

National Assembly for Wales
Environment and Sustainability Committee
NRW 2015 – 60
Natural Resources Wales – Annual Scrutiny 2015
Response from Dr. Richard Birch

Dear Sir / Madam

I am inspired to write by the current parlous state of biodiversity conservation in Wales since the inception of the triumvirate NRW, which combined Forestry (a commercial venture) the Environment Agency and the Countryside Council: the latter with a remit to conserve biodiversity. As such, it had specialist personnel with whom one could consult on conservation issues in the wake of increasing pressures.

This is one facility that has been sorely denuded in the new NRW.

A raft of cuts, redundancies and internal redeployments has resulted in:

- Upland ecologist – gone and not replaced;
- Entomologist – from two to one;
- Marine ecologist – reduced to team leaders without teams;
- Ornithologist – down to one;

Indeed, some principle disciplines, without which conservation becomes meaningless, are no longer represented at all in the statutory service (notably botany).

In consequence there has been a loss of morale and a drift in focus away from conservation in favour of flood defence and generating an income! Not helped by the fact that the Executive Committee of NRW has no one in its higher positions with any background in natural science, let alone conservation. Its intention to appoint a chair also indicates that a background in natural sciences is not an essential prerequisite.

If you want proof of this, simply look at the ‘roadmap’, luridly painted across a wall in all the remaining offices. It does not mention biodiversity anywhere.

Further consequences of this have drifted down into the private sector. With a loss of the former expertise that one could legitimately expect from a statutory agency with a conservation remit, so the more unscrupulous elements of the private sector push the boundaries, confident that with a reduced morale and little support, they can get away with ignoring or steamrolling over their obligations.

As a private sector ecologist in North Wales I have personal experience of this. I now deal with representatives from the other two agencies who are

concerned only with their obligations on European Directives and seem unaware that the remit also included the Wildlife & Countryside Act and the Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act. At best, this is embarrassing. At worst, it results in the erosion of biodiversity, sometimes in situations that contravene the law.

And finally, if I wanted to speak to anyone in the local offices over issues such as this, I would have to speak to someone in Cardiff first. Long live decentralisation!

Yours Sincerely:

Dr. Richard Birch