

The Dyfi Biosphere Conference 2004

Ecodyfi organised a conference on the subject of the Dyfi Biosphere Reserve (or Area) in June 2004. It was largely funded by the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), with assistance from the Welsh Development Agency. The mini-website at <http://www.ecodyfi.org.uk/biosphereproject/index.html> carries the presentations made at the conference, together with related information. A summary of the proceedings is in part (B) below and a separate Frequently Asked Questions document is available.

A) SUMMARY OF THE PROCESS

1. The conference was held from 9th – 11th June 2004 in Machynlleth. It consisted of the following elements:
 - Wednesday June 9th: an evening public meeting at the Tabernacl
 - Thursday June 10th: a whole-day seminar at Celtica
 - Friday June 11th: field trips around the area

2. The conference had five aims:
 - To explore community involvement in land management and sustainable development at a landscape scale
 - To allow the Dyfi Valley community to learn from the experiences of other Biosphere Reserves
 - To enhance local, national and European interest in the Dyfi Valley as a beacon of sustainable development
 - To build links between local people, environmental organisations, councils, landowners, academic institutions and European Biosphere Reserves
 - To give fresh momentum to the review process concerning the Dyfi Biosphere Reserve

3. Ecodyfi considers that these aims were met. The events were well attended and the information content was consistently excellent. Specifically:
 - Around 80 local people attended the public meeting and overwhelmingly supported moves to confirm the designation with enlarged boundaries.
 - 65 people attended the seminar and again demonstrated strong support. Participants included representatives from many of the organisations and stakeholder groups whose active participation will be essential if the designation is to fulfil its potential to benefit the valley.
 - The speakers from Germany and Switzerland provided inspiration and practical examples of how the designation had benefited their areas.
 - The event has opened the way for CCW and ecodyfi to build the necessary partnerships that will complete the review process by engaging the local community in a more intensive consultation.

4. Some important learning points arose out of the conference, including:
 - Many local people consider that protecting cultural diversity (in our case the Welsh language and associated culture) is as important as protecting biodiversity
 - The Biosphere Reserve concept is wide enough to encompass this and UNESCO would regard work on this aspect as a welcome contribution to the experience available to the world network of Biosphere Reserves
 - In other Biosphere Reserves initial suspicion from some landowner and other interests had been turned into active support for initiatives developed on the back of the designation
 - The designation is most effective as a development tool when it is able to integrate other strategies, particularly those for economic and tourism development.

5. The weaknesses of the conference were as follows:
 - While DEFRA was represented and an Assembly Member attended the Thursday morning, no National Assembly officials were able to attend because of previous commitments
 - Considering the crucial role played by land managers in successful Biosphere Reserves, local farmers were under-represented at the conference. Equally, the public event didn't attract as many people new to ecodyfi and the Biosphere Reserve concept as had been hoped. This points to the need for more intensive efforts to engage the community as a whole.

B) SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

1. Public meeting

In order to provide information and enable local people and businesses to assess the case for whether the Dyfi Valley should continue to be a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve a public meeting was held at Machynlleth's Tabernacl on Wednesday, 9th June 2004. This meeting sought to illustrate the breadth of possibilities available to the members of the valley's community in relation to this designation. *The meeting was opened by its Chair, Aled Owen Griffiths, the Co-Chair of ecodyfi.*

A summary of the current situation of the Dyfi Valley and of its assets was provided by Charles Arch and Andy Rowland of ecodyfi, including comments on the importance of the river Dyfi to the landscape and to those who manage it.

This was followed by a section led by Arfon Hughes and Cyril Evans of Bro Ddyfi Communities First, which contained observations on what the community is saying would improve the quality of life and a description of the consultation process.

Ecodyfi's manager Andy Rowland then invited comments on possible development paths for the area and whether the Dyfi Valley possessed a distinctive "unique selling point". The Dyfi valley was described as a cradle of growth, benefiting from new energies. It was pointed out that local actions to combat climate change drew positive attention and that climate change will seriously affect some of the local habitats. Affordable housing was suggested as a priority issue and there was enthusiasm for a better maintained Rights of Way network.

The case for a "new look" Biosphere Reserve designation of the Dyfi Valley by the United Nations and the benefits and opportunities that it might bring was made by Peter Frost of the Countryside Council for Wales. He illustrated the potential gains for the Dyfi Valley with the example of Blaenavon which has benefited from its designation as a World Heritage Site.

Peter Frost went on to note that UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are reviewed every ten years and that since 1995 the Dyfi Valley no longer qualifies because UNESCO has changed the criteria. The Dyfi National Nature Reserve and estuary that constitute the present Biosphere Reserve is not a large enough area and does not include enough people. The Biosphere Reserve designation is for sustainable development rather than habitat and biodiversity nowadays. He said that this is the moment to decide whether we no longer want the designation or whether to upgrade it and reap the benefits of becoming a UNESCO recognised area.

The case for redesignation was supported by short contributions from further speakers, who illustrated some of the activities already taking place that were relevant to the designation.

Charles Arch, of ecodyfi, spoke on the subject of horticulture, stressing the loss of fruit and vegetable growing locally which had been replaced by imports from the wider UK. He suggested various schemes and examples for revitalising the local horticultural industry and finished by stating that there is a need for attitudes to be changed.

Peter Jones, the manager of Celtica, talked about culture and language. He noted that he personally felt that 'culture' in this context related to the Welsh language and activities based around it. This culture provides another unique selling point that other Biosphere Reserves do not possess. He noted that despite a lively and diverse culture in the area, native Welsh culture was being eroded by population movements and a lack of commitment to bilingualism from recent arrivals to the area. These people have an empathetic link to the natural environment but could not fully engage in the culture and language that forms part of that environment. He concluded by noting that there is a need to maintain the Welsh language and cultural diversity in the same way that many people seek to conserve natural biodiversity.

Andy Jeffery, from Outward Bound at Aberdyfi, gave a short presentation on the role of outdoor activities in the Dyfi Valley. He stressed both the

recreational and educational nature of outdoor activities. He saw a role for the Biosphere Reserve in educating young visitors to adopt responsible attitudes and to reduce their adverse impact upon the local environment. This educational role would be fulfilled by outdoor instructors who work under the guidelines of organisations like The Royal Yachting Association, the Welsh Canoeing Association and the British Mountaineering Council. The staff of outdoor centres are invaluable in raising the awareness of the area and culture they are working in and promoting its difference from the cultures which visitors come from.

This section of the meeting concluded with a presentation by Sir John Houghton, former Chair of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, about the proposed Aberdyfi visitor centre. The visitor centre will seek to attract 'eco-tourists' to the area and to engage those visitors who are primarily interested in the beach - so that they appreciate local ecology and heritage.

Following the presentations the meeting was opened to questions from the floor. At the end of this discussion a show of hands demonstrated overwhelming support amongst those present for the process of confirming the Dyfi Valley as a "new look" UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

2. Seminar

The following day a seminar for 60 people was held at Celtica, Machynlleth. In attendance were delegates from local authorities, other organisations and interested locals. *The day's proceedings were opened by the Chair, Sir John Houghton.*

Sir John introduced Peter Frost of the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) who gave a presentation on the role of UNESCO and the new criteria for Biosphere Reserves. The UK review has recommended that the existing Dyfi Biosphere Reserve becomes the core zone of an expanded area that would encompass the whole catchment area of the River Dyfi. The modern designation of a Biosphere Reserve extends beyond the original agenda for the conservation of biodiversity to include the functions of economic development, the conservation of social and cultural practices and the logistical support for education. Biosphere Reserves are seen as providing 'living laboratories for sustainable development' and as such the inclusion of people and stakeholder participation is essential to the designation of a Biosphere Reserve. They are "10% place 90% process".

Peter Frost went on to outline the process of public consultation that would inform the community and help it come to a reasoned decision about whether to ask the National Assembly to forward an application to UNESCO (via the UK Government's Foreign Office). CCW wishes to provide financial support for the consultation process through a steering group involving local authorities and ecodyfi and would pay for data collection / application.

The conference then received presentations of the experiences of three existing biosphere reserves.

The first of these presentations was given by Andy Bell of the Braunton Burrows Biosphere Reserve in Devon. He demonstrated how the reserve was built upon sustainable development principles and sought to use its designation to change public perceptions and create a hub of knowledge through links to local education providers. This educational focus had led to the development of new local environmental businesses and an increased sense of local pride in the area. The area had also benefited from the use of its designation as a brand to market the region to tourists and as a means of attracting further resources.

In their case, the core zone is primarily a dune system that is owned and managed by the Christie Estate along with the Ministry of Defence. The Buffer Zone consists of existing SSSIs, the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Heritage Coast area. The £350,000 annual cost of the Northern Devon Coast and Countryside Service, which co-ordinates activity in the extended Biosphere Reserve, is provided by the three local authorities.

The morning's second case study was provided by Doris Pokorny of the Rhön Biosphere Reserve in Germany. She showed how designation had provided the means for economic and social improvements. Increased co-operation between farmers and businesses had seen the creation of new products and markets and had served to maximise local economic benefits. For example, research into indigenous varieties of apple has led to a resurgence of orchards and new apple-derived products.

Local actors had driven this process and created new markets and jobs whilst simultaneously creating a regional identity for the Rhön. This identity is being reinforced through the creation of quality labels, both for businesses using a minimum percentage of local produce and for individual products in specific sectors.

In their case, the Buffer Zone consists largely of extensively-managed grasslands and is called the Maintenance Zone to indicate it is not just about protecting the Core Area. Actually it is split into two, with Buffer Zone A being those areas with statutory protection (like SSSIs).

The third presentation was given by Engelbert Ruoss of the Entlebuch Biosphere Reserve in Switzerland. He recounted how prior to designation the area had been one of the poorest in Switzerland and had suffered from a long-term negative image. The Entlebuch Reserve was designated in 2001 and quickly gained acceptance from the majority of the local community and received a positive media response in the Swiss press. Local and regional committees were formed and these helped to create positive cycles of innovation in the local economy.

There has been an increase in the production of local varieties of cheese and sausage which are branded as being from the region and serve to promote

the area to a wider world through gastronomy. Mr Ruoss considered that brand labels in restaurants and elsewhere are important.

The Biosphere Reserve management also sought out and coordinated new tourism opportunities in the light of climate change, which is reducing snow cover and affecting winter sports industries. Visitors can book all aspects of their stay through the Biosphere Reserve office, including excursions.

The population of the region has come to see nature and the landscape as capital for future economic growth and prosperity. The designation has led to improved social cohesion and to the creation of representative forums where members of particular communities of interest such as hunters and farmers can regulate their own sector. The Co-ordinators had worked hard to involve “multipliers” in spreading the word, e.g. teachers, priests and community leaders. In response to a question from the floor Mr Ruoss stated that the Entlebuch Biosphere Reserve had management costs of around 1 million € but that the reserve contributed some 2 million € in added value to the region.

Peter Harper of the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) gave a presentation which covered the activities of and background to the centre, which he described as a pioneer of holistic development and as catalytic to the development of the surrounding region. He considers that the visitor centre has driven the economy of the region whilst promoting its ideals and goals. Several spin off companies and organisations have been nurtured by CAT and have strengthened and inspired the local economy.

Further collaboration with local projects and re-localisation initiatives are seen as part of CAT’s future role, as is a continued contribution to the evolving sustainable development discourse. CAT is seeking to extend its educational role through the creation of a micro university as part of the centre.

Chris Edwards of the Forestry Commission gave a short presentation on the role of his organisation both locally and nationally. Since devolution the Commission has been driven by the agenda of the National Assembly, which now owns all Forestry Commission land in Wales. The Commission is keen to foster local development and to help meet the needs of communities. In the Dyfi Valley the Commission has been involved in the siting of the community wind turbine on its land, the creation of mountain biking trails in the Dyfi Forest and in the consultation process regarding the future of its site at Ceinws. Current Forestry Commission policy encourages local managers to undertake projects which are not developed solely for timber production.

The process of involving stakeholders in sustainable rural land management was the subject of a presentation by Dr. Alister Scott of the Institute for Rural Sciences at Aberystwyth. He addressed the four key issues in stakeholder involvement;

- Why involve?
- Who do we involve?
- How do we engage?
- How do we ensure that benefits accrue?

Stress was placed upon the need for thorough research within the community and a comprehensive engagement with all stakeholders and individuals. The resultant relationship allows an organisation to communicate its needs from the outset whilst promoting mutual respect and trust. It was noted that inadequate consultation was worse than none at all. Consultation serves to identify points of both agreement and conflict. It may be better to have disagreement with involvement than to have no input into the decision making process: expose the different positions or they will never be resolved. The practice of involvement and the key issues previously highlighted were illustrated through the examples of Ceredigion's Unitary Development Plan, Ymlaen Ceredigion and the Tarka Project in Devon.

The morning's presentations were concluded by Andy Swash, Chairman of the UK MAB Committee and a DEFRA employee. He stated that the Committee was responsible for awareness-raising about biodiversity and sustainable development and for capacity building within the UK's eight Biosphere Reserves. The Committee will hold its next review process in 2007 and he suggested that this would provide a suitable target for confirming the designation of a "new look" Dyfi Biosphere Reserve. He then reiterated the application process, which leads from local consultation via the Welsh Assembly, UKMAB, The Secretary of State for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs, and the Foreign Office to formal designation by the UNESCO MAB International Co-ordinating Committee.

Designation is dependent upon three key issues;

- Does the applicant understand the Biosphere Reserve concept?
- Is this reflected in the zonation of the area and the process by which it was arrived at?
- How will the Biosphere Reserve function? This raises issues as to the management framework and mechanisms of local participation.

A short question and answer session followed where it was noted that two sections of the community both tend to hide strong opinions from the other in case they hurt feelings – Welsh-speakers because of "mwynder Maldwyn" and greenies because of their politeness.

The afternoon session comprised a series of workshops where delegates were given the chance to consider the opportunities (and threats) relating to specific topics and explore how these might be affected by an expanded Biosphere Reserve. The themes covered by the workshops were;

- Tourism
- Land based industries
- Culture
- People's involvement with nature

The outputs from these workshops and the way forward were later discussed within the whole group in a session led by Andy Swash. It was noted that a

voluntary management framework such as this could be lost if it did not mesh directly with the many other strategies relevant to the area e.g. community strategies, tourism strategies and the forthcoming Wales Spatial Plan.

It was also said that lots of issues had been raised during the conference that should be pursued whether or not the Biosphere Reserve process carried on.

Concern was expressed that statutory bodies may facilitate the establishment of a management framework but then leave businesses to pay for the subsequent co-ordination. Peter Frost replied that he foresaw continuing support for a member of staff from the CCW but that any other members of the team would need to justify their costs through earned income. Mr Ruoss said that roughly one third of the Entlebuch team's income was earned, with the rest split equally between public funding for nature and cultural protection (from the state) and economic development (from the Canton). Sir John Houghton concluded that cost / benefit studies will be needed to see whether the value added to the area is greater than the investment.

The conference was brought to a close with a summary of the day's proceedings by the Chair, Sir John Houghton. He said that Powys, Gwynedd and Ceredigion Councils and the Snowdonia National Park Authority need to support the process collectively as well as individually. They need to find a way to discuss it together. The same applies to the Town and Community Councils. The process requires joined-up action to connect government and local organisations. In thanking CCW for paying for the conference, he noted that they too would need to develop new ways of engaging partners, including the other sponsors of the day, the WDA.

3. Field trip

A minibus took participants to see some specific sites and to get a feel for the Dyfi valley between Borth and Glantwymyn (Cemmaes Road).

- Cors Fochno (Borth Bog) Dyfi NNR with Mike Bailey, CCW. A study is underway to explore management options in the light of the gradual drying of the core and of the likely rise in sea levels. Archaeological excavations were underway on an ancient trackway across the eastern margins of the bog.
- Ynyslas Visitor Centre, sand dunes and estuary (NNR) - Mike Bailey. The dune system is eroding at the southern end and growing northwards while trying to move inland.
- Ynyshir RSPB Reserve with Dick Squires, RSPB. Land acquired in recent years is being stocked with cattle rather than sheep.
- Solar electricity and water heating installations in Machynlleth. Participants were surprised to find there are now at least 11 of them.
- Dyfi Eco Park and Recycling sites, Machynlleth
- 75 kW community wind turbine at Cilgwyn with Andy Rowland
- Centre for Alternative Technology via Cemmaes Road and Machynlleth

Mark Hebden and Andy Rowland

5/8/2004