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# Welsh nature - riches to be protected or resources to be plundered?

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*This article considers the background to the creation of Natural Resources Wales (NRW). Do the economy, society and environment generally and in Wales really form a mutually supportive 'three-legged stool'?*

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## JAMES ROBERTSON

In February 2013 a book was published to celebrate the passing of the Countryside Council for Wales.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps not something to celebrate, unless you believe that CCW laid the foundations for a stronger, more substantial environmental body, Natural Resources Wales, and that this could represent the coming of age of statutory environmentalism in Wales. The book is called *A Natural Step?* The title was my suggestion, but I had to work hard to keep the question mark.

To its credit the book is not a hagiography of an organisation (if such a thing can exist). It is in places deeply questioning and reflective, and its heterogeneity is both its strength and its weakness. Contributors did not see each others' chapters or have detailed guidance on style and content, as the timescale did not allow for such luxuries. In my view, and as one of the authors, I am clearly biased, this book has something to offer other parts of the UK in describing the Welsh experience of integrating landscape and nature conservation, and the way that the enjoyment and conservation of the Welsh countryside have been brought into the heart of public life here.

CCW had a 22 year run, starting just before a high point of international interest in nature conservation: the Earth Summit at Rio in August 1992. Despite its limitations, the Summit, and the Conventions which emerged on Climate Change and Biological Diversity, and its agenda for sustainable development (Agenda 21) was important for the profile it achieved for conservation, and the alliance which the parallel NGO Global Forum established between the disadvantaged human world and the struggling world of nature. Most tangibly, it gave these issues legitimacy - a legal basis. It wasn't the turning point that many hoped for, but nor was it a high watermark.

I won't rehearse the astonishing growth in environmentalism during the 1980s leading up to Rio, except to say that it wasn't matched by a comparable change in the political landscape. Rio was significant in giving nature conservation some new language and credibility with decision-makers; the term 'biodiversity', which did not please many old school conservationists, fitted much better with Agenda 21 and a more inclusive, people-centred agenda for nature.

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### Life support or barrier?

At the heart of this agenda is the simple belief that, as there is only one planet, we had better look after it. Whether you use the term 'conservation', with or without the words 'nature' or biodiversity' at the front, or 'environmentalism', this view had become mainstream in the 1990s. Yet there were several undercurrents running against the tide, and one of these, the view that conservation was a barrier in the path of progress, manifested itself most forcibly in Wales when John Redwood became Secretary of State in May 1993.

Redwood was likened to a colonial Governor-General in the way in which he attempted to introduce his own kind of free-market agenda to Wales, but he was skilled enough to enlist old grudges to help him push forward his policies. When he determined that local government should run most SSSIs, he knew he had the support of many Councillors who resented CCW's powers. In 1994 he announced that he would cut CCW's budget by 12% the following year, and then produced a plan, by which CCW would shed many of its responsibilities and lose a third of its budget over the following two years.

On 23 January 1995, the influential newspaper in Cardiff and South Wales, the *Western Mail*, reported the story on its front page under the heading 'Privatise nature' outrage. "A desperate attempt to stop Welsh Secretary John Redwood privatising dozens of nature reserves, including Snowdon, will be launched in the Commons today", it began, and in a comment column, it reported the view that Redwood wanted to run down CCW so that he could ignore the obligations which arose from the Rio Summit and European directives.

The Redwood debacle united Welsh opinion behind CCW and in opposition to the dismantling of statutory environmental protection. CCW emerged stronger than before. Although many able staff took up the package on offer for early retirement from CCW, the damage was short-lived. Redwood lost the election against John Major for the leadership of the Conservative Party and William Hague became Welsh Secretary. Hague reversed the cuts, showed sensitivity in his handling of Welsh affairs generally, and a strong sympathy for the environment in particular. A colleague of mine, a smoker, complained bitterly about the difficulty he had keeping up with Hague on a walk up Snowdon!

In 1994 Redwood had published a book called *The Global Marketplace – Capitalism and its Future*, which I read with, I suppose, exasperation and disbelief. It seemed that Redwood believed that the economy would move into territory largely uncharted since the 19th Century. Moreover he was cheerleader for this brave new world, urging it on. It is worth considering how much of that depressing vision has actually come to pass, and at what cost.

### Economic backdrop

The dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR) took place in 1991, economic strength had become synonymous with political power, and of course Redwood was by no means a lone voice in championing unfettered capitalism and globalisation. The



A Welsh cultural icon, Britannia Bridge, over a natural one, the Menai Strait.

Photo: Joanna Robertson

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which became the World Trade Organisation in 1995, was pursuing a hardnosed agenda of trade liberalisation, untainted by concerns for environmental sustainability. Its negotiations may have had a larger negative impact on exploitation of the Planet's natural resources than the Rio Summit had a positive one.

Great steps have been made to attempt to reframe economics to take account of the environment, notably by the New Economics Foundations, and by the banker Pavan Sukhdev, whose reports on the green economy, most notably *The economics of ecosystems and biodiversity (TEEB)* give a brilliant economic account of how much we need nature. Yet economic orthodoxy remains dominant. As my partner Joanna has observed, if only the *Today* programme would invite ecologists to talk about the economy, and give economists the environment to analyse, the early morning sessions might generate real light. *Today* is a barometer of the broadcasting media's readiness to take on and expose new environmental thinking. The needle is, appropriately, showing 'stormy', indicating that the environment is now considered too confusing and potentially too controversial for media and public alike to digest. Some of this change in mood I put down to the legacy of the difficult climate change debates.

Waning media interest is one among many undercurrents which have been running against the environmental agenda, and together they add up to a considerable

under-tow. As I have argued, economic orthodoxy, which demands growth, whether of consumption or, indeed, of population, is at the heart of this trend, and is tied up with, or perhaps has tied up politics. However the situation in Wales is distinctive, partly because of the Welsh Government's duty and desire to build 'sustainability' into the economy. Its aim, that Wales should become a 'one planet nation', putting sustainability at the heart of Government, has resulted in a White Paper for a Sustainable Development Bill. This would embed sustainable development within the Welsh Government and public bodies, and create an independent sustainable development body.

Wales is also doing things differently in its strategic approach to the creation of a single environmental agency, NRW. A consultation document, *A Living Wales*<sup>2</sup> in September 2010 proposed a new framework for the environment, based on the idea that nature should be conserved for the ecosystem services it provides. This received mixed reactions from NGOs. These doubts were summarised in an article in *Natur Cymru* magazine.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, provided that nature is not valued for its ecosystem services alone, there is merit in shifting the focus from species to a more holistic approach. The critical issue, of course, remains the funding question – will NRW have the budget to make this new approach work for the environment.

The business case which was made for the merger anticipated savings of £158m over 10 years. Already these figures are looking shaky, with reports that the pension costs alone are likely to be £50m, not the £19m allowed for. NGOs are understandably suspicious. The announcement that the Agency was to be called Natural Resources Wales, with its clinical and exploitative ring, did not help build confidence. However the Welsh name, *Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru*, or Wales' natural wealth, has a much more celebratory tone. So the two names conjure up two different visions for the environment – something to be used and spent, or to be cherished and valued. It does underline the likelihood that NRW will be pushed and pulled in different directions.

### Geopolitics

It is impossible to ignore more negative undercurrents which are affecting different parts of the world in different ways. China is sucking up natural resources in a way reminiscent of former colonial powers, notably in Africa, but without any sense of responsibility towards the countries and people whose resources it is removing. On a visit last year I witnessed Chinese engineers building a new road in the Western rift between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in order to extract minerals from the Congo via Mombassa to China. What was shocking, though, was to come across a village through the middle of which the road was being built. Villagers stood at the roadside and gawped at the Chinese digger drivers, whose huge machines were crushing and clearing tin roofed shacks and *bandas*. Perhaps their village wasn't on any map, but they looked stunned and helpless in the face of forces beyond their understanding.

The Wales for Africa programme, launched in 2006, gives Wales a distinct identity in the pursuit of UN Millennium Development Goals. This programme has sustainable



The impacts of road building in Uganda as China exploits African mineral resources.  
Photo: Patrick Robertson

development, fair trade and ethical procurement built into it. It would be a small step for Wales to begin supporting innovative projects in Africa to serve the interests of nature and people together. Projects which generate benefits and ease conflicts between people and wildlife do exist, such as the ground-breaking Conservation Education Community Outreach Programme (CECOP) which operates on the border of Murchison Falls National Parks in northern Uganda. I will return to the case of Africa at the end.

### EU and environment

I will now turn to the European Union, which also has questions to answer. The dependence of so much UK environmental policy on a European legal framework is not particularly helpful. NGOs seem to suspend their critical faculties when evaluating the role of the EU in promoting environmental policy and economic development at the same time. However in Wales, the LIFE fund has contribute to projects like the restoration of peatlands on the Migneint, LEADER projects have funded some Local Nature Reserves, while the European Regional Development Fund has a £14.5m communities and nature project, and the EU-funded Rural Development Plan supports the countryside and rural communities. As well as direct environmental gains, EU legislation has brought tangential benefits such as the broader ecological perspectives fostered by inter-community cooperation and exchange.

The downside has been the bureaucracy surrounding European law and the public antagonism, sometimes justified, that this causes. Either because of drafting or

implementation, EU environmental regulations can be inflexible and over-prescriptive. Regional development funds, the Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy have had serious negative environmental impacts in the UK and beyond. I'm sure others have seen at first hand what these funds have done in some of the most beautiful and marginal parts of the EU, such as Ireland and Portugal.

Environmental projects depend heavily on public funding, making them vulnerable at times of public sector spending cuts. It isn't always easy to get to the bottom of what is happening to budgets. The original case for bringing three Agencies together into a single Welsh body, NRW, was to make it more effective, and introduce an ecosystem-based approach (see above). Whether the grant-in-aid to NRW will be adequate for the job is one of several concerns. For example the merger could dilute parts of the broad NRW remit, and internalise conflicts, such as the one between planting trees and looking after (and enhancing) semi-natural upland habitats.

### Life at sea

CCW started out with a single marine ecologist, and one marine policy officer. When it mutated into Natural Resources Wales, it had a substantial, energetic band of highly effective and committed marine specialists. Again, to some extent at least, adversity brought strength. On 15 February 1996, the super-tanker the Sea Empress struck rocks and became stranded in the mouth of Milford Haven. More than half of its cargo of 130,000 tonnes of North Sea crude oil, and 480 tonnes of fuel oil, spilled into an exceptionally rich marine and island ecosystem in south-west Pembrokeshire. It was one of the world's worst oil spills, coating popular holiday beaches with thick black oil. Fisheries were closed, seabirds oiled and tourism devastated.

There were silver linings from the disaster, not least that the timing was relatively benign and stormy conditions allowed for quicker recovery than could have been predicted. Much research was conducted and valuable lessons learnt. It put the marine environment into the spotlight in Wales and demonstrated its value to the economy, and that of ecologists to politicians. CCW's expertise benefitted, as did that of many other bodies brought in to help with the work.

Progress over Marine Conservation Zones has been pitiable, but public understanding of some of the issues, including, for example, overfishing and discards, and damage to the seabed from scallop trawling, has been growing. Marine mammals such as dolphins are far better understood, and their popularity has an economic payoff. A head of steam is building up, and behind it is a growing body of expertise.

### Does the label matter?

I wanted to highlight the marine environment because it is an area where I believe CCW has punched above its weight, but progress has depended on wide alliances. CCW completed an intertidal survey of the whole coast of Wales, an achievement in itself, but it has also added to the circulation of knowledge and interest. CCW in this case is not the beating heart – it is part of it, as are the NGOs. That raises the interesting question – does it matter what an organisation is called, so long as it does the work? This is what I want to address.

When William Wilkinson gave his valedictory speech at the launch of NCC's last annual report, he foresaw the end of an independent statutory agency for nature conservation, and spoke of handing the baton to the non-government sector. What actually happened, in Wales at least, is much more complex. The quality and clarity of CCW advice to the Welsh Office, and later the Welsh Government, has been tempered by much second-guessing of what would be acceptable. However two significant developments, in my view, have mitigated this since the Welsh Assembly was established in 1998. Assisted by offices in Cardiff, NGOs such as the RSPB have become regular briefers of Assembly Members (AMs) and Assembly Environment Committees. Any slack has been taken up in this way. Second, departmental Civil Servants have become more interested in the delivery of environmental targets. While it is true that CCW's remit letter, which used to spell out each year what CCW's budget should be spent on, became more prescriptive, this sometimes improved environmental outcomes. The end result of the politicisation of the environment, which has turned independent champions of nature into government functionaries stripped of a policy role, may actually benefit the environment, because of the positive interest taken in it by Government.

The Minister for Environment, Planning and Countryside, Carwyn Jones, put his weight behind local biodiversity partnerships. "Our health, economy and quality of life depend upon increasingly fragile natural resources", he wrote in 2006.<sup>4</sup> Biodiversity gained traction and political favour as an important component of the local economy. Between 2007 and 2011 the Minister for the Environment, Sustainability and Housing, Jane Davidson and her civil servants pushed forward the biodiversity agenda, gave meaning to the Biodiversity Duty and promoted the Wales Biodiversity Partnership vigorously, involving local government and developing partnerships beyond the cosy scientific groups which dominated the Action Plan process within CCW.

Meanwhile NGOs became stronger as CCW funding and capacity-building increased, but this has brought about a greater dependence on grants and, as a result, a reluctance to criticise. In effect, the baton has been passed back and forth between Welsh Government, Agency and NGOs. In Wales the economy and society have always been closely entwined. If sustainability is a three-legged stool, I think the third leg, the environment, has fared relatively well. My conclusion is that the label does not matter very much, CCW or NRW, as long as the context is favourable; that is that there are senior politicians and their aides, agencies and NGOs, and a broadly sympathetic public, all working to a common understanding of the importance of the landscape and nature in this beautiful country.

I don't want to overstate this. Since I started editing *Natur Cymru – Nature of Wales*, a kind of *British Wildlife* for Wales, in 2001, I have published hundreds of articles celebrating nature, describing extraordinary efforts by people and organisations on its behalf, and also criticising shortcomings where they occur. For example tax-payer and biodiversity will lose out because of the switch from an excellent environment-centred agri-environment scheme, Tir Gofal, to a poorly conceived replacement Glastir.<sup>5</sup> And where is the Welsh equivalent of the Lawton report<sup>6</sup>, *Making space for*





The Tir Gofal agri-environment scheme has supported valuable habitat management work, such as rush control here on Rhos pasture. Good habitat may be lost due to limitations of the replacement scheme, Glastir.

Photo: James Robertson

*nature?* Are none of the report's 24 recommendations relevant in Wales? What about the establishment of Ecological Restoration Zones, which the Government has taken up in England as Nature Improvement Areas with £7.5m of Government funds for the first 12 areas? These and many other examples allow no room for complacency.

A final word: we value our environment for practical, cultural, aesthetic and other reasons. Ruthless, narrow economic policy and growing pressures from UK population growth, the perception of a threat to our food security and, perhaps, a growing disconnection between society and nature challenge us. The challenges are even greater in countries whose people lack food and basic health care. They put our environmental battles into sobering context. Nowhere on Earth would the prize, in terms of stunning landscapes and wildlife, be greater for getting the human-environment balance right, than in Africa. Despite huge problems of diminishing resources, desertification, disappearing forests and booming human numbers, I am so overwhelmed by the spirit of the people I have had dealings with in Uganda as well as by its wildlife, that I find hope comes much more readily than despair.

## References

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Thanks to Joanna Robertson for valuable comments on the draft of this article.