

Local Nature Partnership Conference, 16 March 2018

Meeting Report

This meeting pulled together a broad range of people interested in Devon's natural assets, ranging from scientists and researchers, economists, health professionals, conservationists, policymakers and private sector representatives right through to organisations promoting more active lifestyles.

Prof **Iain Stewart** (he of TV fame, and also Director of the Sustainable Earth Institute at Plymouth University) gave a key note talk, **urging everyone to do far more to engage the general public in environmental and countryside issues**. As a 'thought provoker' he put up the famous hockey stick graph of atmospheric CO₂ levels, and asked the room when they thought the issue of climate change was first mentioned by senior politicians at international level. The answer was the 1960s, a time when, compared with now, you could hardly see any change at all. At that point, the American President told Congress it was likely that humankind was permanently changing the balance of gases in the atmosphere. Since then of course, the graph has skyrocketed, but little has actually been done. Prof Stewart's point was that it is **much harder and slower to change behaviour than it is to find out that change is needed**.

Rebecca Waite, Head of Local Delivery on **DEFRA's 25 year environmental plan** talked. She stressed that the PM's launch of the 25 year plan signalled government ownership of the initiative, rather than DEFRA's ownership, and that this was going to be a serious commitment. She also reminded us that the government plan to make **2019 a Year of Green Action**, through a **youth-focused** campaign to drive more involvement with environmental issues. It seems pretty clear that 'Natural Capital' and a 'Natural Capital Approach' are the new buzz words.

Prof. **Matt Loble**, from Exeter University, talked about changes in agriculture, describing a widespread shift in farming demographics, in which the average age of farmers is shifting up, and farmers are taking control of land later in life. He also discussed the trend for fewer, larger farms. Nationally, **42% of the smallest farms (about 41,000 small farms) produce only 2% of agricultural output. In other words, losing these small farms has little impact on productivity, but potentially large impacts for communities, rural roads, land management norms, etc.**, There was also discussion of how housing pressures affect natural capital and agricultural productivity. **Population growth in the South West is double the national average**, again bringing implications: for landscape scale changes in demand for access to the countryside; for pressures on roads and natural capital; and for pressures on farmland.

There were other shorter talks:

On the **benefits of outdoor learning**;

On a new move to be '**naturally healthy**' (**May is Naturally Healthy month, using the hashtag #stepoutside**);

On **invasive species** - we get 10 new invasive species each year, and 40% of these are aquatic, hence the importance of the **Check, Clean, Dry campaign** for anglers;

On **Devon's special species** - species for which Devon has a particular responsibility, either because they are rare/threatened everywhere including Devon, or because Devon is a stronghold and they are threatened elsewhere. For conservation purposes, the list of 'top priority' species is about 106 long, and includes some things most people won't often see, and others that are more familiar (like dormice, barn owls, rare orchids etc).

The rest of the day was workshops, including one on **Using Behaviour Change Tactics to Help People Connect Actively to Nature**. It split people into groups according to their role - from those who interact face to face with countryside visitors through to those making policy about access to the countryside. It was a surprisingly long chain, which can produce weak links. Someone from Public Health England gave the example of how new developments can sometimes put in all the infrastructure to help people use bikes to link into public transport - bus stops, train stations, cycle routes and racks etc. but then fail to specify houses that work with this. So if there's no garage, no shed and no garden there's nowhere to store bikes and it's back to car journeys.

Maggie Watson
DCAF delegate