



The National Association for AONBs
Cymdeithas Genedlaethol AoHNE

CD #56

3rd April 2008 – House of Lords

Debate – The environmental importance of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – move for papers by Lord Renton of Mount Harry.

Lord Renton opened the two and a quarter hour debate by explaining he had been asked by the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty had asked him to make a little noise about AONBs at Westminster.

He declared two interests

1. as Chairman of the South Downs Joint Committee
2. that he lived in an AONB – the South Downs.

He thanked Elizabeth Shepherd for the note lodged with the Lords’ library on the origin and history of AONBs so he didn’t need to cover that subject in the debate.

He also made reference to a Press Release from the NFU quoting the following:
“We believe that in general the AONBs do achieve the primary purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape. Local experience suggests that AONBs have dealt sensitively and pragmatically with landowners”.

For his question “What does the phrase “environmental importance” mean in relationship to AONBs” he had two answers.

1. Natural Beauty. He praised the AONB influence on the environment, citing the reintroduction of the Adonis Blue butterfly species to the South Downs as a result of the AONB Joint Committee persuading local farmers to leave headland and margins as part of the Higher Level Stewardship scheme.
2. An attempt to share to share the countryside with those people who live in towns and cities. He explained the mutual benefit for those who live and work in AONB and those who visit detailing the sustainable transport that the South Downs supports “Take the Bus for a Walk” campaign, the benefit of visitors to local businesses such as B&Bs and local shops. He also said he would like to encourage more children to visit AONBs so they can see that chickens lay eggs, milk comes from cows, and not be frightened of a herd of bullocks.

He added that it is inevitable with our ever busier world that people will seek AONBs as havens where traffic does not drown out bird song and that it is essential that AONBs are funded to ensure their conservation for future generations’ enjoyment.

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Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty**

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He explained that AONBs are funded in three different ways:

1. core funding which pays for staff and officers – funded by Natural England and Local Authorities
2. project funding which pays for projects undertaken in partnership within the AONBs usually lasting up to three years or more – mostly funded by Natural England but able to lever in other funding such as HLF or different types of EU money
3. SDF – a fund from Natural England to support innovative and sustainable partnership projects within the AONBs

He also explained that all three funds are under threat because of the reduced budget to Natural England from Defra. He also explained that even a small reduction in funding from Natural England could have knock on effects because of the leverage that funding could have.

He quoted Robin Toogood, Lead Officer for South Devon AONB:

“To illustrate the leverage and value for money that Defra and Natural England derive from their financial input, I would cite our very successful programme called Life Into Landscape, which ran in South Devon AONB from 2004 to 2007, where Natural England was one of ten supporting partner organisations. In return for a small Natural England project contribution to the wider £1.3 million project budget (which also included Heritage Lottery Fund and European Regional Development Fund) we were able to (amongst many other things) restore over 50 historic green lanes, assist 200 landowners with conservation work, conserve 32 old orchards, improve 20 walking trails, and involve 50 community groups in 7500 days of volunteer work. Many such partnership projects are underpinned by a small core of Natural England Funding.”

He said that he had had other examples from Dorset, North Pennines, Cotswolds, East Devon, Tamar Valley, Isle of Wight AONBs and Surrey and Hampshire County Councils.

He compared the funding received by AONBs which cover 15% of England with that received by the National Parks which cover 8%.

	AONBs	National Parks
06-07	£14m	£44m
07-08	£12.2m (not confirmed)	£46m
08-09	£10m (not confirmed)	£49m

He said that the Minister Jonathan Shaw had widely praised the National Parks for the good work they do, which is basically all the things that AONBs do as well.

This reduction in funding for AONBs was happening despite the following:

They contain

- 25% of SSSI area
- 90% of defined Heritage Coast
- 55,000 listed buildings
- 6,500 scheduled ancient monuments
- 15% of England containing our finest landscape

He didn't expect AONBs to receive the same funding as National Parks as he recognized that their administration was different but he did ask that some of the

rhetoric support from Ministers for AONBs should be translated into action and requested that as CAP and SFP money is phased out over the next few years that Ministers should try to ensure that some of the new budget be allocated to environmental tasks that AONB undertake.

He pointed out that the Government already use AONBs to assist Government policies with access to the coast, encouraging disadvantaged groups to enjoy the countryside (part of the Diversity Action Plan), biodiversity targets in SSSIs and the Health agenda. Therefore AONBs should be properly funded.

Lord Bragg then spoke about the Lake District National Park. He stated that the planet used to control us, we now control the planet and we have a responsibility to look after it.

Lord Plumb declared his interest as President of the Cotswolds Conservation Board espousing the delights of the rolling hills of the Cotswolds, first designated in 1966, extended in 1990 and at 790 square miles, the largest AONB in the UK and the 2nd largest Protected Area in England. He reiterated Lord Renton's concerns re funding pointing out that 3 days into the new financial year, the Conservation Board still does not have a grant offer. It faces reduction in all three areas of funding previously discussed. He pointed out that National Parks receive £200,000 per year for SDF whereas the Cotswolds received £100,000 in 2005 which has slowly reduced to the as yet to be confirmed £60,000 in 2008. He quoted the "Caring for the Cotswolds" project as good practice and a project that with £250,000 from the Board drew down £1.4m from HLF. He also praised the Cotswold wardens who last year provided 40,000 hours of time equivalent to £250,000 worth of volunteer labour.

The Bishop of Portsmouth, Earl Selbourne, Lord Bridges, Lord Marlesford and Viscount Bridgeman all expressed similar concerns re funding whilst citing examples of good practice within the Isle of Wight, Suffolk Coast and Heaths, East Devon, North Pennines and Kent AONBs.

Viscount Bridgeman gave the "Peatscapes" project in the North Pennines AONB as an example where an AONB Partnership is taking a lead on land management-based climate change mitigation. They have blocked over 200km of moorland grips (drains) this year and are seeking a considerable expansion of the project over the next four years. The carbon released in losing the peat of the North Pennines is the equivalent to 72 years of Drax power station emissions, and keeping the peatlands as functioning wetland ecosystems allows them to store carbon, reduce the impact of downstream flooding, conserve biodiversity and reduce water colour. Natural England has provided approx. 17% of the funding for this work, which is acknowledged to meeting PSA targets in ways NE themselves could not.

He also cited Kent Downs whose development of a South East Protected Landscapes Sustainable Communities project, based on SDF, with:

- the French Parc Naturel around Paris and their equivalent regional organisation, Ile de France
- 2 universities in England/France - Kingston and Versaille
- SEEDA and Natural England

is now in jeopardy because of uncertainty of funding.

They were also exploring the possibility of bringing on board:

- Protected Landscapes around the German capital and also
- the SE Rural Communities Councils

The intention is to use SDF to apply for match funding from the Interreg 4b programme, developing the bond between communities living and working in the Areas and their landscape, sharing successes and challenges with partners in other countries and building a stronger tertiary education landscape sector through the involvement of universities.

The uncertainty of:

- the level of funding
- its short term (annual) nature and,
- how late in the preceding financial year the budget is announced (still no official confirmation on 08/09 funding at the end of March 08)

has made it impossible to submit an application this year as it is impossible to enter into 3 to 5 year agreements with partners whilst carrying the level of risk posed by the above uncertainties.

The effect of this is to:

1. undermine relationships with potential partners across Europe; with the NF National Park, who were keen to join up with the AONBs on this project, and importantly with the RDA at a time when we are seeking to build relationships and to continue to show our ability to deliver and organise successful partnerships on the ground.
2. the high opportunity cost for the natural environment and landscape management in the southeast of not being able to draw in additional funding - the intention was to double the SDF through the matching process.
3. wasted time and money in developing the relationships and the project proposal.

Lord Bradshaw declared his interest as Chairman of Friends of the Ridgeway and Oxfordshire CPRE and espoused the benefits of the National Trails – all of which run through at least one AONB – for the Govt’s health agenda. He also expressed concern at the lack of acknowledgement by NATs that the increase of aircraft into Heathrow was affecting the tranquility of the Chilterns AONB.

Lord Taylor of Holbeach spoke of the broad context of the benefits of AONBs. He pointed out the success of AONB units in their partnership working with landowners and farmers. He stated that the AONB Units good working relationship was widely acknowledged to be better than that of the National Parks.

Lord Rooker responded on behalf of the Government stating that the Natural England settlement for 08/09 is £176m. He admitted that the NE Board had had some hard choices to make about funding but that they are considering 3 year settlements for the AONBs which would give better security. He explained that Defra do not wish to micromanage Natural England. They recognize the expertise of the regional units and ask them to make the correct judgments for the local situation. Decisions on 08/09 grants will be made asap.

In response to Lord Renton’s suggestion for other funding solutions, he explained the Government’s central objective is to get as much money from CAP pillar 1 transferred

to pillar 2 which pertains to rural development programmes and this could benefit AONBs.

He felt that one of the problems that AONBs had was that people don't recognize them. The general public tend to know about National Parks and know when they are entering one because of the road signs. He stated that as AONBs don't have signs – there are Local Authority signs – they are not as recognizable *[NB The NAAONB will write to Lord Rooker to correct this. He also wondered how many LAs are involved in AONBs? The NAAONB will provide him with this information]*.

In response to Lord Bridges, he promised to send out a reminder to Local Authorities to take account of AONBs in their decision making. The original request having been made by Alun Michael in 2005.

As a final comment on funding he stated that there has been no final decision on AONB budget and that both Defra officials and the NE Board will receive a copy of this debate.

Lord Renton thanked everyone who had spoken during the debate, thanked **Lord Rooker** for his comments on the intention of the Govt with reference to Pillar 1 and 2 and withdrew the motion for papers.

Jill Smith
April 3rd 2008

A full transcript of the debate can be found by clicking on
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldhansrd/index/080403.html>

Or the debate can be watched on by clicking on
<http://www.parliamentlive.tv/Main/VideoPlayer.aspx?meetingId=1427>

and fast-forwarding 3hrs 35minutes to 14.41 when Lord Renton started to speak.