

Observations on the first year of operation of Natural Resources Wales

Visiting the NRW stand at the Anglesey Agricultural Show last August (2014) I looked for any mention of biodiversity or wildlife conservation on the display boards – I almost had to crawl on the ground to find any mention of what should be one of the prime activities of an organisation concerned with the “Natural” Resources of Wales.

The Welsh Assembly Government made the sustainable use of natural resources one of the main planks of its programme for government. However the natural environment of Wales is **not** “natural”: it is largely man made – the result of human activity working on the geology, fauna and flora of Wales over thousands of years. In order to sustain and enhance biodiversity, human activity to maintain the environment in a favourable condition is essential. (Agricultural activity is not enough: agricultural land may look “green and pleasant” – biodiverse it is not!)

Some recent changes in land management in Wales have been beneficial and are contributing to a sustainable future:-

Thus changes in agricultural subsidies have had the effect of reducing grazing pressure in the uplands allowing the recovery of natural ecosystems and enhancing biodiversity.

The blocking of upland drains, allowing the recovery of peatlands, is having beneficial effects in reducing erosion, improving water and carbon storage capacity, improving the quality of water for human consumption and again benefiting biodiversity.

The recent work by NRW to remobilise sand dune systems in National Nature Reserves along the Welsh Coast to maintain the specialised habitats of mobile sand and the uncommon plants and insects that need such conditions, is a bold and imaginative project. (It would be good to see some information boards on site to explain this work!!)

BUT to see whether the activities undertaken are having the desired effect scientific monitoring is essential.

Monitoring requires skilled taxonomists and ecologists, so it is dismaying to see NRW (and the National Museum of Wales) losing skilled personnel, through redundancy or early retirement, because their essential skills are no longer valued by the new managements of these organisations. I was not opposed to the amalgamation of CCW/FC&EA because all three organisations had developed active programmes, for the sustainable management of biodiversity, essential to meet our international obligations on the management of nationally and internationally important habitats. However it seems that there is a danger that the biodiversity baby is in danger of being thrown out with the bathwater of amalgamation.

Furthermore, organisations such as the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland, Plantlife, and the Wildlife Trusts, which might have been able to plug some of the serious gaps in expertise opening up in NRW, have had funding reduced or totally removed thus destroying their ability to provide expertise and to mobilise the many willing and knowledgeable citizen scientists in Wales.

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