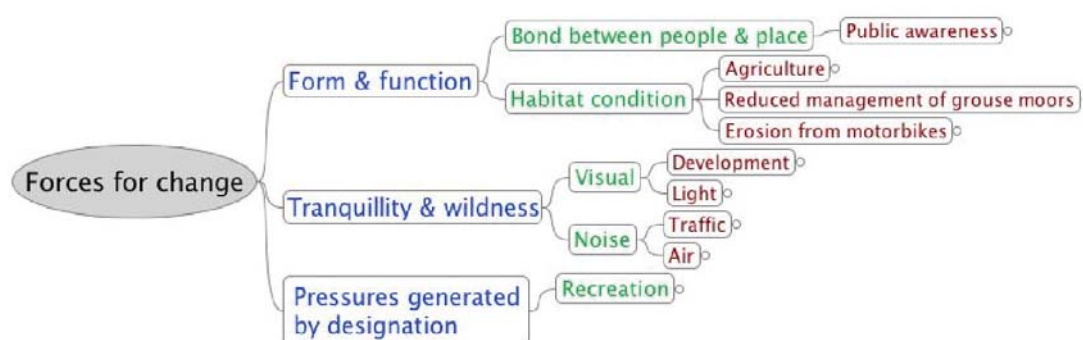


Pathfinder - Testing the Appropriateness of Designation EUROPARC Consulting, March 2009

Summary

This study forms one of a number commissioned by the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) to understand better the effectiveness of designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The focus is on a study area which has been proposed for an extension to the Clwydian Range AONB, but it is intended that this should also serve as a “pathfinder” to help shape CCW’s approach in other parts of Wales. In addition to researching the impacts of AONB designation, we were also asked to review alternative ways of tackling the challenges faced in the area. Previous research in the study area had identified a range of “forces for change” on which action needed to focus:



How others have tackled the forces for change

We began by studying how other AONBs had addressed these issues. We reviewed the responses of 23 AONB Officers to a questionnaire circulated by CCW, following up with selected interviews. We concluded:

- The forces for change in the study area are not untypical of AONBs generally.
- AONBs have demonstrated their ability to address those forces through partnerships driven by an AONB unit.
- A key feature of those partnerships has been the diversity of stakeholders and agencies and the integration of purposes achieved. A tangible measure of their effectiveness at integration has been their success in winning external funding.
- Strategic partners recognise the value of the designation in terms of the leverage it offers them to tackle social and economic issues in an environmentally-led way. This amounts to a significant secondary added value from the designation and a significant market advantage for those areas, offering a clear opportunity to grow “green jobs” and a sustainable economy.
- The common brand values of AONBs are limited. The family is diverse in character and operation. Nevertheless, there is a significant emerging brand derived from the operation and added value achieved by the most effective AONB units.
- The flexibility of local governance arrangements for AONBs including community engagement is an attractive feature of their operation.
- The stakeholders we spoke to could not envisage this package of benefits being delivered without the driver of AONB designation.

Alternative approaches

There have been very few comparative studies of alternative approaches. However, with the character and needs of the study area in mind, we reviewed the experience of:

- The Broads
- The New Forest
- The South Downs
- The Forest of Dean
- The National Forest and Community Forests

- Heritage Coasts

Each of these addresses the needs of “special areas” in ways which - at least initially - did not involve new statutory designation.

We also considered some European examples and the proposal for a rural development project for the Cambrian Mountains.

We concluded that the most successful approaches had five key features:

- an anchor into national policy
- local analysis of the assets and drivers of change
- a strong local partnership prepared to cede/ pool power
- a versatile local unit promoting, chivvying and taking direct action
- flexibility to engage in social and economic as well as environmental action

The costs and benefits of designation

One of the aims of our study was to look at the impacts of designation, seeking to quantify, wherever possible, the costs and benefits. We suspected that comprehensive, robust data would not be available, and that proved to be true.

The studies we found could not be used decisively to come to an economic conclusion about the value of a particular designation. We found no study which was able to isolate the economic value of the designation per se from the overall value of a high-quality environment. The conclusions must thus be more nuanced:

- There is good reason to suppose that the quality of the environment makes a strongly positive net contribution towards the economic well-being of the study area. We estimate that benefit to be in the range £9 million to £90 million p.a., depending on which aspects of the environment you choose to include. We suggest a range of £10 million to £20 million could be attributed to the actions which are likely to flow from AONB designation.
- The cost of designation would be in the region of £300,000 in year one (equating to £10,500 annually) and some £60,000 for subsequent years. If an alternative to designation was chosen, the year-one cost of £300,000 would be avoided but ongoing action to address the forces for change, including projects comparable to those funded through the Sustainable Development Fund, would still be needed. We suggest the saving might be some £20,000 p.a.
- Whether or not designation (or alternative action) represents good value for money must be a matter of judgement based on the qualitative assessments made elsewhere in this report. That judgement will be informed by the figures given here and we note that the cost of designation is slight compared to the value of the benefits generated by the resource which designation is seeking to conserve and enhance.
- We do not recommend spending further money on attempting to value the costs and benefits of designation (or alternative action) for two reasons:
 - Valuing the impact of a specific policy instrument such as AONB designation or an alternative action will always require heroic assumptions.

When these are added to the general difficulty of valuing environmental impacts, the result will not provide any more sound a basis for decision than professional judgement.

- Economic considerations are not material to the decision to designate a specific tract of land AONB. That can only be based on the quality of its outstanding natural beauty. Their application is limited to general discussions about the value of designation and this need is well enough served by the comparable studies we have summarised here.

How the forces for change are currently being tackled

In addition to studying options for the future, we were also asked to review critically how the forces for change were currently being tackled in the AONB.

Our appraisal of the AONB partnership and its present approach to management showed that it had (within the limits of its jurisdiction and influence) been beneficial in:

- establishing and communicating an understandable vision, sense of purpose and direction for the stewardship of the area;

- providing a corporate management approach, a sense of inspiration for others and clear leadership for the area;
- delivering the purposes of the AONB in a transparent, objective and innovative manner to match the expectations of a nationally designated protected landscape; focusing on matters which affect the special character of the area and the quality of life of those living within it where they result in opportunity, impact or disadvantage;
- responding creatively yet appropriately to the changing external environment whilst demonstrating through the various dimensions of its approach, a desire to both protect and enhance the quality and sustainable well-being of the AONB;
- fostering a collaborative and proactive approach to work, encouraging innovation and creativity in a manner consistent with the values of an AONB;
- demonstrating high performance standards amongst all those involved with the AONB, be they employees, decision-makers, partner organisations or stakeholders;
- ensuring that the appropriate systems and processes are in place for coherent direction, effective governance, efficient administration and collaborative management of the AONB;
- providing clear information to decision-makers enabling them to fulfil their roles in setting strategic direction, implementing good practices and maintaining effective stakeholder relationships.

The credibility and confidence which has been established for the AONB has also resulted in an AONB service which is:

- energetic, highly motivated and proactive in the implementation of its responsibilities;
 - a valued source of expertise, able to present the AONB and its principles in a consistent, strong and positive manner to local people, the visiting public, stakeholders and other interested parties;
 - a management body which is respected and valued by local and regional authorities and national organisations including the Welsh Assembly Government;
 - effective and delivers innovative approaches to the environmental stewardship of the AONB, and engages with those having an interest in the challenges facing the area;
 - confident and able to assume further responsibilities should these be delegated to it.
- It is however recognised that, if the AONB partnership is to manage an extended area or become more effective within the existing area, it will need to
- win an increased resource base;
 - exert greater strategic influence and create an increased awareness of the values of the AONB amongst the key and influential “managers of change” within the AONB and those not directly associated with it, in particular developers (public and private);
 - develop and broaden the momentum created by the Sustainable Development Fund and the Heather and Hillforts Initiative;
 - establish a high-profile political “AONB champion” to advocate the needs of the existing or extended area;
 - actively and positively engage with the communities and stakeholders in the proposed extension area to establish their confidence and trust in the benefits and opportunities an AONB offers to them.

Conclusions

The core question

We consider the core question to be:

“What does the area need to tackle the forces for change and what difference would AONB designation make?”

We believe the area needs to win resources, avoid damage and change behaviour.

To win resources, AONB designation gives an area a clear competitive advantage over other areas. The scale of that advantage will depend, however, on the vigour with which a wide range of organisations - CCW, local authorities, landowners - apply the priority and pursue funding opportunities.

Alternatives to AONB designation could achieve some of the same advantages, especially in the priority attached locally to tackling the forces for change. However, in a number of key areas the superiority of AONB designation is undisputed.

To avoid damage:

- In relation to major development and management activities which are subject to other regulatory regimes (utilities, etc.), AONB designation clearly offers superior protection from damage arising from the forces for change.
- In relation to local development, alternatives to designation could offer similar protection if the planning authority so wished. However, national policy is sceptical about the value of local designations. They would need to be defended at Inquiry, and might fail. National planning guidance provides a strong basis for protective planning policies in relation to designated areas.

Changing behaviour is a complex area where good evidence is hard to come by. It covers a wide range of people and the need for their actions to support the natural beauty of the area - farmers, businesses, residents, visitors and consumers.

No definitive conclusion can be reached about whether, in every situation, a designated or a non-designated area would do best in tackling the forces for change which require behavioural change. However, we can say with confidence that, other things being equal, a designated AONB has three advantages:

- help in establishing its brand image by being nationally recognised as one of "our finest landscapes";
- a better chance of securing long-term funding for a dedicated unit promoting its special qualities;
- a statutory duty on public bodies to have regard to its purpose.

The management plan

The preparation of a management plan deserves special mention because it is the only clear-cut statutory duty which AONB designation imposes.

We are clear that the requirement to adopt and review an AONB management plan following full public consultation, if handled well, is a key advantage of designation. The alternatives to designation can, of course, mirror the process if the local authorities are prepared to make the resources available. However, it will be much more difficult to build a consensus around a non-statutory management plan.

The risk of increasing pressure

One of the issues we were charged with examining is the potential danger of designation increasing pressure from greater levels of tourism and associated traffic levels, congestion and loss of tranquillity.

The clear answer from other AONBs and the Clwydian Range is:

- a. Popularity is driven by the resource, not the label. In the very long-term, the net impact of designation may be to increase pressure by making an area's attractions better known, but...
- b. while designated areas continue to enjoy priority for attention and resources, the management of those pressures will be better handled to minimise any problems, and...
- c. successful promotion of tourism in the area will benefit local businesses and help support a living landscape.

It is, indeed, the earnest wish of the local authorities to increase the number of visitors to the area and measures are being taken to achieve this objective.

The existing AONB is considered to be an important attraction in the sub-region and is being promoted as such. Provided the emphasis of tourism promotion remains on the special qualities of the area, it will help to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area.

Costs and benefits

There is no cost-effective method for isolating the precise costs and benefits of designation. We assume that the additional costs of tackling the forces for change, which we estimate at around £60,000 p.a., will be broadly similar whether the area is designated or some alternative approach adopted. The net cost of designation equates to around £10,500 p.a. The high-quality environment of the study area generates benefits, we

estimate, in the range £9m to £90m. We suggest a range of £10 to £20m could be attributed to the actions which are likely to flow from AONB designation. It follows that the cost of designation has only a modest hurdle to overcome before it would deliver a positive return on investment.

Summary conclusions

IN GENERAL

- AONB designation is likely to improve the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of an area. The strength of that improvement will depend on the discretionary action taken by many different organisations and individuals.
- AONB designation is able to contribute positively to the social and economic development of an area. The engagement of AONB partnerships in a broad range of actions supporting sustainable development is at the heart of their work, not an outlier. Well-run AONB partnerships enjoy the enthusiastic support of local communities and the business sector.
- No alternative to AONB designation will be as effective. With sufficient political commitment, alternatives to designation can achieve some of the same benefits. However, designation is clearly advantageous now, and when the uncertainties of the next 50 years are taken into account, the foundation of a national statutory designation is clearly superior.
- We commend the process which has been followed in the study area: independent assessment of the area's outstanding natural beauty; establishing a broad consensus on the special features and qualities of the area, the forces for change and agreed action. This is the way to secure value for money.

IN THE STUDY AREA

- AONB designation would improve stakeholders' ability to address both the identified forces for change and new trends which might emerge in the future to threaten the special features and qualities of the area. It is only possible to value, in monetary terms, a small proportion of the costs and benefits of designation. There is every reason to suppose that the net economic impact of a better managed natural and historic environment on local businesses will be positive. Our judgement is that the direct costs of designation would very likely be justified by the benefits.

Recommendations

CCW has a key role to play in all aspects of designated areas. There are three areas where we think action is needed to improve clarity:

- 1. CCW should publish a statement on the future of the AONB designation as a whole, indicating whether all areas meeting the statutory criterion of "outstanding natural beauty" have been designated and, if not, broadly where the missing areas are.*
- 2. CCW should formally endorse the statement in each AONB management plan of what constitutes the "outstanding natural beauty" of the area.*
- 3. CCW should consider the evidence in this report along with the others it has commissioned and publish a clear "road map" for future action on designation in Wales, including an extension to the Clwydian Range.*

Finally, we outline the strengths and weaknesses of a range of options for taking forward these issues which could form the basis of the "road map" we recommend:

1. Do nothing
2. Complete the designation programme
 - 2.1 Clwydian extension and Berwyns together
 - 2.2 Just Clwydian extension
3. Consider other proposals for designation
 - 3.1 Clwydian extension (and possibly Berwyns) will complete the programme
 - 3.2 Invite other proposals based on the statement in recommendation 1 above
 - 3.3 A full review of designations
4. Pursue an alternative to designation