

Partners in crime?

They are meant to be our best friends – the charities that support the array of eco-causes we all believe in. We rely on these bodies to defend our green and pleasant land, and we proudly promote their logos on our car windows. These NGOs, the non government organisations of the environment and conservation sector, are inherently worthy, and in need of our continual support, aren't they? We put our trust in them to hold government to account, don't we? Well, times are changing it seems – never before have these bodies come in for such stick throughout an issue of *ECOS*. In the pages which follow, NGOs stand accused of being shifty about the Big Society agenda, patronising in their treatment of members, and willing to exploit any offer of public lands or forests for their own specific motives. These are not nit-picking complaints, these are fundamental questions about how the NGOs pursue their mission amidst the bigger picture.

Of course NGOs need to survive the harsh economic times, so should we excuse them adopting a more clinical commercial approach? Organisations are feeling the pinch everywhere, as core funding dries up and income streams and investments are on the wane. Jonathan Somper reviews the prospects for future funding in this issue. His outlook is not as downbeat as some might predict. But in a survey conducted by Rachel Kempson, we asked NGOs for views on the jobs market, and how their recruitment plans were faring. Very few were prepared to share their thoughts – perhaps a sign of uncertainty and loss of confidence. The NGOs' coyness applies to Big Society too – few are challenging the control culture linked to the ethos of Big Society, instead, bodies are poised to grab any funds going. Diane Warburton invites us to realise the pitfalls of Big Society in this edition, and warns against voluntary bodies generating income at the expense of their core values.

Several contributors discuss the U turn on public forest sales, and the aborted plan to sever National Nature Reserves from Natural England. Our authors offer markers for the emerging debate on the future role of the nation's forests, from the functional role of all that goes with timber supply, to the wildlife and amenity angles, which are ever more complex and important. Indeed, the abrupt rethink on forestry sales by Government was more than just tactical politics, it symbolised a realisation in society that something bigger and deeper was at stake – a connection with nature and the great outdoors that we feel in our souls, and are prepared to fight for. It was telling that Government picked this up, yet some wildlife bodies did not.

NGOs are the lifeblood of much that we promote and debate in *ECOS* – the mutual support is close and will go on. But the forces of change affect us all, and the time has come to be a critical friend.