

Public forests - the wildlife NGOs: broken-backed but dangerous

The strife over Forestry Commission privatisation has shone a spotlight on the wider political role of the major conservation NGOs. Do they resolutely act to defend the public sector, or do they provide a soft introduction for harsh measures of privatization?

DAVE BANGS

Jonathan Porritt¹ put it best: “Not one of the major environmental NGOs has so much as lifted a finger in support of the [anti-privatization] campaign.... [This] represents a massive failure of collective leadership.... And they’ve made themselves look foolish and irrelevant, as one of the largest grassroots protests this country has seen for a long time grows and grows without them – indeed despite them”.

Neo-liberal wildlifers

The principles² drafted by a consortium of the largest of our wildlife NGOs in October 2010 just about sum up the reactionary depths to which the NGOs have sunk on the issue of public sector land privatization. I quote: “*We have no in-principle objection to government seeking efficiencies in the management of land through out-sourcing, including to third-sector bodies*”. No chance of a reference here to the vastly greater efficiency of the Forestry Commission’s public forest estate relative to private sector forestry - cross-subsidising landscape-scale conservation resources like the New and Dean Forests....

“In most instances, it is likely that civil society bodies can deliver outcomes more cost-effectively than the public sector”. In the same way, no doubt, that the old charity hospitals delivered health care vastly more cheaply than our NHS: by casualisation, rationing, volunteers, and poverty wages.... And, by a below-the-belt attack on TUPE³ (the bare-bones protections staff get upon takeover of their undertakings), which *“may act as a barrier to outsourcing and thus accelerate job losses, as well as being unfair to existing staff of third sector bodies”.*

This is the language of neo-liberalism from the leaders of a wildlife NGO sector which most of us dupes think is meant to act as a fire-fighting defence against the ravaging of nature by capitalism.

Public is better

It seems as if the benefits of public ownership have been forgotten by many in our generation. Let’s review some of them vis a vis the Forestry Commission:

Steady market conditions: It provides a major counter-cyclical function by steady, planned harvesting programmes, irrespective of the fluctuating price of timber, thus enabling the whole infrastructure of sawmills, processors and forestry contractors to stay in place. It is for this reason, no doubt, that the UK Forest Products Association came out trenchantly against privatization.⁴ It knows that privatization or 'third sectorisation' of the Commission's English forests will mean a drop in timber supply and competition for supply – and therefore possible price increases – from Scottish and Welsh sawmills.

Efficient harvesting: It harvests 92% of its softwood increment, as opposed to just 37% in the private sector, and it harvests 60% of home grown timber on only 18% of woodland.

Open access: It dedicated all its freehold forests as statutory access land under the CROW Act.

Environmental regeneration: It initiates major programmes of landscape restoration in ex-industrial areas and on our urban fringes. These community forests reconnect some of our poorest communities with nature.

Wildlife protection: It maintains 99.5% of its SSSIs in favourable condition, and has huge commitments to ancient woodland and heathland restoration.

By contrast, the NGO sector is vulnerable to all the market fluctuations in revenue affecting share portfolios, bequests, subscriptions, and corporate sponsorship. NGOs are inserted far more thoroughly in the normal operations of the capitalist market than the state sector. They lack all the special advantages brought by state ownership's partial immunity to market irrationalities.

Conflicts of interest

And now these broken-backed NGO leaders form the backbone of the Government's new 'Independent Panel on Forestry Policy in England', created by Caroline Spelman when she conceded to the mass campaign for our public forests. Four of the twelve major landowning conservation NGOs (National Trust, Wildlife Trust Partnership, RSPB and Woodland Trust) plus three landowner reps and a forest industry rep, form a majority – a majority united by a conflict of interest with Panel objectivity, as potential beneficiaries of FC disposals.⁵

I'll exemplify this: in January I publicly asked the RSPB's Conservation Director⁶ to explain how they were campaigning against public forest privatisation. His answer was astonishing. He made no mention of campaigning, though he did muse that the RSPB was toying with buying some FC woodland near to one of its reserves. "The RSPB is not a rich organization", he said, and thus by implication without the resources to participate in this campaign. (But if the RSPB isn't rich, who is?...). And "The state has no business growing trees". Yet it always has had. Oaks and underwood grown in crown forests built the navy's ships and fired the furnaces which produced their cannons.



Forest lovers celebrate at the Friston Forest Rally in East Sussex in March.

Photo: Dave Bangs

The Woodland Trust focused all its fire on the need to safeguard ancient woodland and accelerate the programme for its restoration, provoking accusations that its own on-line petition was an attempt to spike the leading role of the 38 Degrees petition.

To my knowledge, not one of the represented organisations objected in principle to the Con-dem privatisation proposals. The Panel has been carefully chosen to represent an array of the softest opposition to aspects of privatization in combination with the more sophisticated advocacy of 'third sectorisation'. Members have been chosen to block out all passionate opposition. Not a single one of the burgeoning array of forest defence organisations is represented. The new 'Forest Campaigns Network' (bringing together all these groups) has no seat; nor does any representative of the FC's trade unions.

The door remains closed against the real voices in favour of our public forest estate. If things do not change the Government may well gain by stealth and manoeuvre what it has failed to win by main force.

Wot we want

So where do we go from here? We should argue to preserve and expand our state forest sector. There should be no job cuts, no funding cuts and no forest sales. The army of passionate supporters of our public forests must be integrated in the decision making structures of the Commission at all its levels.

The terms of reference of the advisory panel give us a platform to ask for what we were cheated of in the consultation for the CROW Act: a statutory right of access to all woodland, private as well as public, as has always been the case in much of Scandinavia, and is now the case in Scotland.

We must stay organised and keep making the case. And we must wage a two-pronged campaign, not just to persuade the new advisory panel and MPs, but, just as importantly, to lobby the rich NGOs and stymie the repetition of their recent ghastly mistakes.

References and notes

1. Quotes from Jonathan Porritt's blog, Saturday, February 5, entitled "Environmental NGOs betray England's Forests".
2. "Principles to inform delivery models for public benefit associated with public sector land", supported by Butterfly Conservation, The Institute of European Environmental Policy, the National Trust, Plantlife, the RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts Partnership, The Wildfowl and Wetland Trust, the Woodland Trust, October 2010.
3. TUPE refers to the 'Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006'. They implement the European Community Acquired Rights Directive.
4. See the UKFPA letter to the Prime Minister, above their Executive Director D.J. Sulman's signature, of February 8, headed "The future of the public forest estate in England" and posted on their website.
5. Panel members' biographies, and the Panel's terms of reference, are on the Defra website. The Panel is to report to government in the Autumn. Its membership is:
Chair: James Jones, (Anglican Bishop of Liverpool)
Shireen Chambers (Institute of Chartered Foresters Exec Director)
Dr Mike Clarke (RSPB Chief Exec)
Tom Franklin (Ramblers Assoc Chief Exec)
Stuart Goodall (Confed of Forest Industries Chief Exec)
Stephanie Hilborne OBE (Wildlife Trusts Partnership Chief Exec)
Sue Holden (Woodland Trust Chief Exec)
Dr Alan Knight OBE (ex-B&Q environmental executive)
Dame Fiona Reynolds DBE (National Trust Dir-General)
Sir Harry Studholme (private landowner)
John Varley (manager to private landowner)
William Worsley (private landowner)
6. Question asked to Mark Avery, guest speaker at the Sussex Ornithological Society Annual Conference, January 2011.

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