

Riding the managerial tiger

Risk, accountability and being human

In an anxious world managerial procedures and regulations are infiltrating all aspects of life as we struggle to maintain the illusion of control. But conservation is about our relationship with nature. The new managerialism is counterproductive. People are moved to work with nature by a passion which corporate conservation must once again learn to nurture.

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Risk society

The burgeoning bureaucracy and intensification of managerial control together with the other processes of accountability that we experience in health care, education, conservation and elsewhere are cumbersome, often absurd and sometimes soul destroying, yet no-one seems to be able to offer a better way of administering public affairs; the practices are now deeply rooted and we can't imagine how things could be arranged differently. It all seems to reflect a considerable collective anxiety and maybe it's worth asking why that should be.

In 1992 the sociologist Ulrich Beck suggested that we live in a "risk society"; a society which has lost confidence in its institutions and has lost faith in its power to determine its own destiny.¹ It can feel like many things are not just out of control but beyond control. For example, technological development is unstoppable; if something is feasible we know that sooner or later someone, somewhere in the world, will do it and maybe the consequences will be devastating. At the same time, communications technologies have shrunk the globe, equally uncontrollably, with instantaneous data flows. This flux of information and ideas challenges the intellectual and cultural isolation that once sustained the old ideologies (religion, morality, sexuality, political idealism, nationality, history) and while some people cling to them with fundamentalist tenacity others no longer take them seriously. Ideologies are replaced by what Milan Kundera calls imageologies;² leaving us with a sense that reality and purpose have given way to the generation and regeneration of appearances. It can feel like we are no longer sure that we know what to do and we are struggling to find the appropriate social structures to contain our sense of insubstantiality and uncertainty. What we fear is disintegration. This is part of a global process of change which is both scary and exhilarating.

On an individual basis such anxiety can drive us to become deeply concerned for our personal safety; reinforce self control sometimes to the point of obsessive self regulation; become intensely self critical and relentlessly suppress those aspects of our behaviour that might be seen as weaknesses. Something like that is happening in our society. Our collective concerns about personal safety are obvious; one has only to think of four

million CCTV cameras, bizarre health and safety regulation; gated communities and hoodies. We are also self critical. Beck (1996) describes the Risk Society as being:

*“tendentially a self critical society..... Experts are revitalised or dethroned by counter-experts. Politicians encounter the resistance of citizens’ initiatives, industrial management that of consumer organisations. Bureaucracies are criticised by self- help groups.”*³

In contemporary society we constantly challenge and hold each other to account for our thoughts and deeds; we demand accountability. In this the various media act as our agents with ruthless determination in exposing alleged instances of abuse of power, ineptitude or almost worst of all, it seems, complacency. In holding people to account in this way we increasingly insist that accountability means culpability; when something goes wrong, we argue, someone is at fault and must be punished. We no longer believe in fate or acts of God and we can’t tolerate the inevitable fallibility of one another or of our institutions. In this climate of uncertainty and self criticism government and public service managers become hyperactive in their efforts to maintain the appearance of being in control; they use legislation and regulation as a substitute for authority and managerial bureaucracy and “spin” to mask their fallibility.

Accountability and truth

Onora O’Neill (Professor of Philosophy and Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge) gave the 2002 BBC Reith Lectures.⁴ Her subject was “A Question of Trust”. In her third lecture given at Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge she describes what accountability means in the public sector as follows, and this would apply to conservation agencies and organisations because nature has become a matter of great public concern:

*“For those of us in the public sector the new accountability takes the form of detailed control. An unending stream of new legislation and regulation, memoranda and instructions, guidance and advice floods into public sector institutions. Many of you will have looked into the vast database of documents on the Department of Health website, with a mixture of despair and disbelief. Central planning may have failed in the former Soviet Union but it is alive and well in Britain today. The new accountability culture aims at ever more perfect administrative control of institutional and professional life.”*⁴

Far from making government and businesses more effective and more transparently accountable, modern management seems to be intent, not always consciously, on proliferating bureaucratic procedures and increasing control, containment and impenetrability. Much of this is to do with risk management. Risk management, and foresight planning (often linked to almost compulsive assessment of public preferences) have become institutionalised as crucial mediators of corporate activity especially in the public sector and it is also true, though less starkly so, in conservation. In support of this, information management has become one of the main means by which an organisation believes it will maintain its credibility. Much of this is genuine and appropriate, but we

have also become familiar in recent years with the way that information can be managed economically or creatively or merely presented in a way that sounds authoritative but means nothing. So much so that increasingly we don't trust what we hear, nor do we trust the clutter of often contradictory statistical data emanating from public bodies or corporations nor indeed the sometimes paranoid manipulation of corporate image by professional image makers of one sort or another. And we can't even always trust the objectivity of official reports. Frequently we hear allegations of reports that have been rigged by government or business executives in order to suppress undesirable contents or to present a more favourable bias to an argument; such allegations easily seem plausible. In the United States recently an advocacy group called the Union of Concerned Scientists claimed, in response to allegations that a report by the US Fish and Wildlife Service on endangered species had been "watered down" by an official in the Interior Department, that there is now a "culture of suppressing inconvenient scientific truth". (*New Scientist* 4 November 2006). We always knew it was like this, but now the steady democratisation of information means that we can't pretend any more.

Accountability and managerialism

The perceived need to control institutional and professional life ever more perfectly leads to more detailed management and more administrators. Because modern management techniques are highly valued and thought to have a pretty much universal application (independent of the nature of the organisation), there is an expanding cadre of managers, administrators and policy advisers who move freely between public service organisations, charities, government and corporate business. Increasingly senior executives in health, education and conservation are career administrators. From the perspective of current ideas about accountability, this movement of management expertise can be seen to provide a fertile flux of corporate invigoration. So fertile is this trend that it is now almost inevitable that organisations will be thrown periodically into the melting pot of an organisational or strategic review in order to be "fit for purpose" to address anticipated new challenges. This form of managerial upheaval is evidently important enough to justify the demoralisation of staff, the uncomfortable shift in corporate culture and the often substantial increase in overhead costs that result. The trend towards more perfect management leads to increases in data handling, reporting and monitoring, activities which have become a large part of many people's lives and a significant distraction from vocational or front line work. As the managerial base grows the organisational capacity to maintain data on almost all aspects of its work is increased; as it becomes more contained an organisation also becomes more self absorbed.

In order to strengthen control and give a basis for accountability, managers tend to define business success in terms of measurable and usually short term, outcomes or products. Wherever possible these are defined as targets. There are advantages in doing this which conservationists have been quick to appreciate. They have been at the forefront in characterising natural and cultural features as "products". Campaigners talk easily about delivering "environmental goods" and biodiversity can be manipulated nicely within the category of product; even from the earliest days sustainability and biodiversity

conventions and the ensuing programmes have been almost exclusively shaped around measurable and utilitarian aims. Of course, this rhetoric is appealing to politicians, business people, sponsors and fund administrators and because of that it has undoubtedly brought new resources and a significantly sharper focussing of conservation effort.

Targets – master or slave?

Because measurable outputs have become the chief indicator of corporate success there is a real danger that people are seen merely as resources- human resources; a means of delivery. Superficial indicators of efficiency are often pursued at the expense of individual satisfaction at work; even the Inland Revenue has apparently been reorganised on a production line basis. It is demoralising and dangerous when dedicated people's instinctive or professional responses in day to day management are compromised by targets which have more to do with the satisfaction of political or public perception than the real business of the enterprise. It clearly serves no useful purpose if targets are poorly framed, as they too often are. But there is a more disturbing aspect to this trend because, by focussing so closely on what is measurable, people are necessarily distracted from the components of their work which are either not specifically targeted or are essentially unmeasurable; they are also exonerated from any blame for this because they are clearly complying with what is both required and expected of them. In this we see that something is being appropriated; professional practitioners in areas like health care, education, conservation and even, it seems, the army are robbed of both their passion and their authority as experts at their own work. The more focussed people become in compliance with management procedures the less they live in the full breadth of their potential experience and the less truthful and meaningful are their responses. People are learning how to become human resources and maybe how to care less. This is not good for people or their employers and the challenge is to find a way of presenting desirable outcomes that truly reflect the human and professional needs of the enterprise and not just the corporate ones. There is no way back from the culture of accountability but as Onora O'Neill suggests there is a real need for better ways to be accountable:

“Serious and effective accountability, I believe, needs to concentrate on good governance, on obligations to tell the truth and needs to seek intelligent accountability. I think it has to fantasise much less about Herculean micro-management by means of performance indicators or total transparency. If we want a culture of public service, professionals and public servants must in the end be free to serve the public rather than their paymasters.”⁴

From ethics to corporate objectives

In conservation, some people find it quite possible to work creatively within the contemporary manifestation of corporate accountability; others feel worn down by procedural rigidity and depressed by the preoccupation with strategies, management procedures and the associated measurable and sometimes inappropriate outputs. And there is no doubt that people can be so intimidated in a workplace dominated by

corporate aims that they suppress any expression of their own personal values and motivations. Many of us who have been inspired to work in conservation know that the real business of conservation lies not just in achieving outputs but mostly in the way that choices are made by the people that do the work. As Aldo Leopold (1949) put it:

*“I have read many definitions of what is a conservationist, and written not a few myself, but I suspect that the best one is written not with a pen but with an axe. It is a matter of what a man thinks about while chopping, or while deciding what to chop. A conservationist is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land. Signatures of course differ, whether written with axe or pen, and this is as it should be.”*⁵

What this brief extract from Aldo Leopold’s *Sands County Almanac* signifies most potently is the shift that has taken place in conservation culture from what was a largely personal, ethical, spiritually and emotionally enriched response towards a more objectively defined, collective and corporate response to the idea of nature and its perceived needs. While the shift can be justified as being necessary in order to cohesively address sustainability, climatic change and species loss, increasingly it is becoming subsumed within the imperative of managerial control as an end in itself. Agencies and organisations can as often be seen busy demonstrating their delivery capabilities as their capacity to embrace meaningful conservation.

And because we need to be seen as rational and objective in delivering biodiversity conservation there has been a powerful emphasis on the role of science. Science is now *“the only institution that can claim authority”* (Gray 2002).⁶ As other authorities fail, science is vaunted as an authority with a sometimes fundamentalist fervour. In an uncertain world we *want* to be able to rely upon the certainty of scientific knowledge. But science is about uncertainty; it deals in probabilities; its theories are always provisional. Science tells us, in the light of our collective experience and in the context of our cultural preoccupations, what is happening in the world around us and what the most likely consequences are if we chose to act in a particular way. On the whole it doesn’t do that very well in complex systems like nature and so we need to apply our understanding with particular care. While science is an effective tool of enquiry and has given us important insights, it doesn’t provide a comprehensive account of nature or all that matters in the process of decision making. Individually we are not driven to work with nature, to define what matters, by things that are strictly rational; rather we are moved to work with nature by inner processes that are more deeply felt. It is not just coincidence that re-wilding has become a new direction for nature conservation while security measures, regulation and managerial constraints impinge ever more comprehensively upon so many aspects of our lives. Re-wilding can be rationalised and scientifically substantiated, but, as I have previously argued, it’s a need for wildness in us, or at least a need for a real engagement with wildness, that is the motivation.⁷ We may also be moved to work with nature by our compassion, a sense of justice, the need to make reparation, grief, fear, maybe even a sort of greed. As individuals we need to work these things out. In working with nature prescriptively or too “scientifically” we risk missing much of its deeper significance.

Being human

Western culture (and inevitably much of conservation practice) is premised on the notion of human assertion over nature. In the risk society we are no longer convinced of that. The philosopher, John Gray, reminds us that the idea that we are separate from nature is an aberration; that, as opposed to the humanist feeling of being apart and dominant:

“...it is the animist feeling of belonging with the rest of nature that is normal. Feeble as it may be today, the feeling of sharing a common destiny with other living things is embedded in the human psyche. Those who struggle to conserve what is left of the environment are moved by the love of living things, biophilia, the frail bond of feeling that ties humankind to the Earth.” ⁶

The “frail bond of feeling” that ties us to the Earth is a most precious thing; I guess it has many names in different cultures and different expressions of faith; it is a deep source of significance in a world which, as we have noted, can seem stripped of meaning and purpose. If we are to achieve anything in conservation its policies and practices need to nurture the expression of biophilia, the love of life itself; at its root and in its origins nature conservation is mostly about our capacity for this love and our ability to express it. There are two ways of working with nature. One way increases our sense of alienation, the other seeks to overcome it. We have a choice. In this respect, the tendency to see nature as a product and humans as resources is alienating and potentially soul destroying; so let me say this as forcefully as I can:

Nature is not a product and humans are not resources.

The way that we frame our understanding of science, of nature and accountability seduces us into dull compliance with regulation and we risk losing the essential qualities of our care; the quality which nourishes our connectivity with nature and with others and which alone will guide us towards a more sustainable way of living. And because many of us care very much about the full potentiality of human life and the future of the environment we share with all life on the planet we cannot tolerate assumptions that diminish both nature and our humanity as a basis for conservation.

ECOS has carried many articles pointing to the perils inherent in corporate conservation and BANC has debated them at its conferences. Now a new organisation called VINE (Values in Nature and Environment) has formed with the specific intention of reaffirming spiritual values and ethics in conservation. The founders and most of the participants in its meetings have developed it as an outlet for the frustration and despair which they feel in a world of conservation shaped too exclusively by science and managerial processes. Its aim is firstly to enable such people to express and share and maybe recover the inspiration that brought them into conservation at the start of their careers and to awaken the inspiration in new recruits. This self-help function is important but VINE is also pursuing the need to turn once more to what it calls ethics as a guide to action. In the

longer term, it aims to reinstate values and ethics into the policy agenda. [In this respect it is striking that VINE is not yet willing to use the word “love”, recognising that it might detract from its potential influence; most people are not happy to talk about their deeper feelings in the context of their work; a fact that underlines the need for VINE and for a sustained challenge to the growing corporate ethos in conservation].

Riding the Tiger

I don't want to question the success of the nature conservation movement in the UK in the last century which has been extraordinary. Its greatest achievement has been to awaken a widespread care for nature. This could not have been achieved without a corporate stance and a focussing of collective effort but it also needed the individual imagination, creativity and love of a great many people who have been moved by nature and inspired by it. Managerialism will maintain its hold over conservation for a while yet; all the more reason to reaffirm individual inspiration; to hang on to personal motivation. We need to stay open to nature and allow neither a crude statistical account nor a superficial sentimentality to constrain our understanding of it. We need to acknowledge its depth of meaning to us and continue to let ourselves be moved by it in the choices we make. In immediately practical terms, we need to assert a more liberating management ethos and frame policies that better enable people to develop their creative capacity and express their inspiration; to reconnect the personal motivation with the scientific and corporate agenda. We also need to let our hair down and have a bit more fun. There are fine examples of all this happening and more than ever they need to be celebrated.

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