



The Nature Question: Lessons from Pixar's *Hoppers*

by Thomas Webb

Using Pixar's *Hoppers* as an unexpected case study, this article explores how ecology, planning and Biodiversity Net Gain can help shift the conversation from balancing nature against development to designing development that works with nature.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the perks of having a partner who is a cinephile is that I am usually dragged (albeit willingly) to watch most of the new film releases. But it's rare that a film follows me out of the cinema and into my working week.

Earlier this year, Pixar's *Hoppers* did exactly that. Not because of its humour (though it is genuinely very funny), but because it captures something that sits at the heart of the ecology industry: how we reconcile development with the natural system that sustains us.

Don't worry, this isn't a film review, but an insight into the lessons that we, as a country, can learn from a 'dam' good, animated movie about beavers (pun intended).

THE STORY THAT SPARKS THE QUESTION

The film centres around a passionate, nature loving student, Mabel, who becomes understandably angry when the 'evil' Mayor Jerry intends to destroy a peaceful woodland glade right next to her house, to make way for a new freeway. Mabel realises that the only way to stop him legally is to repopulate the glade with the beavers and other animals who have mysteriously vanished.



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When she discovers that her university has developed a way to transform human consciousness into robotic animals (amusing Avatar jokes are abundant), Mabel 'hops' straight into this new technology to make contact with the animals, to persuade them that it is in their best interest to move back to the glade.

In classic Pixar fashion, the film takes an absurd, fictional plot and makes it immediately relatable and in this case, uncomfortably familiar.

WHAT WE'RE MISSING: FUNCTIONING ECOSYSTEMS

Understanding *Hoppers* requires looking beyond its narrative and into the ecological systems it portrays.

At the heart of the film is the beaver, a keystone species. The glade itself exists because of the beavers' activity, with their dams creating wetland habitats that support a diverse range of species. When the mayor installs deterrents that drive the beavers away, the entire system begins to unravel. Wildlife disappears not because it was never there, but because the ecological processes that sustained it have been removed.

Displaced animals are forced into an already occupied habitat (the "Superlodge") where it becomes clear that the system is beyond carrying capacity. Too many species are competing for too few resources. It is chaotic, unstable, and ultimately unsustainable.

It is difficult not to see parallels with the UK. Much of our biodiversity is now confined to fragmented pockets (nature reserves, protected sites, and isolated habitats) where ecological function is constrained, and space is limited. What *Hoppers* subtly highlights is not just

habitat loss, but the loss of the processes that create and sustain ecosystems in the first place.

Seen in this light, the collapse of the glade is not just an ecological story, but a consequence of human choices about land use and priorities. This raises a deeper question that extends beyond the film: are nature and development truly in conflict, or is that narrative something we have created?



THE FALSE DICHOTOMY: NATURE VS DEVELOPMENT

The debate around nature and development is often framed as a trade-off, a balance to be struck between growth and protection. But *Hoppers* suggests that this framing may itself be the problem.

Mayor Jerry is driven by political pressure to deliver infrastructure quickly, prioritising short-term approval over long-term environmental consequence. It is difficult not to see echoes of this dynamic in current UK policy debates, where the urgency of housing and infrastructure delivery is increasingly weighed against environmental protection.

The issue may not be the balance we are trying to strike, but the way we are framing the question itself. Nature and development are not

inherently opposing forces. The real challenge lies in how development is designed, located and integrated within the systems it inevitably affects.

“Nature and development are not inherently opposing forces”

THE REAL PROBLEM: DISCONNECTION

Beyond ecology and policy, *Hoppers* points to something deeper, a cultural disconnection from nature.

Early in the film, a young, angry Mabel is taken by her grandmother to the glade. Sitting quietly, she is encouraged simply to listen and observe. Gradually, the landscape reveals itself. Dragonflies skimming the water, birds calling, ducklings following their parents, and a beaver gliding towards its dam. In that moment, Mabel relaxes. She connects.



The film returns to this relationship throughout, showing how nature fosters not only ecological awareness, but personal emotional connection. The glade becomes something worth protecting not because of policy or designation, but because it matters.

We protect what we feel connected to. When that connection is lost, protection becomes abstract. Something to be weighed, traded, and negotiated, rather than something instinctively valued.

This disconnection is not limited to individuals. It extends to decision-making at all levels. When those shaping our landscapes are removed from the systems they affect, such as Mayor Jerry, it becomes easier to overlook the complexity, and consequence, of those decisions.

“When those shaping our landscape are **removed** from the systems they affect, it becomes **easier** to overlook the complexity, and consequence, of those decisions”

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US

For those working within the ecology and planning sectors, this tension is a familiar one.

We are often tasked with navigating the space between development and environmental protection, working within systems that are already constrained by degraded baselines and competing priorities. Increasingly, the challenge is framed as making development “less bad”,

rather than fundamentally rethinking how it interacts with the natural environment.

Yet there is also opportunity. Approaches such as Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), if implemented effectively, have the potential to move beyond mitigation and towards restoration; funding the recovery of habitats and reintroducing ecological function into landscapes that have long been simplified. The shift required is from minimising harm to actively creating value.

CONCLUSION: A DIFFERENT WAY FORWARD

By the end of *Hoppers*, the conflict reaches its resolution. The development is ultimately rerouted, avoiding the destruction of the glade. The mayor comes to recognise that nature and development do not need to exist in opposition. The freeway is built, and the glade is designated as a nature reserve and given the space to recover.

Nature-positive development is not an abstract ideal, it is achievable. But it requires a deeper understanding of ecological systems, a longer-term perspective, and a willingness to reconnect with the landscapes we shape.

The question is no longer whether we can build alongside nature, but whether we remember that we are part of it. As the beaver King George in the film so simply puts it: “We’re all in this together”.

Key Takeaway:

Disney Pixar's Hoppers offers a timely reflection on the UK's nature versus development debate, reminding us that nature-friendly development starts with recognising we are part of the natural systems we inevitably affect.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Webb BSc (Hons) MSc MCIEEM, is a Senior Ecologist at RSK Biocensus and the Series Editor of Biocensus Insights. Thomas works across a range of development and restoration projects, is a licensed BTO bird ringer and a member of the CIEEM Rebuilding Nature Working Group.



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