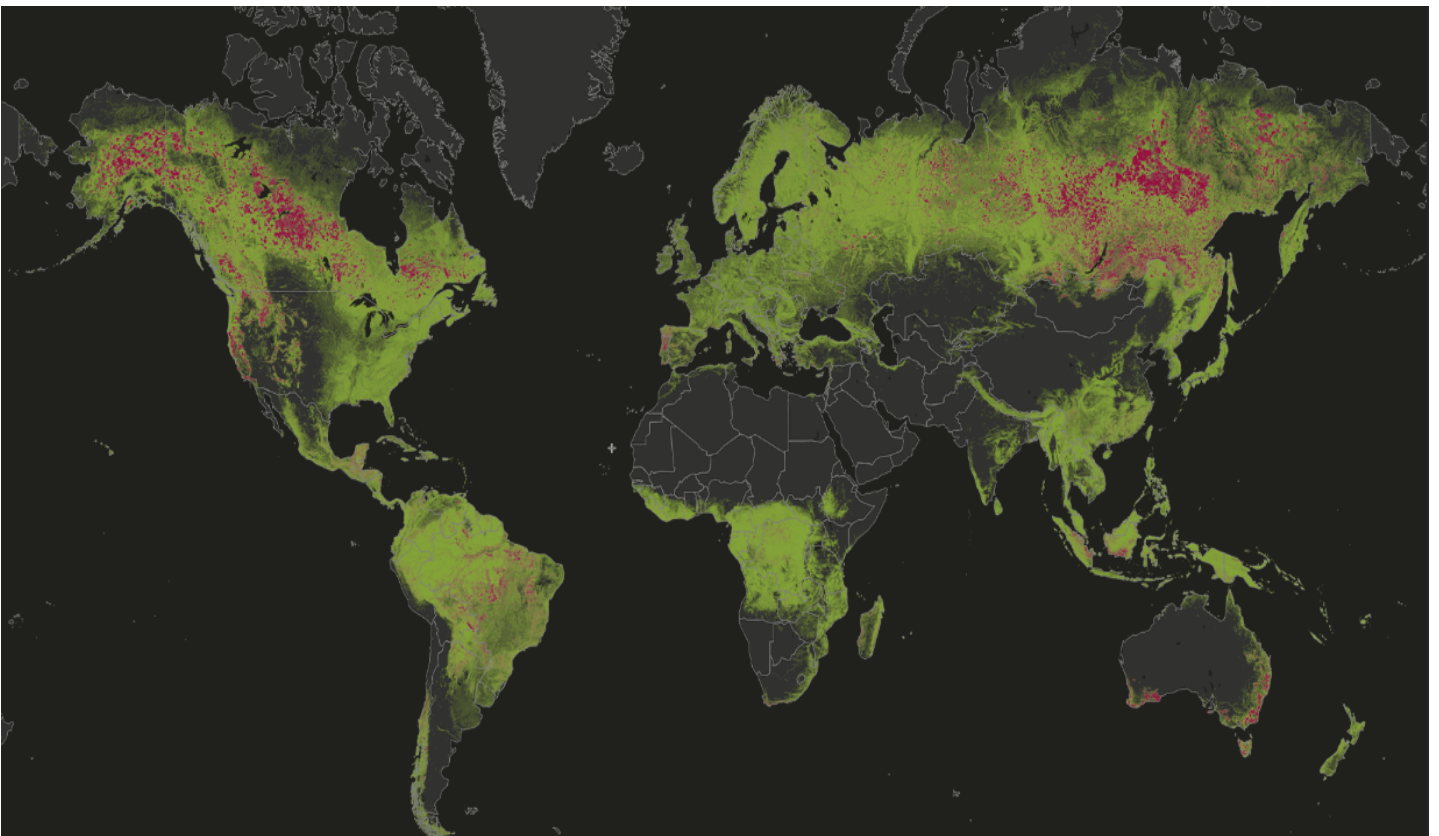


Figure 1 – *The world is on fire* (Thunberg, 2020); tree cover loss depicted in red, from 2001-2021 (Reichter, et al 2022)

¹ FOI response of 8th March 2022 enclosed. Please scrutinise any further training concerning climate change which has taken place since this date. I suspect it will remain inadequate and not relate specifically to the airport's operations and proposed expansion.

Main considerations

Over the years the Airport Operator has failed to reduce overall noise levels, not even the simplest measures to suggest good faith. Only the pandemic did that. In 2020 Stevenage Borough Council granted planning permission for new homes, but a noise impact statement required a 9 metre high noise barrier along the side of the motorway. Yet, despite my repeated asking, no similar barrier has been erected at Luton's airport to soften the worst of the noise of take-offs and landings across rural Hertfordshire. Other airports have them, why not Luton?

I have never liked aircraft noise, but 8 mppa was tolerable, 18 not anymore, 19, then 32 mppa! Will Luton Council ever be sated? In 2013 the Council gave an undertaking to only allow expansion if noise were controlled; having failed to achieve this they now seek to burden the community with yet more noise. The expansion of a further 10 planes a day, heralding even greater expansion later, is for me beyond descent contemplation. The people behind these proposals demonstrate a complete absence of empathy for people affected by them, overlaid by their latent anthropocentrism which creates a form of solipsism, that is, an inability to understand the reality of others. By others, I include nonhuman others, whose wellbeing I prioritise over my own. I have dedicated many years to improving the conditions of our woodland for the benefit of all the life that resides there. Having an airport's insatiable expansion plans undo the last third of my life's work is hard to bear.

Personal distress, fear for my woodland's future, dread concerning the worsening impact of climate change. Let me try to disentangle these themes. At a personal level easterly departures impact me the most; at peak times, overflying planes become what I have coined a 'torrent of torment,' with one plane after another, seemingly indefinitely... One notable Easter it became so unbearable even our dogs cowered. But ultimately my bit part in this story is ephemeral. It is because of the scale of the climate crisis, how it is affecting forests globally and my woodland locally, that increasing emissions of greenhouse gases including nitrogen cannot be countenanced.

If anything of my personal anguish comes across, I apologise, as it is of little consequence. But what happens to my woodland over the next decades, and the life therein, matters very much. For that reason I speak on their behalf. I adjure the Panel not to reach your decision purely within an anthropocentric frame of reference. Expanding any airport will affect people in different ways in varying degrees. But expansion can only ever result in harm to the environment of our planet, affecting nonhumans too, and that should concern us as well. Not out of self-interest, though we would be fools not to appreciate that life is an intricate web and harming woods and forests is to chop off the branch on which we also perch. But because other life deserves consideration as much as we do.

Concluding remarks

The planning system is there to protect the environment and to maintain a balance between industry and commercial interests on the one hand and the protection of people and the natural world on the other.

In the case of a noisy and polluting industry like an airport, planning controls are particularly important since the impacts are widespread and manifold.

The actions of the airport operator and of Luton Council have brought planning into disrepute and I have absolutely no confidence that any future controls would be respected. How could they be – when the Council has effectively incentivised the airport operator to break the planning conditions which that same council itself put in place?

As my wife often reminds me, these are not the actions of faceless organisations. Rather, we are talking here about the behaviour of individuals, who have discussed amongst themselves – and perhaps also personally reflected on – the decisions they later took.

I urge the inspectors to give the Council's behaviour very serious consideration when considering the outcome of this inquiry.

Thank you for listening.



Dr Simon Leadbeater

18th September, 2022

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