

2019

Exmoor Spring Conference highlights the relationship between natural beauty and people's wellbeing.

"The fight for beauty continues even in national parks" was the strong message from Dame Fiona Reynolds at the recent Exmoor Society Spring Conference in partnership with Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) held in the medieval Tithe Barn, Dunster. She argued that lobbyists, politicians and decision makers in rural policy used technical terms such as ecosystem services, natural capital and integrated coastal development rather than words such as beauty, nature and heritage. Many surveys and research showed that people understood what was beautiful—a stunning view, a heath fritillary butterfly, an ancient stone circle— and closeness to nature with access to outstanding natural landscapes was essential for their wellbeing. Not least was to provide opportunities for the next generation through simple outdoor natural play such as climbing trees, wading in mud and skimming stones. As a member of the Glover Review into National Parks, Dame Fiona, Master of Emmanuel College Cambridge, former Director General, National Trust and noted Countryside Campaigner, emphasised the need to redress the dramatic loss of biodiversity and recognise the vulnerability of landscape beauty. She said "To achieve a better future depends on beauty mattering enough to shape both the debate and our decisions. As John Muir, an early 19th century environmentalist said our choice must be "Not blind opposition to progress, but opposition to blind progress" "

In setting the context of the Conference, Rachel Thomas, Chairman Exmoor Society, said that National Parks are very much under the spotlight this year, celebrating both the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act and the Glover Review into designated landscapes. "The Society agrees that beauty at last is re-entering the political discussion with National Parks having the highest form of protection for their landscape and scenic beauty but we call for more powers for National Park Authorities, particularly in land management, essential for delivering their purposes "she declared.

Challenging delegates to consider how buildings can add to the beauty of picturesque landscapes and even wilder areas, Peter Beacham formerly Director English Heritage, responsible for its listing programme, gave several examples from around the country. He referred to the beauty of many Exmoor farmsteads and the use of vernacular building materials such as cob, thatch and corrugated iron. Further examples of the hidden beauty of Exmoor coastal estates and the 19th century reclamation by the Knights at Simonsbath were introduced by Rob Wilson North, ENPA Head of Conservation and Access.

Adrian Colston, from the Centre for Rural Policy Research, Exeter University, said he wanted to understand why people disagree over upland management and grazing and whether a consensus between hill farmers and conservationists could be reached. Conservationists see the conservation of living diversity as a moral necessity and, therefore, as a mission and are suspicious of any competing interests. In contrast, hill farmers have deep roots going back over 5,000 years of managing moorland. Researching Dartmoor Hill Commons, he had interviewed both sides; on the one hand, was the conservation story of too many sheep and too much swaling. With the introduction of agri-environmental schemes, stock numbers were cut dramatically on the commons. On the other hand, farmers agreed that there had been over-grazing during the days of headage payments but, instead of a sudden change, there should have been a managed withdrawal of stock. Now, Molinia (purple moor grass) has taken over, damaging bio-diversity and a contributory cause in the loss of heather. Farmers' knowledge was not taken into account and over-grazing is not the problem now. He said, though, that there were rays of hope in devising future agri-environmental schemes. Matthew Heard, Natural England, agreed that the way forward was to involve farmers' knowledge with experts so that better agri-environmental schemes could be devised. With the right measures, the landscape character of moorland can be improved.

Interspersed through the day were poems, read by the poet Adam Horovitz, as a result of his visits staying on Exmoor farms and to be included in the next edition of his book "The Soil Never Sleeps."

Summing up the day, Sarah Bryan, Exmoor National Park Authority's Chief Executive, said: "The most important step in protecting what we have is to understand it and it's clear from today's speakers that we have collectively come a long way in that journey. We are fortunate to have many capable partners working with us to push the boundaries but we still need better tools to ensure the special qualities of the National Park continue to thrive into the future."

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