Northumberland & Newcastle Society

For Our Future Heritage

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AGM

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Environment, Wellbeing and Fairness in the North East of England

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It is a great pleasure to be here in the delightful surroundings of Blagdon Hall and to share with you some thoughts on the environment, wellbeing and fairness. The timing couldn't be better, because last Tuesday was the World Environment Day and the start of a week-long celebration of the 40th anniversary of the United Nation's Stockholm Conference on Human Environment. The conference was a landmark event in the history of environmental actions. Its declaration stressed that,

"Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations".[i]

These words remind us that having access to environmental benefits and being protected from environmental harms are basic human rights. They also remind us that with any rights comes responsibility and accountability. So, we cannot ask what the environment does for us without asking what we do for the environment.

1. Environment

"The potential for us to make progress with environmental issues is limited by the basic assumptions that we make about nature, the unspoken, often unrecognized perspective from which we view our environment" [ii]

The way we respond to the questions of rights and responsibilities depends largely on the way we understand nature and our relation to it, and the values we attach to utility, ethics and aesthetics dimensions of our relation to nature. This implies that the meanings given to the environment differ in different cultures and evolve over time. [iii]

A broad ethical distinction can be made between two fundamentally different views of human-nature relation. One is the anthropocentric view which places humans at the centre of Universe and considers nature to be at their service. The other is the biocentric view which considers humans as an integral part of nature and as members of an interconnected 'web of life'[iv]. Although the biocentric perspective predates the human-centred view of the world, it has remained subservient to it. Its influence was side-lined after the scientific revolution of the 17th century, and particularly the rise of Newtonian mechanics[v] which portrayed nature as a machine, a giant clock whose wheels and springs were operating according to

some hidden rules and structures. The idea was that in this clockwork universe, human could conquer nature by uncovering its secrets. Thus, in the somewhat romantic and gendered words of Francis Bacon, "Science would 'strip the veil' from nature so that she revealed her innermost self." [vi]

Reducing nature to a mechanical system gave the industrial nations both the means and the right to exploit it. The age of discovery was driven by a desire not only to explore, but also to exploit nature; a desire that was materialised on an industrial scale in the 19th century. Places such as the North East became the power houses of the fossil-fuel-based industrial revolution. While industrialisation brought wealth for some, it created hardship for others. It also left lasting environmental scars in the region, in the forms of air and water pollution, contaminated land, loss of habitats and wildlife, and poor local amenities. The environment was seen largely as a container of resources to be exploited for economic growth.   The collective wisdom of the time was that environmental pollution and waste were the inevitable by-products of economic growth and progress, as these statements indicate.

"… If there is one thing more than another that Middlesbrough can be said to be proud of it is its smoke. The smoke is an indication of plenty of work – an indication of prosperous times…. We are proud of our smoke." [vii]

'Where there is muck, there is money" [viii]

Of course, not everyone was of the same view. For some, nature had symbolic values. It was a source of delight and inspiration, a place in which one could take refuge in the face of the accelerating industrialisation. The romantic period in the 19th century was, in part, a reaction to the dominant mechanical view of the world.   The great Romantic painters, such as John Constable and William Turner, drew on nature's aesthetic qualities for inspiration. For them, "Nature was where industry was not"[ix]; it was 'England's green and pleasant land' which had to be protected from the 'dark Satanic Mills', as William Blake put it.

In fact, it was this desire to protect the countryside from encroaching urban sprawl which drove the planning movement and led to the creation of the Green Belt, which has since remained one of the most enduring and highly cherished planning doctrines. Over 6% of land in the North East is designated Green Belt. It is worth mentioning that some people found the green romanticism of the Victorian era elitist because, they argued, "Environmental artefacts were to be preserved "for 'the Nation', but from 'the public' which was frequently regarded as unappreciative and philistine, representing a threat to this 'national heritage'"[x]. Whether we agree with this or not, one thing is certain: public rights of access to the countryside had to be fought for in the face of a strong preservationists approach to landscape.

In the mid-20th century, and as part of the post-war welfare system, concerns for environmental health began to move up the political agenda. This is reflected in the following statement from the Medical Officer of Health in 1921.

"The absence of clouds of black smoke which are emitted in normal times from the large chimneys have contributed to the favourable health statistics of the District."[xi]

The focus, however, remained on local amenities and the type of pollutions that were directly experienced by people, such as smoke, dirt, smell and noise. It wasn't until the late 1960s when environment-as-ecology replaced environment-as-amenity in public imagination and as significant political concerns. There was a growing realisation that environmental problems were not confined to localities and had indeed global ramifications. It became evident that local industrial processes were having global environmental consequences and affecting humans and habitats in places far away from the sources of pollution. The impetus for the 1960s' environmental movement came from a series of environmental catastrophes across the world as well as a number of influential publications such as Rachael Carlson's Silent Spring (1965) and an alarming book called the Limits to growth (1972). The latter was written by a team of system modellers, sponsored by the Club of Rome; a global think-tank whose founding members were an Italian industrialist and a Scottish scientist. The message was simple yet powerful: industrialisation and economic growth had come at a high environmental cost; and, environmental care and concern is not just desirable, but also crucial for the survival of humanity.

Another event which had strong symbolic effect was seeing, for the first time ever, satellite images of the Earth which showed its fragility, finite resources and limited capacity to support life and satisfy unfettered human consumption and waste. The Stockholm Conference, which I mentioned above, was the apex of this rising environmental awareness and the need for global action. Fifteen years later, the World Commission on Environment and Development gave a further boost to environmental issues when it published its seminal Brundtland Report, named after its chair Gro Harlem Brundtland, the then prime minister of Norway. The report coined the most cited definition of sustainable development, advocating the need for justice within and between generations.

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of this generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs"[xii]

Since then, we have had a proliferation of environmental regulations by international and national bodies, and hence witnessed remarkable improvements in environmental standards, at least in the developed countries. In the North East, scars of the industrial past have been substantially erased. Rivers and coastal

waters have been cleaned up. The cleaning of river Tyne, once essentially an open sewer, has now restored its biodiversity and re-established its otters and salmon to the extent that Tyne is now the best salmon river in England[xiii]. Air quality has been improved due to the closure of old industrial plants and coal-fired power stations and a switch from coal to gas. The amount of waste being dumped in landfills or pumped into the sea has been reduced. Today, the North East recycles 35% of its household waste[xiv]. Many of the worst-contaminated lands and dilapidated buildings, i.e. the most visible legacies of the region's industrial past, have been reclaimed and regenerated. Some of the old industrial sites are now cultural and leisure hubs of the region. Newcastle city, the region's capital, has been twice recognised as the Greenest City in the UK by Forum for the Future, and is now bidding to win the European Green Capital status[xv]. And, the region as a whole is striving to reduce its carbon emissions and move to a low-carbon economy. Alongside these achievements there has been a growing recognition that environment, and more broadly the eco-system, plays a crucial role in people's quality of life and wellbeing, both objectively, in terms of subsistence and health, and subjectively, in terms of aesthetic and cultural values.

2. Wellbeing

As with the term environment, wellbeing can also mean different things to different people. However, as Robert Kennedy once (in 1968) famously said: 'there is more to life than Gross Domestic Product (GDP)', which is essentially an indicator of economic growth. In 1974, his statement was put to a more rigorous test by the economist, Richard Easterlin[xvi]. He found that once a certain GDP is reached, the strength of the relationship between income and reported levels of happiness declines markedly. What is now known as the 'Easterlin Paradox' showed that reported happiness has remained broadly level in the United States over 30 years, while GDP per head in real terms had continued on an upward trend. Evidence from the Office of National Statistic shows that the same trend can been observed in the UK, confirming that: Happiness doesn't increase with growing wealth of nations.

This begs the question: what are the other factors that matter to our wellbeing? In 1989, a Chillean economist, Manfred Max-Neef, developed what he called 'The Human-Scale Development Matrix', which has since been used for generating indices that can measure quality of life by indicators other than 'wealth, health and wisdom'. In a nutshell, the columns in the matrix relate to our 'existence needs' and include: being, having, doing and interacting. The rows relate to our 'value needs' which are all fundamental for our actual and perceived wellbeing. They consist of: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure (idleness),

creativity, identity, and freedom[xvii]. The matrix suggests that firstly, beyond the need for subsistence, there is no single, rigid hierarchy of human needs, and secondly, the trade-offs that we make between these needs both reflect and constitute our circumstances, cultural values, attitudes and beliefs. This implies that the impact of the environment on our quality of life depends largely on what the environment means for our identity, culture and circumstances. For example, even something as obvious as a stone, can have multiple meanings. It can mean a historical record, a boundary marker, or a sculpture, depending on how we use it, and how we integrate it into our everyday practices, discourses, and representations.

"It is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects and events. Things 'in themselves' rarely, if ever, have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning"[xviii]

Just think about the meaning of the countryside in the English culture. At first, it presents a paradox. On the one hand, no country in the world is more urban than England, and none has been urban for longer. On the other hand, there is no culture in the world whose identity is more bound up with an image of the countryside than the English culture[xix]. However, on a closer look, maybe this is not a paradox after all. Maybe the sheer scale of industrialisation was the very reason for a distinct meaning of the countryside in English culture. This example shows that the role played by the environment in our quality of life is largely shaped by our social histories, cultural identities and individual memories, as shown below.

"Many of us have strong allegiances to places […]. We recognise that nature, identity and place have strong bonds. Places are process and story as well as artefact, layer upon layer of our continuing history and nature's history intertwined."[xx]

That is why, despite the smoke, the dirt, and the hardship, the industrial heritage of the North East is as much, if not more, part of its identity as its great landscapes.

In his survey Easterlin did not ask his interviewees whether the environment played a part in their happiness but, the Office of National Statistics, which is assessing wellbeing, has done so. Their preliminary findings indicate that although the environment is not as important as family, health and relationship for people's sense of wellbeing, it is nevertheless an important factor and for some is central to their wellbeing, as this respondent suggests.

"Nature and the environment has to be at the top of the list. Without it none of us live. And for me personally it helps make my life worthwhile. Nature is healing, inspiring and a good balance for what is important in life."[xxi]

People care deeply about the environment in which they live, work and play. The quality of environment affects our health physically and mentally. Being in contact with nature inspires us, and gives meaning to our lives.

3. Fairness

If we agree that the environment plays a crucial role in our wellbeing, it is critical that its benefits are distributed fairly. Is this the case? Before I address this question, it is important to clarify an important point: unequal distribution is not necessarily unfair. However, unevenness becomes unfair if it coincides with: social inequalities, physical and cultural vulnerabilities, a lack of participation, an absence of compensation, or the inability to exercise free choice.

It is true that in the North East we are blessed with: large expanses of green and blue spaces, numerous heritage sites, historic gardens, picturesque villages, and rural retreats, and many more environmental treasures. But, it is also true that the North East remains a region of contrasts of wellbeing, health and wealth. Parts of the region are among the most deprived in the country and parts of it are among the most affluent. For example, in 2004, 38% of the region's population were living in the 20% most derived areas, a higher proportion than any English region. Inequalities within and between different parts of the region severely reduce the life chances of people from cradle to grave. Children born in poorer areas do less well at school, are likely to earn less, suffer more ill health and disability, and die at a younger age than those born in more affluent areas[xxii].

The question for environmental fairness is whether disadvantaged people also suffer disproportionately more from pollution and degradation and/or have disproportionately less access to environmental assets than the affluent population. The evidence suggests that this may well be the case. For example, in the UK, "around 0.2% of people living in the least deprived areas may experience 4 or more environmental conditions that are 'least favourable'. This rises to around 17% of people living in the most deprived areas."[xxiii] A disproportionate number of 'hazardous substances consent sites', such as landfills, are located in wards with a higher proportion of ethnic minority populations[xxiv].

In the North East, 80% of polluting factories are in areas with below average incomes.[xxv] A study undertaken by myself and my colleague Dr Elizabeth Brooks[xxvi] on environmental justice in Newcastle City shows patterns of unequal distributions of environmental benefits and burdens which in some cases can be considered as unfair. For example, there are higher levels of air pollution, caused by road traffic, in the city's most deprived wards which have low levels of car ownership

and high levels of hospital admissions for respiratory illnesses. Although these levels of pollution do not exceed European-set threshold limits, their higher level in poor areas with vulnerable population is unfair. The deprived riverside wads are also home to a cluster of waste-processing plants, and some of the remaining contaminated land. Housing condition, which probably matters most to people's wellbeing, is also poorer in these wards.

When we look at the distribution of environmental benefits, quality and accessibility are as important as availability. Newcastle has over 8.4 hectares of green spaces per 1,000 people, which is much higher than, for example, Coventry which has 5.7 ha per 1,000 people. However, over 20% of the publicly accessible greenspace in Newcastle is concentrated in the Town Moor. The distribution of the remaining greenspaces in Newcastle is much less even than in Coventry. Proximity matters because, research has shown that the extent to which people benefit from greenspaces (in terms of recreation, aesthetics, physical and mental health, neighbourhood development, noise regulation, and air pollution reduction) depends on the distance of their home from them[xxvii]. Similarly quality and appeal of greenspaces are key factors in their use by vulnerable groups. Women, older and disabled people are less likely to use parks if they are kept in poor conditions, have poor access, and lack safety and facilities. The study includes more examples which I won't mention for the sake of brevity.

The key point is what I mentioned earlier: access to good quality environment is a basic human right but with that right comes the responsibility for enhancing the quality of the environment. This responsibility is not just for the sake of current and future generations, but also for the sake of the environment itself. Fairness, according to Amartya Sen (a Noble laureate for economics), is ultimately about capability and freedom because, "Freedom to choose gives us opportunity to decide what we should do, but with that opportunity comes the responsibility for what we do"[xxviii]. Here in the North East, we live beyond our fair share of Earth's resources. The ecological footprint of the average person in the region is estimated at about five hectares. If everyone in the world used this amount of land, we would need three planets to live on[xxix]. We only have one!

[i] UN Stockholm Conference on Human Environment, 1972

[ii] Botkin, D.B. (1990) *Discordant Harmonies, a new ecology for the twenty-first century,* New York: Oxford University Press

[iii] For a detailed discussion on this and the related references please see: Davoudi, S., 2012, Climate risk and security: New meanings of 'the environment' in the English planning system, *European Planning Studies,* 20(1)49-69

[iv] Marshall, P. (1994) *Nature's Web, rethinking our place on earth,* New York: Paragon House.

[v] Along with the work of Galileo, Kepler and Copernicus on mechanics and cosmology

[vi] Francis Bacon, quoted in Bowler, P. (1992) *The Fontana History of The Environmental Sciences,* London: Fontana Press (p. 91)

[vii] Major of Middlesbrough to Prince of Wales, 1886, quoted in Pless-Mulloli T, Phillimore P, Moffatt S, Bhopal R, Foy C, Dunn C, and Tate J. (1998) Lung cancer, proximity to industry and poverty in North East England, *Environmental Health Perspective* 106 (4): 189-196

[viii] Medical Officer of Health, 1953, quoted in Pless-Mulloli et al (1998)

[ix] Williams, R. (1972) Ideas of Nature, in Benthall, J. (Ed) *Ecology, the shaping enquiry,* London: Longman (p. 159)

[x] Newby H (1990) Ecology, amenity and society: social science and environmental change, *Town Planning Review,* 61(1):3-13 (p.6)

[xi] quoted in Pless-Mulloli et al (1998)

[xii] WCED (World Commission on Environment and Development) (1987) *Our Common Future,* Oxford: (p. 8)

[xiii] Newcastle City Council (2012) *Green Capital Bid to the European Commission.*

[xiv] This is still 5% below the national average

[xv] see http://www.forumforthefuture.org/

[xvi] Easterlin, R. (1974) *Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence,* in Paul A. David and Melvin W. Reder, eds., *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz,* New York: Academic Press.

[xvii] For further details see National Ecosystem Assessment, (2011)

[xviii] Hall, S. (1997). Introduction. Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices (ed S. Hall), pp. 1–12. Sage, London (p.9)

[xix] Davoudi, S, and Stead, D., 2002, Urban-Rural Relationships: an introduction and a brief history, *Built Environment:* 28(4): 269-277, (used as the basis of an interview with Radio 4 on 3 May 2004)

[xx] Common Ground (2009) Places, People and Parish Maps: essay by Sue Clifford [online] Available at: www.england-in-particular.info/cg/parishmaps/m-ppp.html

[xxi] Office of National Statistic (2011) *Measuring national wellbeing,* London: ONS (P.19)

[xxii] Newcastle City Council Equalities Statistics (2012)

[xxiii] DEFRA, 2012, http://sd.defra.gov.uk/progress/national/ accessed 5 March 2012).

[xxiv] Stephens C, Bullock S and Scott A (2001) *Environmental justice: Rights and means to a healthy environment for all.* Special Briefing Paper 7. Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Global Environmental Change Programme, Brighton: University of Sussex

[xxv] Boardman, B., Bullock, S., McLaren, D., (1999) *Equity and the Environment Guidelines for green and socially just government,* A Catalyst pamphlet in association with Friends of the Earth, London.

[xxvi] Davoudi S. and Brooks, E. (2012) *Environmental justice and the city,* unpublished report

[xxvii] UK National Ecosystem Assessment (2011) *The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Technical Report.* UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge

[xxviii] Sen, A. (2009), *The idea of justice,* Penguin Books (p.19)

[xxix] Newcastle City Council (2012) *Green Capital Bid to the European Commission.*

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Founded in 1924 the Northumberland & Newcastle Society's aims are the protection of the environmental wealth and cultural heritage of the County and the City.

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