

Future Landscape Wales Update

Where are we with the Future Landscape Wales (FLW) project?

The answer to this question is hard to assess as time rumbles on and government process seems to obfuscate rather than clarify the direction of travel. In recent months we have heard very little. What we do know is that four years have passed since the idea to take a fresh look at the role of protected landscapes in Wales was first presented.

What was the original idea?

In Wales we are well aware that with 25% of the country lying within either a National Park or an AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), it is important that these huge tracts of land are working in tandem with the whole. With their status as the crown jewels of our nation, they require the appropriate protection necessary and are also a potential target for jewel thieves. Thus it seemed in everybody's interest to check their purposes were clear, their governance was up to it and their longer term operation was in sync with the other 75% of the country.

What was the Marsden Report we hear so much about?

2015 saw the publication of the Marsden Report which was the result of a wholesale trawl through every conceivable aspect of how these designated landscapes operate, their strengths and weaknesses, their international, national and regional roles, and it concluded with a set of detailed recommendations which broadly speaking called for National Parks and AONBs to broaden their aspirations and remit without losing their special status as beacons of conservation. Professor Terry Marsden and his team had produced a report of 250 pages with almost 70 recommendations which was widely praised. It was then handed back to the Government to decide what they wanted to do with it. What could possibly go wrong?

Anyone for another report on the report?

And from then on it has been a somewhat oblique process and it remains anyone's guess where it will eventually lead. Armed with the Marsden report, a FLW Working Group was established by the Welsh government in 2015 to take things forward towards, presumably, legislation. Many organisations and consultees to the original Marsden report became involved in this Working Group, chaired by Lord Dafydd –Elis Thomas, which eventually published their final report in May 2017.

How did it go down?

Not good to put it mildly. The reception was almost universally poor. Some of the contributors were unwilling to support the report as they felt it misrepresented their views and input. Lacking any clear link with the work of Terry Marsden it meandered confusingly around the subject and seemed to purposefully avoid tackling any of the key recommendations suggested in the original work. Most criticism centred on the glaring omissions within the FLW report and primarily on the

absence of any reference to the Sandford Principle - the vital basic principle that recognises, in the event of irreconcilable conflict, the primacy of conservation. The strong environmental message and the role of biodiversity were both key features of the Marsden report and both seemed to have vanished by the time the FLW working group had finished.

Indeed, so bad was the reception to the report, that the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the global authority on the status of the natural world, which determines which areas of the UK meet international standards for protected areas ... said *"If acted upon, the recommendations in the Future Landscapes report would make it impossible for the panel to continue to accord international recognition to Wales' [national parks] and AONBs as protected areas"*

And the Government's reaction?

There was a pretty stony silence from the Welsh government and barely any defence of the work. In a sense it was so bad that it spoke for itself. Since midsummer very little seems to have happened.

However there now exists a further FLW Delivery Group with the aim of moving things along. This is a civil service- led group with the remit to formulate some tangible outcomes (salvage something from the wreckage). Fortunately Terry Marsden was invited, and agreed, to join this group which is reassuring. It is not yet clear how fast and in which direction this process will head.

What would they now like to achieve?

The aspiration of the group is still focusing on alignment, cooperation and flexibility across all landscapes. There is a particular emphasis on bringing all of this into line with the Environment Act and the Well-being of Future Generations Act. These are both recent, major flagship bits of legislation which seek to put the natural resources and the well- being of society at the forefront of all public activity. But the suspicion remains that this would be achieved by dumbing down the protected landscapes rather than raising the overall bar.

What the FPCNP has done

Through our membership of the Alliance for Welsh Designated Landscapes we have garnered support from a very broad range of disgruntled organisations most of whom have been engaged with this process from the outset and were dismayed with the FLW report. This in turn led to the commissioning of a position statement outlining the flaws in the process, the weakness of the report and particularly the absence of the Sandford principle and the primacy of conservation. Widely circulated and backed by over 20 organisations it displayed a coherent and damning critique of the FLW work.

And finally

The other element which has entered the arena is of course Brexit and apart from anything else it is quite possible that there is simply not enough manpower or political energy to prioritise the FLW work alongside the mountain of work required to manage the repatriation of all the EU legislation.

There may be a pause.....

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