

CPRE Lecture
Reconciling Environmental Goods, London, 9 July 2009

Introduction

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak this evening.

I'd like to start by paying tribute to CPRE for the critical role it plays, not only in actively protecting our environment, but also in contributing to the vital debate over how we develop broader agreement about the value we place on the countryside, and how we best maintain and improve it.

That has never meant pickling it in aspic, refusing to allow it to change. As long ago as the 1920s, CPRE's very first President, Lord Crawford, put it very well, when he acknowledged:

“We have got to have new roads and bridges, new suburbs, new villages and perhaps new towns. Our desire is that they should be comely, and shall conform to modern requirements without injuring the ancient beauty of the land.”

That pretty much sums up the same challenge that faces us today – how to reconcile the need for development, without compromising the integrity and beauty of the countryside.

The aspect of that challenge that I've been asked to address today is a very particular one: how can we reconcile competing environmental objectives.

As Green politicians and activists, it can sometimes feel that we are so busy fighting against those who want to put the interests of business and profit ahead of the environment, that we see that as our primary challenge – allowing the ways in which different environmental objectives can in fact sometimes themselves be in competition with each other to fall into the background.

So I was delighted when CPRE asked me to speak on this topic, and I'll do my best to explore some of the tensions between different environmental benefits in a number of contexts, and to set out some guiding principles that might help us navigate a considered course between them.

Clearly, in all of these areas, we face some difficult decisions and, in some instances, we'll have to confront the reality that we can't achieve a win-win solution.

The case I'll make is that there are neither generalised, off-the-peg answers to be applied in all circumstances, nor technocratic fixes, such as cost-benefit analyses, that will make such difficult decisions for us.

Instead, I believe we need to be guided by a set of principles:

1. **Firstly, any decision must be informed by genuine engagement with those affected.** Good decisions won't be made in the abstract, but rather through a thorough understanding of the specific and concrete effects of any proposed development or initiative. To gain such an understanding, we need involved dialogue with those who are likely to be affected.

Where there's a local community involved, that's relatively straightforward. But the climate crisis makes matters more complex.

How do we weigh the views of local residents against the need to protect the interests of others elsewhere (in time or space) who could be negatively affected by what appears to be a local decision, but which has more global consequences?

One corollary seems to be to remember that the principle of subsidiarity doesn't simply mean decisions made at the most *local* level, but decisions made at the most *appropriate* level – and that means that we need to explore ways of hearing the voices of the wider, global community. Already existing engagement models, such as Citizen's Juries, can help us here.

We need to get away from sham “consultations”, where a very small number of not very different options are presented, and where the preferred option is more or less a foregone conclusion.

Genuine engagement is about people with different opinions working together to find out what they have in common, and to move towards a shared solution to a problem.

2. **Secondly, in addition to being informed by the views of stakeholders, we need to take decisions informed by the best available scientific evidence.** Robust scientific research into climate change and our impact on the environment needs to be marshalled in support of sound decision-making.
3. **Thirdly, we need to be wary of setting up false dichotomies between supposedly competing environmental objectives, and instead think creatively and innovatively about possible alternatives that may eliminate, or at least reduce, any unintended negative consequences.**

Competing environmental objectives

As soon as the topic of competing environmental objectives was proposed, I was prompted to reflect on two of the most high profile recent instances where respected environmentalists and environmental organisations found themselves on opposing sides.

Both examples, and this probably comes as no surprise, revolved around energy: the need to provide cleaner, renewable forms of energy, on the one hand, and the need to protect natural habitats, wildlife and landscapes on the other.

Severn Barrage

The first example that came to mind was the proposed tidal barrage on the Severn, near Bristol. With the potential to generate nearly 5% of all the electricity consumed in England and Wales – the equivalent of three nuclear power stations – it is not difficult to see why some environmentalists looking for cleaner forms of energy, with the urgency of climate change becoming more apparent every day, would be in favour.

But the Severn is also a unique natural environment and landscape. It has a 45-foot tidal range – the second largest in the world – and the outgoing tides leave large areas of mudflats, saltmarshes and rocky islands, and food for an average 65,000 birds in winter. It is also used by an estimated 30,000 salmon and tens of thousands of shads, lampreys and sea trout use the estuary to reach spawning grounds in the Usk and Wye rivers.

Fault lines soon emerged among environmentalists in the debate over whether the development should go ahead. The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) came out in favour, but with strict conditions attached, calling for any development to comply with European directives on natural habitats that would require new habitats to be provided elsewhere to compensate for any losses.

Greenpeace also gave the development an amber light, urging for the potential of clean energy generation to be explored, but not to be pursued at any cost to wildlife.

But a coalition of environmental groups, including the RSPB, WWF and National Trust, launched a campaign to oppose the proposed development. Their concern was with the threat posed to wildlife, habitat and with disruption to landscape. Critically, though, they also questioned the economics of the development, and urged for more investigation into other, potentially more cost-effective ways of meeting renewable energy targets in the UK.

In the Green Party, I remember, we had robust debates. As the political party that for longer than any other in the UK has called for the adoption of renewable energy to reduce damaging carbon emissions, the decision over whether to support the tidal barrage in the face of mounting evidence of the impact on local habitats and landscape was a difficult one to take. In the end, we decided that on balance we could not support it: that it had the potential to be a damaging, and wasteful, gamble.

The decision-making process within the Green Party over the barrage, and also the public debate that ensued in the media among the various environmental actors, are a good illustration of the principles that I put forward as guides for decision-making when competing environmental objectives come into play:

1. The debate showed very clearly that we cannot take decisions at an abstract level. They must always be informed by the

specific and concrete impacts on the local environment, including landscape and community, and stakeholders must be involved in helping us understand these.

2. Secondly, decision-making must be based on sound evidence. The coalition of environmental groups and SDC presented robust scientific evidence on the likely effects on habitats and wildlife of the development and, conversely, also of the likely impact on carbon emissions from energy production if it went ahead.
3. Finally, the debate in the Green Party and among the environmental groups avoided falling into a false dichotomy between clean energy in the form of the tidal barrage, on the one hand, and protecting habitats and landscapes on the other. Instead, we put forward alternative, potentially more cost-effective, means of meeting renewable energy targets. These included smaller renewable projects in the Severn area that would not come with the large attendant risks to habitats.

At this point, I want to sound a note of caution about technocratic fixes. When we, or governments, are faced with difficult decisions, it is tempting to seek out tools that, cloaked in a veneer of objectivity, appear to be able to make such decisions for us.

When it comes to decision-making about conflicting environmental objectives, the most common and most developed fixes are often

cost-benefit analyses that use economic value to translate competing environmental ends – such as reduced emissions, the preservation of bio-diversity, and protection of landscapes – into a common language in order to make the relative value of these, and the trade-offs between them, visible.

I can see the value of such an approach in some instances. We might use it, for example, to make a case for the value of eco-systems' services to the World Bank if a rainforest is threatened by development. But we need to be careful: such tools can only ever inform decision-making rather than make difficult decisions for us, as many of the developers of these tools would themselves agree.

My caution stems from both practical and philosophical concerns. Most fundamentally, these tools ultimately only ever have the appearance of being objective – the process of valuation that underpins them is always necessarily subjective no matter how developed techniques of economic valuation might be.

After all, if we return to the example of the Severn tidal barrage, who is to say what value it has for the 65,000 birds that feed there? Or the worth of the preserved natural landscape? Or the wetlands for that matter?

In other words, how can we possibly put an objective price on the intrinsic value of our environment? Value that comes from resources like food and water, as well as from the contribution made by landscape, beauty, tranquility, distinctiveness and quality of place to our whole experience of life.

Cost benefit techniques can only ever open up, rather than provide definitive answers to, questions about value and priorities. Moreover, these questions are themselves the result of context that we impose through our interaction, as a human species, with the world around us, generally failing to appreciate that the environment would exist – and one can only assume thrive – without our presence.

More generally, there is also another reason to be cautious when deploying such techniques. By attaching monetary values to environmental outcomes, we risk giving the impression that such outcomes can indeed be traded for each other, that some kind of substitutability exists between them.

That is, in the case of the tidal barrage on the Severn, by viewing both the benefit of reduced carbon emission and the loss of habitat, wildlife and landscape in monetary terms, these diverse outcomes might seem to be able to stand in for, or compensate for, each other. Yet, can the reduced carbon emissions really substitute for the loss of birds, or the landscape?

The answer, of course, is no. This is not to say that we might not need to take a decision to prioritise reduced carbon emissions over the birdlife – there may be good reasons for doing so – but we should be fully cognisant of the fact that they are not substitutable when taking such a decision. Cost-benefit analysis can be dangerous because it masks this.

Similar flawed thinking is what seems to lie behind David Cameron and the Conservative Party's plans for conservation credits – that is compensating for any cost to biodiversity by at least an equivalent investment in biodiversity elsewhere. Destroying our precious environment by building Tesco's superstores does not suddenly become OK because CEO Terry Leahy promises to plant woodland somewhere.

Expanding Heathrow airport does not suddenly become a green option because BAA invest in some bat boxes. Our planning system already requires developers to mitigate for environmental destruction and this kind of credit scheme is giving the green card to business as usual.

I want something entirely different. I want the focus moved away from offsetting damage to the environment and towards radical reform of the planning system.

Reform that allows communities an opportunity to engage fully with local decision making, as well as with how those decisions connect to the national or global context.

I want reform that puts environmental benefits at least on an equal footing with economic and social gains – and reform which sometimes even says no matter how much that new bypass might claim to stimulate the economy, it does not justify concreting over

acres of ancient woodland and the habitats of rare and protected wildlife species.

Reform that starts with the premise of negatively impacting as little as possible on the environment, rather than this being an add-on at the end, something we think about only when the objections start pouring in.

Above all we need a planning system that is actually about pro-actively and strategically planning for the future - not just about avoiding the long term consequences of the decisions we make today. Opening up democratic space within the planning process must reflect this objective, rather than ignoring these wider strategic considerations, as the Tories' localism agenda appears to do.

Wind farms

I said there were two examples that immediately came to mind when Shaun suggested the lecture topic. I now want to turn to the second example, which also relates to energy: the tension between on-shore wind farm developments and countryside preservation.

Some of you who are familiar with these debates might say it is no accident that I have chosen to tackle wind farms second – it is on this issue that the Green Party and CPRE have on more than one occasion found themselves on opposing sides.

We have not found ourselves on opposing sides, however, because CPRE has a disregard for the threat posed by climate change or the Green Party a disregard for the value of the countryside, aesthetically or otherwise. Quite the opposite is true. CPRE recognises the need to urgently reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the Green Party has a well-developed policy on the countryside.

But this is difficult terrain. And faced with the evidence in each particular case – because, again, we cannot make a decision in the abstract about the value of wind as a clean energy form versus the countryside – a judgement has to be made.

For the Green Party, however – and we make no apology for this – the threat of climate change has to be a central consideration. There is increasingly a scientific consensus that we should not exceed greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere of 450ppm – and some would argue for a much lower concentration.

If we are to provide some room for poorer countries to develop, then industrialised countries such as the United Kingdom will need to cut their emissions by 90% by 2030 – or the equivalent of 10% year on year. The scale of this challenge becomes all the more apparent when we acknowledge, as demonstrated by the latest research from the Tyndall Centre, that emissions are actually still going up.

Clean energy is clearly a major part of the solution. That's not to say that all wind farms should always be approved, but that they will have

a significant role to play – and here in the UK, we have one of the best potential wind resources in the whole of Europe.

In essence, the same principles that I outlined earlier need to be applied when deciding on wind farms.

1. There needs to be involved dialogue with those affected. The word ‘involved’ is key here. This cannot simply be a one-sided debate, but would ideally follow a Citizen Jury model where expert witnesses are called to increase the likelihood that a shared understanding of concerns is developed and perhaps new ways of addressing concerns, such as alternative sitings, are able to emerge.
2. Scientific evidence informs the decision-making. A good example here is the Romney Marsh wind farm in Kent – an instance where the local Green Party and CPRE did indeed find themselves on opposing sides. There was some concern about birdlife, but we argued that the weight of scientific evidence suggested, as a High Court judge later agreed in a subsequent appeal, that the risk of endangering bird life was low.
3. Finally, we need to always be thinking creatively and innovatively to see if there is a way out of the wind farm/country-side preservation dichotomy.

This is true in a very immediate sense by recognising that the countryside has always been subject to change and that it is in fact a myth to talk of an unspoilt, untouched countryside that is now being encroached upon. Wind farms are not appropriate in every setting, but there is scope for them to become part of our countryside landscape in many places, and indeed to even be welcome additions that attract new people, as the building of viewing platforms on some turbines attests.

We also need to explore ways in which local people can derive a direct advantage from the wind farm in their locality. I've been excited, for example, by the emergence of community-owned wind farms, like the Westmill windfarm in South Oxfordshire.

The benefits of community ownership are not simply financial. If they were, one could simply opt instead for the potentially higher financial gains to be reaped from "goodwill payments" from corporate wind farms. But the principle relates to the inherent character of ownership, to the inclusive decision-making that community ownership necessarily creates. It is this kind of creative opportunity to enhance environmental gain with clear social benefits that is at the heart of genuine Green thinking.

Environmental and social objectives: housing

The community-owned wind farms are a good example of where doing something that helps us address the demands of climate

change can also provide a benefit to the local community by ensuring that the proceeds remain local. But such a co-existence of social and environmental ends cannot be taken for granted – just as there can be competing environmental objectives, so environmental and social objectives can be in competition with each other.

As a party that is resolutely concerned with building a socially just world that exists within environmental limits, the Green Party has increasingly had to confront and negotiate this tension between the social and environmental, particularly in the face of widening social inequalities in the UK.

Although not made explicit in the title of the lecture, this tension is still present. It comes to the fore in the challenge that I have been asked to address around housing, namely how we meet housing needs while maintaining green spaces in cities and protecting the countryside from urban sprawl.

As the Green Party, we have for a long time had policies that call for strict planning regulations to ensure that green spaces, green belts and, increasingly also, bio-diverse brown-field sites are protected from development. At the same time, we have advanced policies that affirm the right to good quality, affordable housing for all. We see no contradiction between these policies.

The latest figures from the Empty Homes Agency show that there are nearly 700,000 empty homes in England, or 3.1% of the total housing stock.

Better use of that housing stock can help meet both our housing needs and ensure that we do not encroach further on the countryside. High density housing also has an important role to play – and it's not only better for the environment, it has also been proven to improve social contact, security and connectivity, as well as contributing to a thriving local economy and to the conditions required to make public transport viable, for example.

So too, can questioning the idea that London and the South East must drive the UK's economy – and thus bear the brunt of any new housing development. There is a clear North-South divide in the number of empty homes, with nearly double the number in the North.

This means that any successful rehabilitation of empty housing stock must be accompanied by policies that regenerate economically deprived areas to make sure that we rebuild these as places and communities where people want to live. Looking creatively at ways of converting other empty buildings into homes, or dividing up large houses, must also be strategies we can employ. And social housing can play an important role here, so we want every new housing development to allocate a higher share of properties to the less well off.

I am clear that such approaches would massively reduce the need for new housing but what happens when there is a genuine need, identified locally? I lived in Stonesfield, Oxfordshire for 5 years, so know first hand how successful the model of a Community Land Trust has been there. Based on shared ownership, land is bought by a trust formed by local residents, giving them the opportunity to ensure that housing is affordable, that value remains in the community and that there is a presumption in favour of local use of new housing.

Supporting similar schemes could make a real difference to the housing debate. It would take decision making out of the hands of developers and government, putting it instead in the hands of communities, who can then work in partnership with local planners to deliver much needed affordable housing.

Concluding: Bringing it back to the big picture

In concluding, I want to bring us back to the politics that most of us face on a daily basis. Tonight we have been concerning ourselves with competing environmental objectives and, to a lesser extent, competing social and environmental objectives. Yet, as I said right at the beginning of my speech, the main battleground still pits the interests of business and profit against people and planet.

For this reason, at the Green Party we have been putting a lot of effort into thinking about how we can redesign the economic system at this crucial juncture so that it serves us better.

Some of you will have seen the Green New Deal publication that I was involved in with a group of economists and environmentalist, including the Guardian's economics editor Larry Elliot, Ann Pettifor of Operation Noah and Andrew Simms of the New Economics Foundation. We set out a comprehensive package of investment and reforms for the transition to a greener, new economy, creating hundreds of thousands of new jobs, and tackling both the economic crisis and the climate crisis at the same time.

Clearly the tax system will also need to be overhauled if the interests of business and the environment are to be more closely aligned. Eco-taxes have received a bad name, not least because they have become associated with attempts by politicians to raise additional revenue by the back door. We are adamant that eco-taxes – perhaps with a new name! – need to be part of the taxation system because they provide powerful disincentives to environmentally unfriendly activities.

We need to get away from chasing the holy grail of ever more economic growth at any cost, recognising that it is only through a shift to a steady state economy that we can live sustainably on a planet of finite resources.

I've strayed well away from my brief, for which I apologise, but I do think this is the fundamental challenge we face: building an economic system where business, people and planet are more closely aligned.

And I felt emboldened to digress, because it's clear that CPRE is grappling with that same challenge. I read CPRE's "2026 Vision for the Countryside", published last month, with great interest. And as you put it in that document, "There is a growing recognition that the country has been on the wrong path, that crude economism has not resulted in greater happiness, that we need a values-based politics".

It is precisely a values-based politics that is at the heart of the Green Party's approach, and I look forward to working more closely with you on this shared agenda of promoting urgently needed change.

Thank you.