

THE INAUGURAL BUCCLEUCH COUNTRYSIDE LECTURE

in association with the Southern Uplands Partnership

Bowhill June 6th 2000.

Introduction

Your Grace, Ladies and Gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to present the inaugural Buccleuch Countryside Lecture. It is particularly fitting that I am able to talk about my subject for today, countryside education, at an event which is itself an example of good practice, and in a setting where so much good work has been undertaken, and where I am sure that much more is planned for the future! This theme of valuing our achievements and planning for the future is one that I shall return to later.

I present my lecture with a degree of trepidation because it is the first, in what I hope will become a series, and because the further I have got into my subject, Countryside Education, the more challenging I have found it to make precise recommendations for the future. When Richard Williamson asked me to give this lecture, some months ago, it seemed like a very good idea. It is only as the time grew near that I recognised the magnitude of my task!

In essence, I want to talk about four things today. I will speak initially about certain definitional issues surrounding countryside education, then go on to give my own view on the development of countryside education, and more broadly, education for sustainable development throughout the 1990s. I will then explain why I believe it is vitally important that we make progress in this area of education and finally I will look at some of the key challenges which I believe face us, and offer some recommendations for how we might collectively begin to address them. I should say at this point that I am not proposing an exhaustive blueprint- there are issues here which I have been

unable to resolve and which remain challenges for the future.

Also, I have to say that I do not profess any great expertise in this subject area. I have been indebted to SNH staff for their considerable help in putting together this lecture and I would mention, in particular, Adrian Fenn and Ruth Grant. I was, of course, the Chief Executive of a Scottish Local Authority for over 12 years and I now wish that I had listened more carefully to the advice given me by successive Directors of

Education! All I think I can say, with some authority, is that the last thing that education services - both formal and informal - need right now, is yet another initiative. One of the main ground rules I have set myself, therefore, is to ensure that any proposals and recommendations I make are capable of delivery within structures and arrangements which exist today.

Definitions

It would be very easy in a lecture on countryside education to spend two thirds of one's time dealing with definitions. You may be pleased to know that I do not propose to spend that much time on this today. That does not mean that I am going to spare you from a small number of quotations on the matter. What I want to try to do is to build a picture of what constitutes an education appropriate to the challenges we face in the countryside in the 21st Century and how this could relate to the policy context in which we are currently operating. I am also regarding countryside education as an important subset of education for sustainable development. Sustainable development itself has many definitions but I prefer to use (not surprisingly) a definition in which I had a hand which is that set out by the Secretary of State's Advisory Group on Sustainable Development. It is "sustainable development is about the wise use of all resources within a framework in which environmental, economic and social factors are integrated"¹. A parallel report, "Scotland the Sustainable? - the Learning Process"² defines the purpose of education for sustainable development as being "to equip people with the skills, knowledge and understanding to help them take better informed decisions, whether corporately on behalf of others or individually in their own lives, and to act in ways which are consistent with a sustainable future".

You will see, therefore, that I am treating countryside education in a very broad context indeed.

Background

Anyone arriving in Scotland and enquiring about countryside education or education for sustainable development may well conclude two things:-

1. A great deal of good work has been, and continues to be, undertaken throughout the country but it is inconsistent, patchy and often dependent upon the enthusiasm of a small number of individuals; and
2. Much has been written on the subject throughout the 1990s but little conspicuous or concerted action had arisen as a result.

Let me explain this a little more. Three major reports on environmental education and education for sustainable development were prepared in the 1990s. In 1993 "Learning for Life"³ was prepared for the Secretary of State for Scotland by a working group under the chairmanship of Professor John Smyth. In June 1995 (over 2 years later) the Scottish Office published "A Scottish Strategy for Environmental Education"⁴ which was a response to the working group report. Although this report sets out a Scottish Strategy for Environmental Education, demonstrable progress is not easy to identify. In 1999, the Secretary of State's Advisory Group on Education for Sustainable Development, under the chairmanship of Professor Bart McGettrick, produced the report I mentioned earlier "Scotland the Sustainable? - the Learning Process". There is no doubt that some of the issues highlighted in this report are being taken up by the Scottish Executive and by Ministers as I shall show later. It can reasonably be concluded, though, that we are overdue some positive action in this area, not least because of the expressed wishes of the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament, which I shall come to in the next section.

Why is it important that Countryside Education and Education for Sustainable Development should be higher up the National Agenda?

In my view, there are four main reasons which lead me to think that this issue should be much higher up the national agenda.

First, and perhaps most fundamentally, we can be clear that our policy makers regard this as important. Sam Galbraith, Minister for Children and Education, said last year "The Scottish Executive is committed to integrating the principles of environmentally and socially sustainable development into all government policies, including education, and the "Scotland the Sustainable" report was a useful addition to the debate on how this can best be done"⁵. Peter

Peacock, the Deputy Minister for Children and Education took this issue further when he said "an understanding of sustainable development is a vital component of education for citizenship: the realisation that what we do today has an impact upon what we have to live with in the future. It is never too early to learn that lesson and our schools clearly have a key role to play in promoting that message"⁶. The importance of sustainable development seems to be recognised across political divisions. As Kenny McAskill the Scottish National Party MSP observed "sustainable development is not environmental luddism nor is it the slash and burn of unrestricted free market capitalism or unlimited social libertinism. It is simply a sensible balance of environmental protection, wealth creation and social justice. United they stand, divided they fall"⁷. The point of stressing these quotes, selective though they might be, is that we can affirm, possibly for the first time, that sustainable development is high on the political agenda. Not only that, but its place in education provision is fully recognised. That provides a real and challenging mandate for those of us looking to the future of countryside education. As we have seen throughout the 90s, however, it is a far cry from making the right noises and achieving something in practice.

But there are also important links for us to make with other political priorities, especially with the numerous policy papers and consultation documents surrounding active citizenship, lifelong learning and social inclusion, to name but three. There are very real links between all of these areas and a sustainable future for our countryside, and that brings the importance of effective and appropriate countryside education into sharp focus.

The second reason why we should treat this area of education seriously is because of the very nature of the legislative programme and the resulting practical initiatives which are being promoted by The Scottish Executive. Of the first eight main pieces of legislation to be considered by the Parliament two of them - on National Parks and Land Reform - contain considerable impacts for Scotland's countryside and, in turn, have major implications for education if they are to be implemented successfully. The National Park bodies themselves will have specific powers to inform and educate. The access provisions of the forthcoming Land Reform Bill will require a major educational and information programme,

across Scotland, if the legislation is to be implemented successfully. The Bill will promote the concept of allowing responsible access to land. That right can only be exercised sensibly if landowners and the population at large are aware of the rights and the limits to the provisions contained within legislation. This will be no easy task; it will take time; and it will require considerable ingenuity in designing education programmes and in providing the means and resources for putting our messages across in an appropriate way.

Similarly, the practical outcomes of the focus on active citizenship, lifelong learning and social inclusion are beginning to emerge, with the establishment, for example, of Social Inclusion Partnerships. Addressing the very real issues which these partnerships face will require an effective countryside education programme to play its part.

We should perhaps wonder at this point whether our policy makers are quite as joined up as they would like to think they are. Taking into account the quotes which I used earlier from Sam Galbraith and Peter Peacock it is slightly surprising that while another piece of legislation - the Education Bill - draws on the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child in identifying a purpose for education, it leaves out those clauses which identify the social and environmental context of education. Similarly, "Communities- Change through Learning"⁸, the document which provides the framework for the future of community education in Scotland, contains the following in its vision for the future: "The capacity of individuals and groups to participate in developing their own learning is crucial to improving their quality of life. Through learning, people can come to make a real contribution to their own communities.....and build the confidence to tackle wider social and economic issues such as health or community safety". Such a vision for learning should surely make explicit reference to the place of the environment, including the countryside, in this picture.

A third reason why I believe that these issues are important is because of the heightened awareness, in people's minds, of rural issues generally. Anyone who has taken an interest in current affairs over recent years will be only too aware of the wide range of countryside issues which have made national headlines:-

- The crisis in agriculture
- The decline in some areas of rural tourism
- The possibility that Scotland will show increasing signs of an issue affecting large parts of England where many areas have become second home "ghettos" with a weekend population owning and house prices well outside the reach of local people
- The loss of rural services - banks and post offices for example
- The ageing of the rural population and the problems that presents for the provision of health and social services
- Maintaining a viable education services in areas of declining population
- Effective protection of the natural and cultural heritage whilst allowing development in appropriate locations
- Resolving conflicts between competing upland land uses
- The incidents of crime and the policing of rural areas
- The difficulties in the provision of effective public transport, at an affordable cost
- The impact of rising fuel prices on private and commercial transport

This list could readily be expanded but the point is made. These issues are significant and will not go away. They have been recognised by The Scottish Executive in the recent publication of "Rural Scotland - A New Approach"⁹. There is a vital need to consider the issues affecting our countryside - as exemplified in this paper by The Scottish Executive - in a holistic way, adopting the principles of sustainable development, and not piecemeal policy initiatives which have all too often been a hallmark of the past.

But heightened awareness is only one side of this particular coin. The definition I offered to you earlier about the purpose of education for sustainable development talked about equipping people with the skills, knowledge and understanding to help them make better informed decisions. Where will people have the opportunity to make these decisions? At a personal level, certainly. But increasingly we have an emphasis from government, and a demand from local people, which requires us to look at real and meaningful community involvement-opportunities for people to participate in the decisions which affect their lives. Here again is a challenge for countryside education, in looking at learning opportunities which will support this.

Fourthly, we are at the centre of major societal changes which take place with greater repidity, year on year. As the working week, for many people becomes shorter, retirement ages come down, and personal mobility becomes within the reach of many so the pressure on our countryside increases. We have a major challenge ahead to educate ourselves about what is possible and what is not possible in our countryside. Assuming that the National Parks Bill is enacted, for example, we need to make sure that we draw on and learn ourselves from the very considerable body of experience which is held by those who already manage the land. We also have a major task of education with the Scottish people, and those who come from further afield, about the purpose of our National Parks and about the benefits they can bring to all of us. Of course, our areas of high conservation status still need to be protected whilst those areas which can benefit from development can be promoted.

Recommendations and Further Challenges

If we accept this need to move the place of countryside education up the national agenda, what are challenges which face us, and how might we begin to meet them?

Let me begin this final section of my lecture by saying precisely what we don't need at present in Scotland. That is a further report compiled by experts in education, countryside affairs, sustainable development and so on. I am sure that we know enough of the issues and we can start to understand what actually needs to be done. What we do need is a concerted programme of action, and I have set out my thoughts under six main headings.

First and foremost, we need a clear Scottish context and framework for how countryside education fits into this bigger picture I have offered you of education for sustainable development. Who is responsible for doing what and what outputs are expected from this area of education? This means clarifying the links with what is happening elsewhere in education, including work related to social and economic issues. It also requires a close examination of the work of the existing players in the field of countryside education. There are many people involved here, The Scottish Executive, government agencies such as Scottish Natural Heritage, Local Authority Education and Planning Services, individual schools, non-governmental organisations, charities and many more. This

range of organisations and individuals in the field should be regarded as a strength. But it can only be a strength if we understand what the overall objectives are and what role each of us is to play in this pattern. At the moment I have this vision of a large disc which is called countryside education. It is cut into segments and each segment operates, often very effectively, on its own. There is little connection between the segments of our disc and no-one seems to have a sense of its overall size. Much good work is being done but it is too dependent upon the will and enthusiasm of individual organisations and often the talented and enthusiastic individual. Whilst it would not necessarily be a simple task it would not in my view be a difficult one for The Scottish Executive to lead a short life exercise to provide the framework which is much needed.

Secondly we need a practical forum for driving such a framework forward. I suggest that there is need here for a funded body to play a role similar to that which SEEC, the Scottish Environmental Education Council, played until recently. With SEEC dormant, we lack an organisation which can drive and support the co-operation and communication between these various players.

Thirdly, we need to initiate a much longer term exercise which begins to question the way in which modern principles such as sustainable development - and equally social inclusion, active citizenship and lifelong learning- are embodied in our education system, and crucially which also begins to look for and exploit opportunities to make this happen in practice. Whilst these may be the current buzz words of the day it seems to me that if we are to obtain what many of us have been seeking for a number of years - that is a more holistic way of dealing with policy matters, less compartmentalism and better outputs then we need to have a vision of how this can be delivered through the education system. At present, too many of these issues are bolted on to the outside of our system or are relegated to the margins of the curriculum.

I would like to highlight one area in which we might begin to address this in practice- that of the emerging Community Learning Strategies and Plans. It seems to me that here we have an ideal vehicle to start tackling many of the issues I have raised. Perhaps I could quote here from the Scottish Borders Council's own strategy: "Scottish Borders will be a area in which organisations work together for the benefit of all,

and every citizen is able to participate in and enrich the life of their community and the area as a whole". It goes on: "Our goal will be to encourage people to achieve their full potential, in vibrant communities increasing the demand for learning for individuals and our organisations"¹⁰. Here is a practical local framework which encourages organisations to work with and learn from each-other, and places individual learning within the context of sustainable development on which I have based my lecture.

The recognition that we are all learners here is important too. The Learning to Sustain report highlights the need to focus on learning rather than teaching, or to meet a criticism levelled by some at environmental education, a need to focus on learning rather than *preaching*..... This recognition will perhaps also encourage us to look at our own organisations' corporate approaches and priorities, and how they match up with those of our existing partners. It might even encourage us to look afresh at who those partners are and how we work with them. In SNH we have been going through this in developing our new corporate strategy. One theme of this strategy is entitled "Enriching People's Lives". Delivering on that will require us to consider how we and what we do in the light of the changing context in which we are operating.

The challenge clearly is to translate aspirations such as these into reality in the practical programmes which will be set out in the Community Learning Plans, and also to make the links with other local processes such as the Local Biodiversity Action Plans. A challenge indeed for joined-up thinking! I am sure that SNH, with others, will want to play a full part in that process.

My fourth suggestion is that we need to take seriously this focus on learning, and therefore on *learners*, rather than teaching. What does this mean in practice? For me, it means that we need to acknowledge and build from people's own needs, interests and aspirations for their learning, rather than expecting people to conform to our predetermined outcomes, and our preferred ways of delivering education. It means recognising that for many, education, and the experience of the natural environment, is an enriching experience in its own right. In other words, we need to value the journey as well as the destination!

We also need to be receptive, responsive and creative in how we develop learning

opportunities. That means looking not just at how and why people choose to learn, but where and when. Perhaps I could illustrate this with two brief examples. The first is a project which SNH is developing with the Millennium Forest for Scotland Trust and the Scottish Arts Council. This is a project which is using the arts as a way of increasing young people's awareness of, and concern for, the natural environment. Using performance or visual arts like this is one way of focusing on the interests of the learner, rather than simply presenting them with a medium which is convenient to us. I am sure that you will all be aware of other examples of this sort of approach. My other example is the growing importance and use of information and communication technology. With the establishment of the National Grid for Learning in Scotland, and the work going on both in formal education and community learning grids, here again are opportunities for us to develop approaches which are appropriate for particular learners. Perhaps we even need to challenge some of our own deeply-held beliefs here. We would all, I am sure, assert the importance of first-hand experience of the natural environment in both learning and in enriching people's lives, but to what extent are we able to prove that this is always the most appropriate approach of learning? If it is not, when does it have the greatest benefits and what might the alternatives be? How should this influence our approaches to supporting learning? I think that there are real questions to be asked here, and this is an area of research which SNH is actively interested in.

My fifth (and penultimate!) point is that we need to be far better at making each other aware of the quality and diversity of learning materials and programmes which already exist. I am frequently astonished at the quality of publications, teaching packs, posters and so on which are produced by a wide range of organisations operating in this field. When I ask particularly teachers of their awareness of this material it is very often at a low level, and is frequently dependent upon chance contacts and personal acquaintances. There is a great deal of quality teaching and learning materials available in Scotland at the present time. It is vital that networking is rapidly developed to make sure that there is far better and more consistent access to what exists. Equally, there is also a need to make sure that we have good quality learning programmes to introduce these materials to educators. WWF's Bright Sparks programme is a good example of this, where

resources were introduced to teachers through a series of hands-on events.

My final point, which is linked to my previous one, is to see how better use can be made of material and information which is often readily available locally. I am thinking, for example, of Local Agenda 21 Plans and Local Biodiversity Action Plans, and the huge amount of locally-relevant information which has been collated in producing plans. Again, the quality of these documents is more often than not very high indeed as is the input of staff who have been working in these areas. We must ensure that this sort of information and expertise is readily accessible by as wide a range of people as possible. Perhaps this will mean re-examining how we do this, including how we make best use of the growing levels of access to the Internet. We can spread our net more widely, of course, and include in this list examples such as the evolving SNH- led programme of education to support the new Scottish Outdoor Education Code and make the links back to delivery mechanisms such as the community learning strategies and plans.

This leaves a wide range of challenges which I do not pretend will easily be resolved. These range from fundamentals such as the need to ensure adequate funding of education services through to the equally fundamental organisational contexts within which we work. However, I hope to have shown that there are practical steps which we can take now, and encourage others to take with us.

Conclusion

I hope that what I have said today will strike a chord- chords even, with some of you. There is an enormous amount of good work going on in Countryside Education, but there is so much more that we could achieve. I hope that some of the ideas I have set out today will help us move things forward.

References

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- 3 *Learning for Life.* A report of the Working Group on Environmental Education to the Secretary of State for Scotland, The Scottish Office, 1993.
- 4 *A Scottish Strategy for Environmental Education.* The Statement of Intent by the Secretary of State for Scotland, The Scottish Office, 1995.
- 5 Sam Galbraith, Minister for Children and Education, Parliamentary written answer 21/9/99.
- 6 Peter Peacock, Deputy Minister for Children and Education- News Release SE1317/1999, 16/11/99.
- 7 Kenny McAskill, MSP, during Scottish Parliament debate on sustainable development, 3/2/200
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- 9 *Rural Scotland: A New Approach,* Scottish Executive, 2000.
- 10 *Partners in Community Learning: A Community Learning Strategy,* Scottish Borders Council, 2000