

Shaping the Nature of England – Defra’s discussion document

John Bacon offers thoughts on the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP) consultations

The Natural Environment White Paper consultations

The Defra consultation on this White Paper was launched on 26th July with a closing date for responses of October 30th. The Papers presented 15 questions for consideration. Immediately after the closing date the Defra NEWP Team held two one day workshops, in Birmingham and Bristol on a first come first served basis. Some 50 to 60 organisational representatives attended both workshops representing the countryside and nature conservation government and non-government/voluntary sectors. The briefings included a presentation from Richard Benyon the Under-Secretary for Natural Environment and Fisheries. The NEWP team had also held workshops for staff from Defra Departments.

We were told that 350 full responses had been received by the NEWP Team by the closing date along with several thousand responses to their short survey. The website now states over 13,000 responses were received in total which the NEWP Team will be working through. They have additionally now published further resources to help organisations facilitate *grassroots* engagement. A Guide for Facilitators, a Briefing Note for Participants, and a Feedback Form can be found on its website at: <http://ww2.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/> The deadline for returning the feedback forms from any grassroots engagement is 31 December 2010. There is to be a ‘Water’ White Paper developed by June 2011 in parallel with this Environment one.

Evidence base

This is the first environmental white paper for 20 years. The previous one had little mention of climate change as an issue – this is an indication of the development of the climate science base since that time and the need for this current review, which is intended to set a policy and action framework for the *long term*.

There are many statistics that tell of both successes, but mostly failures, of environmental policies since the 1940s; for example it is a sad reflection of past failures that 19 out of 45 priority habitats are currently assessed as degraded.

Defra is keen to see accepted the huge value of all the many benefits that the environment delivers for society. Their website sets these out in various reports and reviews e.g. National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA), The Economics of Ecosystem and Biodiversity (TEEB), Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation in Developing countries (REDD).

Personal observations

My involvement in helping to provide a written response for VINE (Values In Nature and the Environment) to the White Paper and attendance at the Birmingham Workshop have confirmed in my own mind a few observations:

Population and resources: It is a salutary lesson that world Governments did not heed the warnings of the 1960's when books (such as 'The Limits to Growth' by the Club of Rome in 1972) urged a change of direction. If actions to find, agree and introduce a policy of limiting human population growth had been successful then the last 50 years would not have been wasted and we would not now be facing a world population that will soon exceed 9 billion. When you dig down really deep you find that all our current environmental problems stem from that population growth tied to the understandable wish for all people to have a standard of living that approaches that in the western world.

Implications of resource constraints: The Earth's natural resources are used in every way to support the life systems of the continually expanding human population but no longer can these be taken for granted. As the availability of resources becomes limited, global population migration will become common place on a scale that will lead to huge social tensions.

Everything's connected, so our own small steps count: The issues surrounding climate change have perhaps for the first time brought home to governments just how much '*everything we do relies and depends on everything we do*' – with grateful acknowledgement to the Honda advert!

A global outlook: So clearly there is a critical need to reassess priorities for the management of nature conservation and the environment not only in England and the UK BUT EVEN MORE ACROSS THE WHOLE OF PLANET EARTH. We are a species running out of control and history only predicts an unhappy ending for such species!

Out of our misery?: As an aside: perhaps in a wicked pessimistic moment we should hope that large, or as we now understand even 'small' asteroids, (Ref: BBC2 Horizon 3 November 2010 – The Good, The Bad and the Ugly) may save us the agony of a long drawn out and painful decline ... and so put an end to a more painful and slower decline which will result from disease and resource shortages!

Taking responsibility in a global context: So if we graciously ignore the obvious temptation to believe that there is a hidden agenda of political and fiscal objectives – and I think the crisis that is facing the Earth means that we should - then the coalition government is to be congratulated on initiating this White Paper. That is must be converted into long-sighted and achievable action - not just here in the UK but even more importantly at an international global level - is now crucial. Yes we have to set an example here in England and the UK if we are to be listened to, but global action is now the priority.

Defra's bold efforts: Those that have sent in written responses or attended the workshops know that choosing the best policies and actions is going to be a huge task. From what I saw of the Defra White Paper Team I was impressed with their approach to the task, their clearly displayed **organising** skills, and their determination and commitment to make a difference. We should all be sending them constructive thoughts and positive vibes to help them in their huge task. They need all the help they can get.

Creating a groundswell: Then of course we will have to see whether our Government and governments across the world will be courageous enough to take steps that sometimes will be unpopular with the majority of the population? Internet lobbying groups (e.g. www.avaaz.org ; www.foe.org.uk; organisations@1010uk.org) have for the first time provided those in the environmental society with a way to let their voices be heard on a scale that demands attention.

There is a groundswell developing – the question is can it be made large enough to achieve *the* difference that is needed?

Population measures – on the radar?

Amongst all the strategic issues which influence the context for wildlife conservation, the most difficult and contentious policy area is that of trying to limit population increase! A European country has recently encouraged people to have larger families because of the need for there to be enough young people to support the burgeoning elderly population. Certain religions have moral policies that prohibit followers using family planning aids despite their clear adverse effects on individual/global poverty and suffering. China has taken a lead with its one child policy because it could see the problems of over population coming its way, but even with their controlling communist political system it has not been popular. How much more difficult is it for democratic governments to make progress where individual freedom is so prized! The ‘freedom of the individual’ on this one issue puts at risk the future of the human species. Environmental history shows that humans do not take remedial action until situations become critical – are we approaching that point when population control is no longer the unthinkable?! Or do we go blindly on like lemmings over the cliff edge?

John Bacon is a founder member and current Chair of VINE (www.vineproject.org.uk). A forty year career in nature conservation was spent working to manage National Nature Reserves and SSSIs variously for the National Trust, Nature Conservancy, Nature Conservancy Council and English Nature. Now retired he has returned to where he started, wearing a ‘volunteers’ hat! Over the last two decades he has expanded his focus from wanting to help solve nature conservation problems on to world environmental issues because of the direct causal linkages he has recognised. The views expressed above are entirely his own.