

## What's in a view?

Who cares about a view? CPRE members do, but sometimes it's hard to see that the value of landscape and views carry any weight with planners.

The value of landscape somehow feels like a weak argument when opposing developments that, it is claimed, will lead to jobs, more houses or to avoid the possibly calamitous consequences of global warming – which may well include unwelcome effects on the natural biology and appearance of the countryside. Here I shall declare my own stance: that global warming is a very real threat arising from our activities, and that we should do all we possibly can to reduce carbon emissions. However, I also believe that we can do this without destroying the views and landscapes that bring us so much pleasure and enjoyment.

There is, in fact, a wealth of legislation, government reports and academic research on landscape values – not to mention the literature, poetry, art and music that have celebrated the natural beauty of our landscapes through the centuries.

### Legislation and planning

National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) receive the strongest protection, in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 – updated in the Environment Act 1995. Their protection was strengthened in the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act, 2000. Interestingly, the primary purpose of AONBs is *to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape* (which includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features and the rich history of human settlement over the ages); for national parks, promoting understanding and enjoyment by the public is equal with conserving natural beauty.

<http://www.environmentlaw.org.uk>

<http://www.aonb.org.uk>

<http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk>

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF): this famously replaced 1000+ pages, but these were the very detailed guidelines for assessing planning applications, not actual planning legislation such as that above. It does maintain protection for countryside and “heritage assets” such as listed buildings and conservation areas. For example, in one of its defining Paragraphs, 7: *Economic, social and environmental* roles must be in balance. Among its core land-use planning principles (Paragraph 17) are:

- *recognizing the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving rural communities within it;*
- *contribute to conserving and enhancing the natural environment ...;*
- *conserve heritage assets in a manner appropriate to their significance, so that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of this and future generations ...*

Although the NPPF strongly supports renewable energy proposals, even so, Paragraph 98 says *local planning authorities should approve [an application for energy development] if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable*, but this is qualified in Footnote 18: *Unless material considerations indicate otherwise*. Material considerations could include a designated landscape or a Landscape Character Area (see below).

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/nppf>

By some miracle (mistake?) the European Landscape Convention<sup>1</sup> (ELC) was ratified by the UK Government and became binding from March 2007, committing it to recognise the importance of landscapes to people; to protect landscapes, especially in planning; and to encourage participation.

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/landscape/protection/europeanconvention/>

### **Ways to characterise and monitor**

Landscape Character Assessment is an important part of UK compliance with the Convention. LCAs have much less protection than National Parks or AONBs, but it is clear from a growing body of government reports that they are considered increasingly important. For instance, Landscapes of the future: Strategic planning policy should include consideration of green infrastructure, landscape character and provision of multiple ecosystem services. (This is a Commons Briefing Note – these are very useful, in fact quite addictive – and presumably accurate.)

LCAs are tricky to use, as there is a cascading hierarchy of them from national down to specific and local.

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/landscape/englands/character/>

<http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/post-notes/energy-and-environment/>

Natural England with DEFRA and English Heritage undertook a project that reported in 2003, Countryside Quality Counts, to research change in countryside quality, using attributes such as biodiversity, tranquillity, heritage and landscape character.

[www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/landscape/englands/character/cqc/](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/landscape/englands/character/cqc/)

Cornwall AONBs have developed a complex but precise grid system for detecting adverse change, using factors such as Quality; Scenic quality; Rarity; Representativeness; Conservation interest; Wildness; Cultural associations; Consensus of opinion.

### **The values of landscape**

There is a lot of academic and government research on landscape values, including a particularly interesting piece of work from Germany on who values landscapes for what: older citizens and country dwellers are more likely to value agricultural 'managed' landscapes; younger ones and town dwellers, 'wild' landscapes.

In the present culture, where it seems that economics trump any other argument, some government departments have felt it necessary to pin down the values of landscape. The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Understanding nature's value to society (the NEA) was commissioned by DEFRA with the collaboration of some of the Research Councils. This absolutely vast and comprehensive report was launched by the Environment Secretary in June 2011. It records that a significant proportion of the country's ecosystems (including countryside) are in a reduced or degraded state, and because of their critical economic and social importance, account needs to be taken in planning decisions of the value they hold for society. The NEA brought us the term, *ecosystem services*, the benefits bestowed on us from the natural world. Rumour says the current Secretary of State, Owen Patterson, has banned this term but it would be too much to hope that he agrees with The Guardian's gloomy environmental commentator George Monbiot that Putting a price on the rivers and rain diminishes us all.

<http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/aug/06/price-rivers-rain-greatest-privatisation>

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe: ETS No. 176 - European Landscape Convention

Another useful Commons Briefing Paper, Natural capital accounting, describes *natural capital*, the public values of nature that we should take care not to diminish. A Google for this phrase turns up widespread international support for taking account of these values in business and legislation, for instance from the World Bank (somewhat ironic, that, in view of the projects they support).

<http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/POST-PN-376>

If you find all this legislation and research to be dull stuff, the CPRE published in 2003 The lie of the land, an impassioned celebration and defence of landscape, although unfortunately planning inspectors are inoculated against such vaporous considerations.

<http://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/countryside/landscapes/item/1931-lie-of-the-land>

Finally the now departed Caroline Spelman may have learnt from her doomed forest sell-off proposal. A White Paper in June 2011 (introduction by her may or may not add to its credibility) agrees that *nature in England is highly fragmented and unable to respond effectively to new pressures such as climate and demographic change*. Among the aspirations is that *The Government wants this to be the first generation to leave the natural environment of England in a better state than it inherited*.

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/>

***We hope!***