

Finding funds for nature – muddling through in middle England

This article calls for a Royal Commission investigation into funding for nationally important heritage assets, including woodlands and nature reserves.

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News that the Government will be cutting Defra's budget again this year comes as no surprise. There will of course be further cuts in the coming years which will mean less funding for the environment in England. Putting the Agri-environmental funding and the re-energised (or is it re-booted?) England coast path being managed by Natural England aside, there hasn't been any substantial Defra funding going into countryside access or nature conservation for some years now.

Shifting responsibility – good or bad?

This is nothing new to the environmental voluntary sector as they have seen the writing on the wall. An added pressure is government's haste to transfer state owned assets into the charity sector. The emergence in 2012 of the Canal and River Trust from the old British Waterways Board and the more recent break-up of English Heritage into Historic England and the English Heritage Trust has shown that the Government's role for safeguarding our heritage, painstakingly built up over the last 60 years, is now fast declining and being handed over, albeit with a dowry in some cases, to the charity sector to manage.

May be central government or its agencies should not be managing historic buildings as visitor attractions nor canals for holiday makers in the first place, and it was just a quirk of fate and history that led them to take on these responsibilities, as at the time there were no other takers for the work.

Perhaps government has got too big and it is time to slim down and focus on governing the country, while waterways, old buildings, art, historic landscapes, National Nature Reserves and even forests are for others to look after?

If that is the direction we are heading then there needs to be some broader government thinking and public consensus on how this so called divestment is going to be managed and be funded, in the short term and longer term. Otherwise we face the uncertainty of our heritage, our inheritance, being whittled away and passed down to the charity sector to manage in piecemeal fashion with no coherent strategy. Opportunism will reign and there will be consequences, including



Multi funding for multi-functional nature: Reach Community Orchard on the Cambridgeshire fens is a community asset for wildlife, for understanding the diversity and use of local fruit, and for people's quality of life.

Photo: Pete Johnstone www.pj.elements.co.uk

perhaps inconsistent standards of management and even different rights of access depending on the lead organisations for each asset or location.

Pressure on the funders – how to cope?

And, if the established voluntary sector says 'no' to taking on properties, land and staff because it will not be adequately funded by government for that task then, as is the case now, the old guard charities will be by-passed and new charities established to take on the new functions. The follow-on scenario is that we will see the continued rise in the number of charities and yet more pressure on grant giving bodies, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, trusts and foundations and the general public. If the pressure to raise funds gets to boiling point (it's at simmering point now) then it is likely that grant giving bodies will tighten their priorities even further and the general public, who are generally sympathetic donors to charities and their causes, will be inundated in funding requests and will either lose interest or worse still, turn against the not-for-profits in anger.

Here's one possible solution.... In 1994 John Major's Conservative government created the National Lottery which to date has contributed a whopping £33bn to a range of good causes including the built and natural heritage. Two years later in 1996 the same Conservative government established the Landfill Communities Fund (LCF) as the first environmental tax in the UK which was introduced to increase the cost of landfill and therefore help reduce waste. Since its introduction the LCF has contributed £1.27bn to environmental projects including public parks, wildlife and public access projects, many of which would just not have happened without the LCF contribution.¹

So can the present day Conservative government be forward thinking enough to learn from these two seminal ventures created in the 1990s to tackle the current problem of who should be responsible for the long term management of our state owned natural assets? And if the answer is yes then what would the solution look like? One practical charity led example is from Nesta² which is running an initiative to explore new ways of managing and funding local authority owned parks with its Rethinking Parks Programme.

National debate in a national inquiry

The uncoordinated disposal of state owned heritage is too big an issue for charities to sort out for themselves and it needs government resolve to seek a solution. A proper public debate and a Royal Commission to investigate the value of our state owned natural and built assets and to lay out possible options of future management and funding is, to my mind, the best way forward. This process has to be done in an open and transparent way and one that clearly thinks through the long-term solutions.

There is precedence to the idea in that 60 years ago in 1955 a Royal Commission on Common Lands³ was set up to unravel the confusion over Common Land legislation. The Royal Commission report led 10 years later to the Commons Registration Act 1965 which allowed for the registration of common land and towns and village greens. This was by no means the end of the debate on common land but a vast improvement on what had gone on previously. Incidentally the setting up of the Royal Commission did not come by chance as it was the Open Spaces Society which had been pushing for it for some years. A fact which should not be lost on those charities today concerned with woodland and nature.

So if established, a Royal Commission on our state owned natural and built assets would no doubt take several years to report back but if we don't have this debate now and a clearly thought through process on the Government withdrawal then we may face a future of increasing management cuts to state owned national forests, nature reserves and finest landscapes to a point that they will be termed 'nationally renowned' in name only.

References and notes

1. Following the Autumn Statement of 2014 the government is undertaking to reform the LCF. The consultation closed in June 2015. The outcome is not yet known.
2. Nesta is an innovation charity designed to help people and organisations bring great ideas to life. Its Rethinking Parks Programme is working with 11 parks teams to counter reduced public investment in parks management.
3. The National Archives, online records on Common Land.

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This article is an updated version from one hosted at Miles King's *newnature* blog: www.anewnatureblog.wordpress.com

The Caledonian Forest Wildlife Project launched in Summer 2015. It is establishing 10 new red squirrel populations in the Highlands over the next three years. It will relocate red squirrels from areas of Scotland where they are thriving to remote forests in the north-west Highlands where there are no squirrels at present, but good quality habitat for them. It is coordinated by the conservation charities Trees for Life and the Highland Foundation for Wildlife.

Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the project will see squirrels transported to carefully selected release sites in specially constructed nest boxes, lined with hay for comfort and warmth, and provisioned with peanuts for food and apple for hydration. These nest boxes will then be nailed to trees and their exit holes filled with moss – so that the squirrels can find their way out in their own time. Food will be provided for several months after release, to help the squirrels settle easily into their new surroundings.

At the donor sites, once a squirrel has been caught, the trap will be covered with a dark cloth to keep the animal calm and reduce stress. All traps will be checked at a maximum of two-hourly intervals, and all squirrels will undergo a health check by a qualified veterinarian, to ensure that diseased animals are not introduced into the new populations. No more than two squirrels will be taken from any donor site, so that their removal does not negatively affect the donor population.

Photo: Peter Cairns www.northshots.com

