

UK LANDSCAPE CONFERENCE : EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

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Multi – Functional Landscapes – A New Imperative

Abstract

Our most treasured and iconic landscapes are bi-products of function, bi-products of the way we have chosen to manage and to settle on the land. Our capacity to change the landscape has never been greater and through our democratic processes we have chosen to introduce strong protective legislation and, at times, devise false economies to sustain what some would banish as the pursuit of a romantic idyll. But that capacity to rapidly change the landscape has been borne at a time when most of us would accept we are just not leading sustainable lifestyles and that too many of the resources we consume are finite. We are about to enter a new phase in the evolution of humanity where harnessing the power of natural systems will take on a new significance. We are all too aware that society has worked against the natural environment for too long and that we are on the brink of a new deal to develop a true symbiotic relationship with natural systems. For those of us involved directly with the connection between people and natural processes these are immensely exciting and challenging times.

In Brief

In the few moments I have I want to touch on three topics:-

- The process of understanding the landscape that has contributed to the European Landscape Convention.
- The changing influences on the landscapes.
- Multi-functional landscapes and the future.

Health warning - I must emphasise that these are my personal views and they have no standing whatsoever.

Landscape Character

The European Landscape Convention is a Treaty of the Council of Europe, 31 of the 50 members have ratified the Convention and you will hear more about this tomorrow.

The European Landscape Convention draws its intelligence about the landscape from the tried and tested process of survey and analysis, demonstrated so well in the New Map of England published in the 1990s by the Countryside Agency and adopted by Natural England. By pulling together various related landscape types that make up a generic National

Character Area we can map places that are distinctly different from other areas. The Character is directly determined by the physical results of human activity on the baseline geology, geomorphology, soils, topography, climate and the associated flora and fauna. It is in fact a scientific description expressed in plain language.

This process does not give a value judgement, it just maps character. If the character is valued this process allows us to understand the detail that makes up character to enable us to identify the targets for intervention should it be needed. If society identifies a new performance requirement from rural areas it is the Character Area that will be the most effective parcel of land to be working at. So re-watering the landscape for biodiversity and carbon sequestration reasons is happening in the New Forest Character Area.

Most of the details that make up Landscape Type and subsequently, character, can be traced back to a utilitarian reason for its existence, on balance the majority of the things we treasure are relics.

So these rich, diverse landscapes across Europe are a living record of our culture and economy over thousands of years. We have given values to landscapes through quite a complex series of primary legislation that have resulted in a variety of designations many of which require considerable public investment to sustain them. Although relics, the drivers of modern agricultural systems are themselves not sustainable and there may be a more modern use for these abandoned systems.

If I may I will draw on the Nation's most recent National Park the South Downs to give an example of these issues for one character area, you will be able to draw out a different set of issues from any one of 159 National Character Areas. In the South Downs species rich chalk grassland exemplifies the classic image of this treasured landscape. Modern agriculture:-

- Has destroyed all but a tiny remnant of species rich chalk grassland,
- Is ploughing and destroying Scheduled Ancient Monuments with public subsidy,
- Lost forestry skills so that the majority of woods are unmanaged and
- Has caused the pollution of aquifers with nitrates so that the water companies have to import water to dilute the drinking water.

Unlike all other National Parks where farming is close to subsistence but sustainable, the South Downs farming systems are big business but completely unsustainable because of its reliance on non-renewable resources. Although worthy of National Park designation the landscape of our newest National Park is in serious trouble, it is not spatial planning decisions that threaten the Downs it is the very way we manage the land.

People and Rural Areas

But where does David Cameron's Big Society fit in with all this? Do we feel empowered to become involved with the rural landscape that defines our sense of place? The spatial planning process in the UK has been very successful at separating town from country. However the fact is that the majority of the public feel powerless to be able to be involved in the local rural landscape and this raises a number of delicate issues, any one of which we could debate all night, they include:-

1. The European Commission is unhappy that the benefits of public investment into farming systems in the UK are not made clear to the public.
2. The majority of the farming community will take public money but absolutely hate any idea of public intervention into farming, on balance they distrust the public sector.
3. Most of the public intervention into the countryside is through regulation or investment by central government agencies, who are not about to delegate their powers locally.

I would question whether it continues to be right for urban and rural areas to be managed in completely different ways. The separation in the democratic administration of town and country is no longer sustainable on a small heavily populated island like the United Kingdom. Let us explore some of the influences.

The Economy

It will be some time before we unravel the consequences of the Comprehensive Spending Review but it has been a major distraction. Put simply there has to be a balanced relationship between wealth generation and public services. But we have all been party to the major imbalance that has developed over the past few years between the two, the readjustment was crucial and I support it. However there are choices as to how to comply with the downsizing and redistribution of resources that will inevitably follow, an opportunity to look forward to the changing world I referred to. For local government it is essential that the breadth of skills associated with the landscape and natural systems, developed over the years, are sustained, if not then to use a European term, they will no longer be a Competent Authority equipped to meet future challenges. In terms of redistribution of resources I would argue that for too long the natural environment has been a recessive influence on the spatial planning process. Take the appalling lack of care over the relationship of new housing and flood risk and the low priority given to areas of biological importance or to the provision of adequate green infrastructure. But equipping local government to meet the future challenges is the new imperative, to ensure that we are able to harness the power of natural systems to meet so many of our needs and to drive programmes and policies for adaptation to climate change.

In England the Government made efficiency savings by pulling three agencies together to form Natural England 4 years ago and to a large and measureable extent the economies have already been squeezed out of that range of public services. We must give every

support to Natural England's working at a landscape scale in the delivery of its programmes but its commitment to landscape weakens at the sharp end, specifically in its response to consultations and in its targeting statements for the distribution of the £400 million given over to the Environmental Stewardship programme.

The demise of the Government's capital programme will have differing impacts on the landscape but the one I want to specifically mention is the decision to end the £45 Billion Building Schools for the Future programme. Despite a lot of effort to influence BSF to ensure that the outside spaces to our schools are transformed into rich learning environments the results are very disappointing. The school estate in the United Kingdom remains an absolute disgrace, impoverished and bleak, the one place in the public realm where we should be demanding the highest standards to secure the best opportunity to support child development. Yes a lot of money was spent outside the new buildings but more often than not it was spent on razor wire and CCTV cameras, or on what I describe as 'superstore landscapes', pretty but useless, designed by adults for adults.

These are places where we make friends for life, where given the right facilities children can learn experientially – critical to transforming the attitude to learning, places that can reconnect children with natural systems and places that stimulate activity for health of mind and body.

Climate Change

For those of us directly involved in the landscape, climate change adds a complexity to the way we work because the climate is one of our day to day considerations and the manipulation of the climate is invariably part of our solutions. We need to turn our skills in a more focussed way to drive the key programmes, including :- the sequestration of carbon using natural systems, risk assess the impact of extreme weather events on every place and adapt the landscape to absorb the impact on humanity. We must also secure a biologically rich and robust landscape to ensure it is equipped to adapt naturally to changes in climate. We need to produce a new framework to the landscape of urban areas to reduce heat gain, improve air quality and control air speed and countless other landscape services that will equip our country to meet these new challenges.

Ecosystems Services

Returning to a detailed point about biodiversity for a moment we do need a scientific solution to one of the problems generated by climate change and this concerns the definition of the natural world where as a profession we promote only native species when specifying new landscape infrastructure. The definition of Native has assumed climate as a relatively stable factor but with a rapidly changing climate and by slavishly following native only species we will be party to an inevitable decline in bio-diversity. In my view we need to operate within a wider biological framework of mobile biomes.

The opportunities for furthering the interests of humanity through biodiversity, bio-technology and bio-mimicry, are endless. But the concept that society finds most difficult to accept is the fact that we are all part of one ecosystem and that a balanced, healthy ecosystem is vital to our very survival, there is little doubt that ecosystems will collapse if we continue to ignore all the warning signs.

Energy Supply

The last contextual issue I want to touch on that will have a huge impact on the landscape, is the future of energy supply. Many of us are concerned about the political and commercial control of on any reliable information about the remaining reserves of oil and natural gas, bearing in mind the relentless growth in demand worldwide. My starting point on this was the leaked internal memo to his staff by the Chief Executive of Shell when he inadvertently mentioned that the supply of oil and natural gas could not meet demand beyond 2015. I was on the Board of Natural England at the time and asked for a formal response from the Government. We received a report that said van de Veer was wrong on two counts, on natural gas it was more likely to be 2030 but on oil it was not 2015 but 2014. You may have also seen the open letter from the Chairman of Lloyds underwriters to private businesses, in the last couple of months, warning of the implications to them of the world not being able to meet demand beyond 2013. Whichever year it is, it will mark the beginning of a very difficult time for us all.

I am sure we all agree that securing our future energy needs will not depend on just one technological development or generation supply system, the answer will lie in several and there will be major implications for the landscape. I hope that the future for land based wind turbines lies with community choice such as what has been achieved at Swaffham in Norfolk.

I am sure we are about to see numerous photovoltaic farms cropping up south of the M4 as a direct result of the seductive feed-in-tariffs. We are of course nervous of the potential damage caused by the new transmission infrastructure that will be needed. We must be very excited by the proposed European Super Grid and the opportunities for opening up this country to both supplying and consuming more renewable energy. I am sorry that not more is being made of the contribution that biomass can make to meet our renewable energy needs.

I think we took a wrong turn when we put all our research energy into short rotation willow coppice and Miscanthus because of course these systems take land out of food production and we now know that is just not going to be possible. I think it was an error to abandon the two tier forestry system of 'coppice with standards', of course most remaining coppice is considerable weakened by the number of standards that have grown up since.

There are hundreds of thousands of hectares of derelict coppice of one sort or another all over the country. I have been looking at the figures and coppicing hazel on a 20 year rotation and ash on a 15 year rotation produces levels of biomass which compares very favourably with that of short rotation willow coppice. Looking into the future I am sure we will be valuing human effort more in energy generation and community based biomass/multi-functional woods and forests is an example of the sort of changes we need to be planning for now. So I would urge the landscape profession when they are involved in restructuring the landscape to look closely at the huge variety of stand types that have been used to good effect over thousands of years.

Sustainable Food Production Systems

There has been a lot of talk about keeping the lights on, keeping industry going and how we are going to keep up our level of mobility, but I think we need to be really alarmed by the potential impact that reduction in oil supply will have on our industrialised food production systems. Think about the reliance that agriculture has on oil and natural gas – cultivation, seeding, herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, cropping, drying, transportation, processing, etc. Looking worldwide we can see that 1 billion people are undernourished today but too many of the remaining 5.5 billion are reliant on intensive and unsustainable agricultural systems. Food reserves are fragile with failing world crops, an increase in meat eating, and of course Americans subsidising the growing of bio-diesel and bio-ethanol not realising that just to sustain our current road travel in this way would require 70% of land to come out of growing food. The government, up to two years ago, was saying no need to worry about food security we will import what we need but instinctively the public knew that this was not right and they have taken action, take the huge waiting list for allotments and this uprising is exemplified by the Incredible Edible project in Todmorden in Yorkshire. But strategically where is the research into food production without oil and gas? We know we can fix airborne nitrogen through integrated crop management systems rather than obtaining it from natural gas as we do at present. Not enough attention has been given to the biodiversity of our soils and this point was well made in Rebecca Hoskins film *A Farm for the Future*, she uses an example of how we have to get back to working with the power of natural systems rather than continuously working against them. An acre of corn will meet the needs of ten people for a year but an acre of Sweet Chestnut will do the same, if you think of the sustainability of both systems and the degree of human intervention in both you can see what I am getting at. There are numerous solutions to the problems facing food security but these threads must be brought together into a coherent policy to equip the farming industry, spatial planners and the public to be able to respond in time to the inevitable problems facing food production.

Common Agricultural Policy

I hope that at the next review of the Common Agricultural Policy that Europe is challenged on the sustainability of the systems it is currently propping up, indeed we could go a lot further and demand that the Single Farm Payment moves faster towards equipping the industry to transform itself to sustainable systems, accepting that it is moving slowly in this direction already. No-one in government has a better relationship with the farming community than Natural England through its officers administering the Environmental Stewardship programme and I think it is perfectly possible to redirect the Single Farm Payment to being less passive than it is at present and more directed at driving up the biodiversity of our soils and adopting systems like integrated crop management to harness the power of natural systems for sustainable food production. I think all £3 Billion of CAP funds should be passed to Natural England and for every farm to be obliged to produce a Farm Environment Plan and act on it in exchange for the continuing public investment. But to achieve this level of change needs a clear vision, a clear articulation of a much needed public agenda. Every government has shied away from reviewing land use and moving towards a clear agenda for a multi-functional landscape that will be better equipped to meet our needs in the future. There is an agenda but it is clouded in a cloak of bureaucratic systems, for example take the 40+ conditions attached to the Single Farm Payment under the two headings Statutory Management Conditions and Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions, these are inspected by the Rural Payments Agency which duplicates the administration of many of these conditions with local government – now these conditions are one way of setting an agenda but the public have no understanding of what the outcomes will be. You can add to these all the other related public interventions systems from other government organisations.

Review of Land Use and a new Integrated Vision

David Miliband when he was Secretary of State for DEFRA started to explore the need to review land use in light of the very different pressures that land is now under. I would go further and say that it is time for a utilitarian based vision for our UK and European Landscapes. I very much like the sound of the Welsh Assembly idea of a Natural Environment Framework and it emphasises managing the environment as a whole rather than focussing on separate parts. We need a vision that will promote multi-functional landscapes and be subject to a process of continuous review. The vision should be articulated and delivered within the framework of the National Character Areas. There is a very good scientific reason for adopting such a framework as I said at the beginning. Because Natural England has promoted the connection between character and geographic location, the connection with specific communities in our villages, towns and cities is made all the more easy. A single plan for each of the 159 character areas, integrating the plethora of national and local policies, drawn up through collaboration between all levels of government, concentrating on the place rather than their own specific brief and being directly relevant by involving local people. The framework of these plans would provide the context for public intervention. Natural England is already

moving in this direction and we must applaud their approach but this will be confined to NE's terms of reference. The Government's Natural Environment White Paper, due to be published in the spring, could provide the impetus for developing the Vision by drawing all of the public agendas together.

This approach would shift values away from most flexible and versatile land which has often given rise to unsustainable practices. It would give greater emphasis to the best use of natural systems for things like food production, clean water, carbon sequestration, renewable energy and biodiversity, linking all these to people and local communities, providing them with the opportunity to become reconnected with natural systems that might eventually see cultural shifts towards more sustainable lifestyles.

This multi-functionalism must wash over our urban as well as rural land.

The master plan for the new design for the Chelsea Barracks site in London, prepared by Kim Wilkie, if realised it will see the development of the first new London squares for a century and his design is based on interconnecting vegetable gardens, allotments, orchards, cobnuts and walnut trees. A landscape driven by function and utilitarian necessity and I applaud his courage to bring this approach into the heart of the city. But this vision has no chance of success unless he can capture the imagination and commitment of those who will live here and there is no infrastructure support for urban food growing, perhaps this is something Natural England can give some thought to.

Closing Remarks

I am looking forward to seeing nominations for the Landscape Awards and the strong links with sustainable futures that they must demonstrate. I have quite deliberately not mentioned design because in a way the emphasis on design and aesthetics devalues the vital scientific and function based skills of both the landscape profession as well as those of Natural England. The issues I have touched on this evening need to take more of a centre stage.

So to conclude, we need to:-

- Review land use as a direct result of a wide range of new pressures.
- Develop a clear multi-functional based vision for our land.
- Advance a strategy to reconnect people with natural systems, with land and landscape.
- Hold Europe to account over the issue of sustainable agriculture as part of The Review of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Thank you.