

The future of England's green agencies

Should we welcome the current review of Natural England and the Environment Agency or should we be worried if government is tempted to meddle with these bodies? Peter Shirley and Simon Leadbeater look at the options and the issues under debate.

Tidying up or dumbing down?

PETER SHIRLEY

Putting to one side the question of the advisability of reviewing government agencies every three years, and the perpetual state of paranoia and nervousness thus engendered, what can we say about the current round of scrutiny of Defra's agencies?

It seems not to be, unfortunately, a consideration of how well the outcomes of their activities match perceived needs or scientific imperatives. The many pages of background documents seem to contain virtually nothing for example about Natural England's performance in halting biodiversity losses or implementing protective regulations. As with the Environment Agency, and despite some fine words here and there, form and function seem to be treated as quantitative rather than qualitative factors. These background papers are characterised not by visionary or inspiring prose, but rather by turgid management gobbledegook of the most stultifying kind.

Amongst the hints of what might be considered success is a depressing catalogue of resource reduction. Thus we learn, and seem to be expected to applaud, that Natural England has reduced back office costs by 40% since 2010, staff by 20% since 2010/11, and its number of offices by 60%, *whilst enhancing its approach to customer service* (my italics). Similarly the Environment Agency is reducing its back office costs by 33% by 2014, and has achieved 'significant' staff and estate costs reductions.

This attitude is doubtless what leads to being asked to consider the option of merging Natural England, the Environment Agency and parts of the Forestry Commission. It is difficult to work out if this is a serious proposition or an 'Aunt Sally'. Most government consultations include Aunt Sallies, put there to mitigate anguish when unwelcome reforms are announced, on the basis that 'it could have been worse'.

Lest we forget, both Natural England and the Environment Agency are already conglomerates: Natural England includes what was English Nature, the Countryside

Commission and the Rural Development Service; the Environment Agency absorbed the National Rivers Authority, the Pollution Inspectorate and waste authorities. How much more dilution, lack of focus and bureaucratic tidiness can they take?

Here we come to a conundrum. Why are so many people instinctively against merging statutory agencies, arguing that diversity equals dynamism and leanness is better than flabbiness, whilst at the same time bemoaning the multiplicity of conservation NGOs and suggesting that some of them should merge? They can't have it both ways. I believe that we need a thriving forest of both public and private agencies, not a green corporate desert of blandness and obfuscation.

Sadly though, nothing will work well in a culture of resource starvation and environmental illiteracy. Many good people are being ill-served by blinkered political masters. This means that as long as reform is motivated by reducing the establishment and the influence of the agencies the form they take is irrelevant.

References

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The dangers of agency merger

SIMON LEADBEATER

A possible merger of the Environment Agency with Natural England is likely to dilute conservation capability further and weaken environmental protection in order to streamline decisions in favour of economic growth, and for this reason I am against any proposal to merge the bodies.

An arranged marriage of incompatible partners

My direct dealings with both the Environment Agency and Natural England reflect their fundamental differences. Some years ago I led a social enterprise that maintained elderly residents' gardens, and which used to transport garden waste to a central compost site. The organisation had to obtain a waste carriers' licence from the EA, without which it would have been operating illegally. Through Natural England I have secured an Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) grant to improve meadow and hedgerow management. Meeting ELS criteria was complex, but the NE and its staff helped me to enhance the conservation management of what little land I own, for which I am grateful. The support given me represents the NE's purpose, as defined by the Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act (2006) to "ensure that

the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development".¹

The EA, in contrast, is responsible for licencing, regulation and the enforcement of environmental protection legislation; instead of giving grants it charges for licences and permits.

What is actually needed for organisational effectiveness?

Faced with increasingly pressing environmental problems the real need is to re-focus on environmental management and to improve organisational capability in this field. Some commentators, however, have said that the expertise and knowledge base that English Nature² once benefited from in many disciplines of nature conservation has been irrevocably eroded³ something also bemoaned by staff at my county council's biological records office. Is this trend likely to be reversed under a merger – much more likely, as CPRE have said "the voice of the NE would be muffled within a larger single body"⁴ and the haemorrhaging of expertise and capability would accelerate. The same concern from an industry perspective is made by the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM) which also argues against a merger because the industry does not want the "focus, and the Agency's expertise in waste, diminished by the formation of an even larger consolidated body...".⁵

Periodic reviews to ensure organisations remain focused is fundamental to good management, but the proposed merger is being driven by inverted priorities. When Owen Paterson writes in the foreword to Defra's *Triennial Review of the Environment Agency and Natural England* "as I seek to radically reprioritise Defra so that ...its work is focused on growing the economy"⁶ he does state that this should not be at the expense of the natural environment. However, I believe the motivation behind the review should be – as presented by the CIWM – about "getting the balance right between environmental protection...[and] supporting economic development".⁷ This is not just word order; Mr Paterson's primary concern is about improving the "current financial climate"⁸ whereas I believe the environmental crisis at home and abroad is of a significantly greater magnitude and the emphasis should be the other way around.

What is driving the emphasis on economic growth?

In 2006 the Leader of HM Opposition visited the Arctic island of Svalbard to "see for himself the effects of climate change" and urged voters in that year's May elections to "vote blue to go green".⁹ He later replaced Lady Thatcher's torch logo for a tree and ruled out a third runway for Heathrow. Wind forward six years and the now Prime Minister's apostasy, not fully satisfied with the NPPF's 'presumption in favour of sustainable development'¹⁰ he wanted to allow 8M house extensions without requiring any planning permission,¹¹ and his Ministers now refuse to 'call in' planning applications for regional airport expansions.¹² This is the policy context within which the merger of the EA and NE is being considered. "An effective single body, leading to sustainable swifter decision making for, and lower burdens on, businesses and developers"¹³ should help stop the "dithering" which is putting the brakes on economic growth.¹⁴ Above all else this is what the merger portends.

And who supports the idea – predictably enough the development planning sector. Clive Harridge, director of the consultancy Amec Environment & Infrastructure UK, comments "to have one statutory consultee not two in the field would be very helpful for our private sector clients".¹⁵

Seeking progressive change

Economic cycles including this recession are by their nature ephemeral, but the short term fillips to promote economic growth will permanently remove some of nature's capacity and be of enduring harm. Not only do I not accept that economic growth should be prioritised over environmental protection and enhancement, but how the two are inextricably linked – how 'growing the economy' leads to climate change, habitat loss and species extinction – needs decoupling and mechanisms put in place to ensure that environmental enhancement and economic sustainability complement one another. Getting this right is the challenge which should be at the heart of any review of government policy and its regulatory framework.

The review may recommend some appropriate changes. For example, the river conservation work of the EA may be better placed within the NE which already has a responsibility for the marine and water environment. However, do I want a single body to remove 'dither,' so that decisions are streamlined in favour of developers and which reduce local communities' capacity to protect and preserve – An emphatic no and for good reason. Where I live the countryside and greenbelt is threatened by a coalition of infrastructure projects and economic interests; an incinerator and large rail freight depot are planned for the south, and to the north Luton Airport's expansion would mean an additional 160 flights a day!

Delaying tactics are sometimes protest's only meaningful recourse, so my first objection to a merger is that two statutory consultees may retain an element of 'dither'. When Luton Airport last tried to expand this was with a proposal for two runways; I well remember our local MP arguing that anything to delay the project would be helpful, and he was right – no second runway was ever built. Second, the EA and NE have fundamentally different purposes and the culture of one amalgamated body is unlikely to be able to promote rival aspirations equally. Finally, improving the capability of both the EA and NE is needed, not a diminution in focus or capacity for either.

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The first nest-building attempt by common cranes in England for 400 years.

The Great Crane Project is a reintroduction programme based at the WWT at Slimbridge. Common cranes were reared at Slimbridge in 2010 by aviculturalists who dress in adult crane costumes to teach the baby birds how to forage, feed and be scared of humans (see ECOS 32 (1) page 75. The birds were then released on the Somerset levels where they flew free. Four chose to fly north up the Severn Estuary and have been around the Slimbridge reserve in Gloucestershire during winter 2013. Nest-building is innate for cranes, although this attempt may come to nothing and be abandoned, but it is a milestone for the project to reintroduce cranes into southern Britain.

BANC's 2013 Autumn field trip and AGM will be based at the Somerest levels where we will learn more about the Great Crane Project and view the cranes. Full details are at www.banc.org.uk

Photo: WWT

