

SDC's Opening Statement Outline: Western Weald

Tuesday, 15 April, 2008

Today is the first day of the SDC's evidence on Topics 3 and 5, related to the Western Weald. As you will be hearing evidence from us both this week and next, the latter on Topic 6, we thought it would be helpful to you and the smooth running of the Inquiry if I take you through how we propose to present our evidence.

You will be aware that we represent 145 national, regional and local organisations and parish and town councils. You will see that we have on the front of our proofs the logos of the major contributors to each proof of evidence. But that is the tip of the iceberg; many, many others, from different organisations, have been involved in their production. I won't say more about that now, as Robin Crane, our chairman, will provide information about the Campaign and how it operates in our Closing Statement to the Inquiry.

You will recall our support in principle for the PSDNP and our general agreement to the boundary designated by the Countryside Agency, now Natural England. Within the Western Weald, we promoted one additional area, around Kirdford and Plaistow. You rejected our case, which was fully considered, and we accept your conclusion with regard to that area. We are therefore appearing at this re-opened Inquiry to support the boundary of the Designation Order and to object most strongly to any boundary which narrows the area of the PSDNP in the Western Weald.

Before I take you through the evidence we will be presenting I would like to say something about public opinion. We fully recognise this is not part of any statutory criterion for the designation of a National Park. Nevertheless, it is very important for the well-being of any future National Park.

We are conscious that you received representations from a few witnesses at the first part of the Inquiry in favour of a chalk only National Park. In your report to the Secretary of State you suggested that many of those who opposed the PSDNP might have supported it if it had been promoted on the basis of being limited to the chalk downland¹. We were puzzled by that statement, which did not conform to our own experience nor to the results of the Designation Order consultation. That latter elicited only 18 representations in favour of a chalk only National Park. There were five objectors to the principle of a National Park who stated that their 'fall back' position was a chalk only National Park. Those five included WSCC and CDC. But we then read in the Landscape Assessor's report² the conclusion, without any obvious evidence to support it, that 'the Agency has not given sufficient emphasis to the long-held support for a National Park consisting of the chalk downland alone'.

We have seen in Natural England's Position Paper 6 an analysis of public opinion both at the Designation Order consultation and at the consultation undertaken last year, related to the possible new boundary. However, public opinion has been tested on numerous other

¹ CD #3 Part 2 para 2.3

² CD #3 Annex A para 6.129

occasions, both in the earlier stages leading up to the Designation Order and subsequently. We would not lay claim to all of these being a scientifically based analysis. Nevertheless, the results are remarkably consistent. They are set out in our written proof #1147/0/2. They show massive public support for a National Park and one based on the wider area. They therefore give credence to the results of the consultation on the Designation Order and the more recent consultation in July last year.

I should add, as it is relevant to the issue of the Western Weald, that the Designation Order consultation elicited over 400 representations in favour of the boundary as drawn in the East Hampshire part of the Western Weald, with many of those who made representations making clear that they favoured the inclusion not just of Woolmer Forest but of the settlements further to the south also. There were just three objectors who wanted land to be removed; these were the Ministry of Defence and two developers.

You will have read in the representations made on the possible new boundary not only objections to it but also a heartfelt anger at the idea of the Western Weald being excluded from the National Park and divorced from the chalk hills. Many representations made the point that the towns of the Western Weald should be included as well as its countryside. Over 4,250 people have signed the on-line petition to the Prime Minister in favour of the inclusion of the Western Weald. Currently this makes it the number 1 'live' environmental petition and in the top ten environmental petitions since the website was set up.

I turn now to our evidence that you will hear from us this week. We believe there were two major determinants you considered in reaching your provisional recommendations: first the issue of single or core character and secondly the provisional conclusion you reached regarding the quality of parts of the Western Weald, which I will return to in a moment. So far as the first point is concerned, we have presented our evidence under Topics 1 and 2. We have nothing to add this week on that issue.

Returning to your provisional conclusions regarding the quality of tracts of the Western Weald which were based on the advice of your Landscape Assessor. He concluded that the so-called A3 corridor and other areas including the Sandy Arable Farmlands in West Sussex had become so degraded since the AONBs were established that they no longer meet the natural beauty criterion.

The areas identified by the Landscape Assessor amount to broadly some 100 sq km, that is a size equal to or greater than about a quarter of the AONBs in England and Wales. If his findings are correct; that landscapes that have been nationally protected for over 40 years have lost their natural beauty, then we are looking at a profound breakdown of national, regional and local policies that have been directed not just at the conservation of natural beauty but to its enhancement too.

We disagree with the Landscape Assessor's analysis. We are not alone in that: HCC, EHDC, NE and even WSCC and CDC are of the same mind. Of course there have been instances where policy has failed or its application has not been as rigorous as it might have been. These things happen, even in the best protected landscapes. There are also, as everywhere, rogue landowners or land users. These factors have led to limited, localised degradation.

Equally, other national, regional and local policies have actively conserved or enhanced the landscape. And as a protected landscape, the Sussex Downs AONB and the East Hampshire AONB have received additional national and local funding to enhance their natural beauty and provide the management to go with it. That is all landscapes in the South Downs, including those that are alleged to have been degraded.

For such conclusions as the Landscape Assessor reached, with their potentially very serious repercussions, we would have expected a high threshold of evidence, which is not obvious on the face of his report. We therefore believe that it is essential that the Landscape Assessor's findings should be subjected to proper scrutiny. We intend to play our part in this by bringing before you evidence this week on what has happened to these areas since they received national protection. We have divided our evidence into discrete subject areas that we hope will assist the Inquiry.

We will also bring before you evidence on the possible new boundary. Our concern here is not the line on the map as drawn by Natural England, but the underlying concepts and assumptions, which relate again to the Landscape Assessor's findings.

This possible alternative boundary raises a number of serious issues for the future of the Western Weald and its future management should it be excluded from the PSDNP. We shall be bringing evidence forward on these issues later today.

In all these cases we will be relying on new evidence not available to the Inquiry during its earlier sittings. A great deal of this evidence has only become available since the closure of the first part of the Inquiry. Other evidence was available at the time but is new evidence to the Inquiry.

We recognise, however, that at the heart of the debate over the quality of the area there are judgements to be made. On this score we agree with Mr Jarvis who gave evidence on behalf of Tarmac, though we were puzzled when he went on to suggest that an area either met the criteria or it didn't, which seemed to contradict his acceptance of the subjective or qualitative nature of landscape appraisal. However, it is the view of the SDC that judgement must come into the equation and so we have commissioned an expert on both nationally designated landscapes and the South Downs to appear on our behalf. Next week Professor Robert Tregay will give our evidence on Topic 6 and will include in his evidence his judgement on these important issues as well as bringing to bear new evidence on other issues.

Putting together our evidence has involved an immense amount of work from a large number of people, mainly volunteers. The fact that so many people have been prepared to give up their time in order to prepare this evidence demonstrates the passion felt about the future of the Western Weald, not just by those who live within it but also by those who know it and love it as a place to visit.

It is our contention that the combination of the chalk hills of the South Downs and the ridges and valleys of the Western Weald is an iconic landscape worthy of national park status. Geographers of the past said, and I quote from the book 'The Weald':

"Neither the physical nor the human history can be seen in perspective except by including the Downs with the Weald. There is, indeed, a further principle at stake.

Where the geographer delimits areas which, perhaps rashly, he calls 'natural regions' he cannot lose sight of the fact that they would cease to be in any degree natural if they were divorced from their surroundings. His boundaries are necessarily conventional and must own to a high degree of unreality; there can be no question of 'cutting along a dotted line'."

We recognise that linkages are not part of the statutory criteria for National Park designation, but this powerful pull between the Downs and the Weald exists; it is palpable in the representations made last year and explains why many of us have put our lives on hold to prevent that link being severed.

We want you to understand the country that we are so passionate about and so we have put together a Powerpoint presentation. It is only a flavour of the many images of the area that we could have presented to you, given the number of photographers who volunteered their services. To truly appreciate the area and to understand it properly you must visit it for yourself.