

A very brief reflection on the Landscape Symposium (Newcastle 18 March 2015)

by Adrian Phillips

The Symposium was timely and very productive. From the outset, when Andrew Sells acknowledged that landscape had slipped down the Natural England agenda, there was agreement among all present that there was an urgent need to restore the standing of this topic in public discourse and public policy. The meeting generated some important ideas about how this could be brought about.

The ELC provides an excellent framework, with its emphasis on protecting, managing and creating landscape. Landscape is used as a noun (as per the ELC definition), as an adjective (as used by ecologists to mean large size, as in landscape-scale) and as a verb (to give shape to a place). It is both the objective of policy (e.g. landscape protection) but also a medium through which policies in many sectors can be shaped. The many ways in which the word is used can cause confusion but it also reflects the strength of the concept. On the hand, the word comes with baggage: it is seen as synonymous with scenery, it has (fairly or otherwise) associations with NIMBY-ism and there is an assumption that it is only to be found in countryside. In fact it is about what makes each place special.

The landscape agenda can only be taken forward successfully through strong alliances, such as those between Natural England and English Heritage which set up the symposium, among the NGOs (this has often proved difficult), between academics and practitioners, and between those concerned with landscape and those working in the health, education and tourism sectors.

The mantra “all landscapes matter” is invaluable. It reminds us that – as the ELC explicitly recognises - landscape is everywhere and a good quality landscape is everyone’s right. Yet deterioration in the quality of the “in-between” or ordinary landscape (through a loss of diversity and distinctiveness, damage to ecological foundations and intrusive infrastructure) is everywhere apparent. To address this, we need to put as much emphasis on creative approaches to landscape as we do to its protection.

There are examples everywhere of how to do this, from high quality green infrastructure in many towns to large scale landscape restoration schemes like the Durham Coast and the National Forest. We need to broadcast and celebrate this experience and demand that the lessons be applied far more widely. We need too to make more of the successes achieved through the HLF Landscape Partnership programme: HLF needs to embark on a campaign to raise public and political awareness of what has been achieved and what is possible in future.

I don’t believe that we should base all our arguments on economics, though there is powerful evidence, which we should use, that shows how investment in landscape care can create wealth, make jobs and generate income. We should be ready to speak to higher values too: the way that beautiful green places can greatly improve the quality of life; the importance of a good quality environment for a healthy population; our children’s need for green spaces; and the intangible values that are embodied in the landscape and which enrich our lives.

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