# Equity, Ethics and Evidence in Environmental Governance

Two events recently drew my attention to the issues of equity, ethics and the use of evidence in environmental policy and decision-making. The first was the decision by the UK's Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government that 32 ha – the area of about 16 football pitches – of ancient woodland will be destroyed to allow the extension of an existing ragstone quarry. The second was a meeting with representatives from the UK Business Council for Sustainable Development.

The first case evidenced the currency of the old cost-benefit justification for environmental destruction. In this instance, the commercial benefits of extending Hermitage Quarry were said to outweigh the value of 400-year old Oaken Wood in Kent. This decision is claimed to be in line with Development Plan policy (Bawden 2013). Indeed, the new National Planning Policy Framework published in 2012 states that 'planning permission should be refused for development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland […] unless the need for, and benefits of, the development in that location clearly outweigh the loss' (DCLG 2012, p 28, section 118). Pessimism and mistrust over such guidance stems from common practice where evaluative tools and statutory mechanisms are applied in a tick-box fashion and evidence produced to support a priori desired results. There should perhaps be no surprise then that ancient woodlands are one of the oldest and most biodiverse land uses but have been decimated and fragmented, halving in area over 80 years with around 300 sites left covering just 2 per cent of the UK (only 14 sites are now larger than 3 km$^2$). This ruling sets a precedent for further development on other ancient woodland sites, according to the Woodland Trust and Bawden (2013).

The woodland ruling reflects the current emphasis on (short-term) economic growth. Economic gains, here in the form of supplying the construction industry and maintaining existing quarry jobs for several more years, are elevated above the maintenance and improvement of environmental 'assets' and fundamental benefits, be it in terms of air quality and climate regulation, biodiversity or health and well-being related 'services' – let alone respect for the health of nature or more holistic motivations. The environmental focus is largely limited to 'restoring' the site after its extended lifetime. It does not take an ecologist to realise that an ancient woodland – defined as continuous woodland cover since 1600 – once lost is lost forever.

This case, like many others, shows the maintenance of a false dichotomy in planning between development and the environment. Yet believing that new development can always be a win-win (for the current market-led economic system *and* the natural environment) would be naive. In reality, societies and

their economic systems are nested within and dependent upon environmental systems. Economic or social 'development' cannot be treated as independent nor should social and economic benefits be elevated above due respect for nature.

The second case was the sustainable development meeting where two facts emerged. Fact No. 1: For any message to get through to the Board of large international firms it needs to be in plain English and fit on an A4 sheet with a clear yes/no style recommendation. So while huge amounts of time and re-sources get pumped into researching a rigorous evidence base, in the end the decision comes down to simple messages and a persuasive argument. This highly condensed, 'back of an envelope', approach to decision-making ap-pears to be favoured both by big business and decision-makers in government. Fact No. 2: In the absence of regulatory compulsion and client demand, higher environmental building standards will remain the exception rather than the rule. Compared with other European countries such as Sweden, Germany or Austria, the UK's regulatory system for environmental standards and retrofit-ting (e.g. improving energy efficiency of existing buildings) is weak. Designs are often made without sufficient consideration of the whole life cycle: so specific user requirements are often unknown; choices of material, style and quality are decided to fit a perceived average buyer, known suppliers and tight budget; builders are chosen based on their cost-cutting quotes; after comple-tion the occupants pay the ever-increasing bills for any environmental and other inefficiencies; and a redeveloper then starts the whole cycle again after negotiating a bargain price for the unit. The focus is on making as large a profit as possible in the initial development, chain of sales and redevelopment rather than designing, building and maintaining as efficient, comfortable and versa-tile a home, office or factory as possible.

A common theme between my two encounters is about selective or limited perspectives and evidence, lack of connectivity, and lack of 'equity' or equal standing; in other words the dangers of considering things in isolation. In the first encounter, the decision about Oaken Wood was made for this specific case without due consideration (or perhaps knowledge) of the already massive loss and fragmentation in ancient woodland habitats and its impact on ecology and society. After all, each planning proposal is evaluated based on its own merits. Similarly, despite recognising the importance of joining up and connectivity in spatial planning (e.g. Allmendinger and Haughton 2007; Low 2002), actual development decision-making and implementation is still disjointed, resulting in the wrong things being mis-identified as 'opportunities', missed opportuni-ties and environmental and social injustice.

The themes of isolation, ethics, equity and governance all feature in this is-sue's papers. Stevenson (2013) considers the politicisation and democratisation of technologies for climate change mitigation and adaptation, and outlines the possibility of global deliberative accountability. Accountability and reflexive

decision-making are identified as core considerations when addressing and dealing with climate change. Stevenson approaches the lack of formal global democratic structures through the idea of nested public spheres, and specifically geopolitical and functional nesting, for effective decision-making and action. Key to the paper are deliberative and polycentric forms of reflexive decision-making, and Stevenson directly builds on Dryzek's writings on deliberative democracy – defining representation as 'representation of discourses that may capture the values, interests and needs of potentially affected people' (p. 572). She uses several short case studies to illustrate and unpack Dryzek's points, including the Clean Technology Fund and the Carbon War Room. This reveals, via comparison and contrast, aspects of the governance structures involved in terms of their inclusiveness, authenticity and consequences. What we can glean from these existing 'platforms' is drawn out as to how we can shape representative and accountable fora or approaches to inform climate change mitigation and adaptation at the global level.

Maltais (2013) also considers climate change – focusing on politics, moral responsibility and equity. He argues that unilateral personal emissions reduction is unlikely to contribute 'in a meaningful way to bringing about collective schemes for regulating, monitoring and enforcing emission reductions' (p. 595). Maltais rightly emphasises climate change as a political communal issue and, equally rightly, observes the failure of nations to effectively reduce overall greenhouse gas emissions so far. Sadly, in this context personal emission reductions are neither effective nor fair despite there being, in principle, good reasons for personal action (e.g. promotion, virtue and/or duty; see also Booth 2012). Maltais argues that, under existing global (in)action and global warming scenarios, individuals lack the need to feel a moral obligation to reduce their carbon footprint. However, in democratic terms, one lever that individuals hold over communal action and climate change politics is via their right to vote. He concludes that much more attention should therefore be directed to failures of climate politics and large-scale climate cooperation.

James (2013) draws attention to part-whole relationships, unhealthy anthropocentrism, prejudice and myopia. The latter he characterises as a problem of a very limited perspective or 'way of *not* seeing' things (p. 619). The arguments, or narratives, are built around finding or failing to find meaning in nature, drawing on a range of naturalist and other writers, including Richard Mabey, Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez. The core of the paper is about coming closer to seeing things the way they really are, rather than misreading (often self-centred) feelings and descriptions into nature. Prejudice and myopia are identified as major vices, counterbalanced by the virtues of attention and receptivity. He questions whether more scientific evidence, or general better knowledge of existing scientific facts, would help reduce vices and improve virtues (not an uncommon line of argument used by politicians and scientists, e.g. in relation to controversial issues such as agricultural GMOs and wind

farms). Drawing on Stan Godlovitch's work, he argues that both the methods and the results of science reflect our distinctly human interests in theorising and experimentation, description and measurement, and hence are anthropocentric (and by implication partial or potentially flawed). Instead, a better antidote to the vices may be, using Godlovitch's phrase, a 'state of appreciative incomprehension' to appreciate nature's otherness and experience it through touch, smell, taste and hearing.

The way we create, frame and express our ideas (and associated research, plans, policies, actions …) and allocate moral concern matters. Samuelsson (2013) draws our attention to the commonly used centrism-terminology in environmental ethics (and beyond). He exposes their ambiguous and misleading uses and associated (flaws in attributed) moral significance by unpicking 'ordinary' and '-centrism' interpretations. He furthermore highlights the terminology's failure to capture the theoretical understandings and expressions of most environmental ethicists. Samuelsson hence proposes a typology of theories in environmental ethics that distinguishes between scentientism and non-scentientism, with three more distinctions for the latter based on whether ethical theories are interest-based (or not), and whether they direct moral importance to non-organisms (categories of individualism or non-individualism); a final distinction is made under non-individualism between holism and non-holism. Adopting this typology ecocentrism, for example, would be replaced by holism.

The final paper in this issue, by Robinson and Sasu is about environmental governance of conservation areas focusing on values and especially the importance of non-material values in community-based conservation. Drawing on a case study in Ghana, they point to socially constructed meaning and significance that needs more prominent consideration in environmental policy and management. To become more sustainable, we need to get the right conditions and incentives from government. Good environmental governance would be characterised by trust, respect and legitimacy.

Coming back to my initial two examples of 'environmental' decision-making, in the light of some of the specific points discussed in this volume. Fundamental and wide-ranging environmental benefits still do not find an equal footing with short-term financial gain or recognition of their 'true' value in our policies and plans. We have no pervasive environmental ethics embedded in our current planning system other than a tokenistic voucher for survival if the profit from exploitation of that area does not yet stack up.

With regard to pinch-points between the push for development that stimulates economic growth and good environmental governance, alternative economic models such as a steady-state economy or long-term policies preparing for degrowth are marginalised or ignored in current policy debates. Warning signs about long-term massive environmental change, with the associated social and economic catastrophic impacts, are buried in these debates,

with half-hearted responses of promoting – for example – the anthropocentric ecosystems services framework yet ignoring the ecosystem approach of which the ecosystems services framework is just one part. The UK and other governments show a persistent reluctance to more critically examine the externality- and inequality-riddled economic system and associated dominant growth paradigm. The trend for putting monetary values on environmental 'goods and services' and paying for ecosystem services has not fundamentally shifted mainstream political thinking towards environmental equity. Values and valuation are comfortably absorbed into the economic powerhouse, fuelled by utilitarian thinking and infesting (rather than investing in) the environment.

So what would I like to change? Perhaps it is time we thought and talked more about meaning and less about value. But if this is to translate into meaningful environmental governance, we also need decision-makers who are capable of understanding the discourse of meaning as well as the discourse of benefit and cost, and who appreciate the distinction between the very different kinds of 'loss' that each discourse involves. At least we might then be spared nonsensical talk of 'benefits' that outweigh 'the loss ... of irreplaceable habitats' (DCLG 2012, p.28, section 118). These habitats are not simply things that might have been mislaid. Their loss represents a hole in the fabric of our lives.

CLAUDIA CARTER

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