

Inspiring people to enjoy the natural environment – a new vision for our green spaces

Introduction

- Thank you Kate,
- It was the enlightened Victorian manufacturers who first saw the link between chronic widespread poor health, cheapjack building and lack of urban green space.
- Octavia Hill, who went on to found the National Trust, was horrified by the misery of the urban slums. She said: “Sometimes we think of nature as a luxury, but when the world was made, it was made very beautiful, and meant that we should live amongst its beauties, and that they should speak peace to us in our daily lives.”
- At Natural England one of our aims is to take forward these ideals, without I hope the paternalism and reliance on philanthropy.
- In our recently published Manifesto, we called for concern for the natural environment to be hard wired into all public policy. The natural environment should not be seen as an obstacle when it provides the solution to many of the problems confronting us in modern life – it has exciting, unique contributions to make to health and well-being, education, housing and planning.
- We want to inspire people to value and conserve the natural environment. And we want to do this because it has the power to enrich our everyday lives.
- And we want to turn the conventional environmental narrative on its head.

- The natural environment is not a problem to sidestep - it is an essential social and economic asset. And it provides a range of services – clean air, clean water, productive soils, and natural flood management - that we all depend on.
- And crucially it is for everyone.
- So I am grateful to Kate for asking me here to talk to you today about Natural England's work to reconnect people with the natural environment, which is one of the four big themes that underpin everything that Natural England does.
- As the Executive Director responsible for all our campaigns and communications work, the big challenge for me and my team is work out how best to inspire, encourage and help people, especially the unusual suspects, to experience the wonders of the natural world. In fact I would welcome any suggestions that you might have.
- But before that:
 - I want to set why it is so important for us to inspire and encourage people away from the TV to experience and learn about the natural world.
 - I will explore the role I see Open Spaces Society members playing in this
 - And I will share with you some of plans and ambitions for the future.
 - After that I am happy to answer your questions, and to share ideas on how we can work together.
- At Natural England we want to safeguard the green places that we have already, in towns and cities, and in the countryside; we want to see these places managed so that nature can flourish; and continue to prosper in a

changing climate; and we want to create more high quality natural green spaces so that everyone in England has the opportunity to enjoy the wonders of the natural world, regardless of where they live, their background, age, religion, or income.

- The bottom line is that the natural environment is not a luxury add on, a nice to have or an optional extra. It is far too important for us not to take action on when threatened.
- That's why we are committed to expanding the ranks of people for whom taking action to conserve and enhance the natural world plays an important part of their daily lives.

What is Natural England - Our challenges

- Back in 2003 Lord Haskin's 'Modernising Rural Delivery' recommended the creation of an 'integrated agency'. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act established Natural England at a time when concern for the environment has never been more important.
- Our remit is, on the face of it at least, simple. We are here to ensure sustainable stewardship of the land and sea so that wildlife, agriculture and recreation can thrive and people have the freedom to enjoy it. It is our responsibility to see that the wildernesses, natural habitats and landscapes of England can adapt and survive intact for future generations to enjoy.
- And there is no hiding from the fact that particularly outside of protected areas the natural environment is suffering – as set out in our recently published State of the Natural Environment report.

- Our report highlights the need to take action now: We need to ensure that our green places and countryside do not share the fate of many of our high streets, becoming increasingly soulless and uniform, and in some cases disappear altogether.
- And as our population grows and land is in demand for housing, for food, for energy and for leisure, tourism and recreation, and as the impact of climate change begin to bite, it is clear that we need to ensure that England's natural wealth is not sidelined and squeezed into shrinking areas.
- Commons and village greens may be windows on our past, but they have an important role to play in busy, modern lives – providing that 'sense of quiet' and freedom, and the opportunity to experience nature in the raw, near to where people live, and providing a stepping stone to exploring the wilder places further from our towns and cities.
- Fortunately the Commons Act 2006 finally brought to an end to many of the problems that had threatened these areas in the decades since the Registration Act was passed in 1965.
- We're proud to have been part of this success story, by seconding our commons expert into the Bill Team to ensure the Bill got the fine detail right.
- And I'm delighted to see communities, and campaigners like OSS with your Green Alert initiative, using the provisions in the Act to safeguard these vital neighbourhood resources for ever.

- The crucial point is that if we are really to safeguard the natural environment in the long term, we need to reconnect people to it, and it needs to be **their** natural environment.
- Shaped by them at a local level, and maintained by local communities, bringing people together and making them healthier and happier places to live.
- You only have to look at the success of Springwatch with its swat teams bringing together communities to transform their patch to see what a difference it can make to people's lives.

The challenge of competing views

- To make our role as an integrated agency work, we need to be an integrating agency – balancing the concerns of communities, visitors, walkers, cyclists, horse riders, conservationists, farmers, land managers, fishermen and business.
- Our job is to come up with bold evidence based solutions to properly address the different parts of our remit.

Coastal access

- Our approach to coastal access symbolises more vividly than any other single initiative what Natural England has been created to do - to integrate the needs of wildlife, and the landscapes that sustain it, with the rights and needs of people.
- It has also drawn its fair share of criticism!

- The nation's favourite motoring correspondent, for example, wrote: "When the French and Russian proletariat rose up against the middle and upper classes, they made a lot of noise and used pitchforks. Whereas here the revolutionaries are using stealth and a drip drip drip policy of never ending legislation.....There are plans afoot to give Janet Street Porter and others of a Gore-Tex disposition access around all of Britain's 2500 mile coastline. So you worked hard all your life and saved up enough to buy a bit of seclusion by the sea? Well sorry, but Natural England, a sinister sounding bunch, has advised Defra, which sounds like something the Nazis might have dreamt up, that your garden should be confiscated".
- This 'colourful', and inaccurate, critique misses the point, I think – it is not unreasonable for people in England to have access to their coastline! In fact it is long overdue.
- We have to travel way back to 1821 to find the last time that the issue was seriously debated. The year Napoleon died. Someone brought a case inviting the High Court to confirm that the English have an ancient right to access the coastline that they use so freely in practice. The court disagrees. It found that people have no such right.
- Why? To protect private property rights? No. To avoid disturbance to wildlife? No. The court was worried that if men and women both have rights to reach the sea, they will end up bathing in it together and heaven only knows what forms of depravity that will lead to.
- And that is pretty much where the law remains today.
- So it's time to move on a couple of centuries and put that situation right. The reason why has never been better expressed than in the words of the one dissenting judge in 1821.

- He put it like this: “Free access to the sea is a privilege too important to Englishmen to be left dependent on the interest or caprice of any description of persons.”
- We think he was spot on about that. As I said earlier we think it is important that more people enjoy England’s rich natural environment more often.
- There were all manner of dire prophecies about how life as we knew it would come to an end when the CROW open access rights were created. In fact, it has all worked out rather well on the ground. People have the security of knowing they can use these areas, but the damage that was predicted to land management and privacy has simply not materialised.
- As a result of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act we now have ‘open access’ to over almost a million hectares of mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land.
- Some of you, I suspect, would have wanted more, indeed still want more.
- Well the Open Spaces Society - indeed all interested parties, will have a chance to make their views heard as we prepare the decadal review of ‘Open Access’.
- Later this year we will begin reviewing the mapping methodology, and will be inviting you, and others, to let us know your concerns.

Access on the ground

- Alongside our work to inspire and reconnect people to the natural environment, and bringing our influence to bear for the right decisions to be

made politically for the natural environment, we need to make sure that the access infrastructure is there on the ground. We want to see an enhanced rights of way network for the future, providing access near to where people live, linked to high quality wildlife rich green spaces.

- Reinstating lost routes remains another important part of the network of rights of way of the future.
- Soon after we were established as Natural England we set up a review of the existing project to research historic routes - Discovering Lost Ways.
- The review concluded that existing project was not a good way of getting historic routes onto Definitive Maps and into use. It is no good producing mountains of evidence if all it is going to do is join a local council backlog that could stretch to tens of years.
- It soon became clear to us that many of the problems were due to the complexity of Rights of Way legislation.
- We believe a pre-requisite for achieving real & lasting progress is a proper re-evaluation of the relevant law and procedures, working co-operatively with all interested parties to establish the best way forward.
- We will then champion the necessary reforms to provide a proper foundation for turning the definitive map into a living record.
- We have recommended – and Government has agreed – that it should not bring the 2026 cut-off date into force (section 53 of CROW) at least until it has the benefit of advice from all relevant stakeholders.

- Here too we want OSS members to be fully involved and have announced this week the establishment of a Stakeholder Working Group to find the best way to ensure that lost ways are established on the definitive map. You have the in-depth knowledge of these issues that are essential to getting this right.
- We are also focusing on encouraging highway authorities to put into place Rights of Way Improvement Plans. 80% have these plans already, with most expected to have them in place this financial year. We will work to pressurise any who are lagging behind and bring our influence to bear wherever we can to ensure that plans are then put into action.
- And later this year we will be asking OSS members for their help later this year as we review Trails and Routes in England.
- According to the Long Distance Walkers Association there are an estimated 800 named and promoted routes across England providing opportunities for journeys of more than one day.
- Natural England has inherited a special relationship with only 13 of these routes, our National Trails and takes a strategic role in their establishment, management and on going marketing.
- By contrast we have little or no insight or strategic involvement in the 800 or so other named routes. These range from purpose designed and professionally marketed short break routes established by local authorities as a green tourism product like the Tarka Trail in north Devon to hobby routes invented by enthusiasts with a route name, and maybe a guide book.
- Our review will compare what people want from named and promoted routes compared to what they get and explore new models for the management and

funding for these routes with a view to providing long term clarity for the future.

New greenspace

- We are not talking about rationalising the rights of way network here, but of improving it and making it more user friendly.
- And alongside safeguarding what we have, and improving it wherever it is most needed.
- We need to create new green spaces.
- As I mentioned earlier on as part of our campaigning work we have recently published our 'Manifesto for the Natural Environment', calling for concern for the natural environment is hard-wired into all public policy. It is intended as challenge and call to green action to government – national and local -, policy makers, business and to communities.
- We see green spaces as an essential, and until recently, forgotten component of community life. Forgotten, I should say, by planners and policy makers, not by people in this room who have been making the case for neighbourhood green spaces for many years.
- The truth is that people have become disconnected from the natural world and the link between environment and health, well-being and happiness has been temporarily lost.
- Through the 70s, 80s and 90s people gradually lost touch with nature, and now we have entire generations for whom the outdoors is an alien land – seemingly hostile and unwelcoming.

- Gardens are concreted over to park the car, and recreation grounds and village greens are still developed for superstores.
- Green space is being pushed into lay-bys, roundabouts and rectangular parks. And crucially we want to see 'quality' wildlife rich green space. Not patches of 90% rye grass, 5% tarmac, with the remaining 5% evenly shared between cigarette butts, crisp packets, coke cans with added organic material of canine origin.
- As a result people walk less and there are fewer opportunities for children to go outside and explore.
- People however still experience real health problems – obesity, heart disease, diabetes and declining mental health are all on the rise for example- and like the actions taken in 1848 to improve water quality, and in 1956 to improve air quality, we need to take action now to improve the urban environment, and to promote the need for outdoor exercise.
- Natural England has also recently launched a £25 million Big Lottery funded 'Access to Nature' scheme – to help recreate and restore green spaces to bring nature back into people's lives. You can find details about how to apply for a grant on our website.

New development

- As well as working with partners and local communities to transform existing greenspaces in urban areas, Natural England is making the case for green spaces to be at the heart of all new development.
- After all, developers would never get away with building new housing without sewer facilities or mains water grey infrastructure –so called grey infrastructure.

- So why is it acceptable to leave out vital green spaces – the green infrastructure which improves people’s quality of life, their health as well as creating new habitats for wildlife.
- And they help reduce the impacts of climate change too – helping with flooding run off and keeping us cool is the height of summer. Not that this is proving much of a problem this summer!

Energy

- Climate change represents the most serious long term threat to the natural environment, to us all in fact. We need to move to a low carbon economy, as efficiently and quickly as possible.
- This will undoubtedly require a significantly more efficient use of energy and a substantial investment in clean energy technologies.
- The Government’s Renewable Energy Strategy, published last week, signalled a step change in the development of England’s renewable energy resources.
- And we have some of the best resources for wind, wave and tidal energy in Europe. But these resources are often found where our landscapes are at their most pristine and where nature thrives.
- The challenge then is for us in the conservation and environment sector to work with the energy industry, and government, to find the right places for the right technologies.

- This does not mean that we will rush headlong towards one environmental disaster to solve another. But it does mean that there are difficult decisions ahead.

Conclusion

- I hope then that I have provided you with a better idea about what Natural England is all about, what drives us, and what we are seeking achieve.
- I hope I have been able to share with you just a little of the real passion we feel for the natural environment, and for its enjoyment by people.
- I hope too that you will work with us wherever you can. We will not always agree – as I said earlier it wouldn't be healthy if we did.
- But I would ask you to remember that if you strip away the strategies and the plans, our aims are simple.
- We are here to ensure the good stewardship of the land and sea so that wildlife, agriculture and recreation can thrive and that people might have the freedom to enjoy it. As Turner put it - it's about "the proper use and care of the environment we borrow from future generations."
- That epitomises very well what Natural England is working for.
- We want to reconnect people to the natural world, and to ensure that that the green places of England – in towns and cities, as well as in the countryside, can adapt and survive intact for future generations to enjoy.
- To return again to Octavia Hill,

- And I paraphrase slightly - “Sometimes we think of nature as a luxury, but when the world was made, it was made very beautiful, and meant that we should live amongst its beauties, and that they should speak peace to us in our daily lives.”

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