

In October 2006, English Nature (EN) was merged with parts of the Rural Development service and the Countryside Agency to form a new outfit called Natural England (NE). This followed a recommendation in a report by Lord Haskins called *The Rural Delivery Review*, not a radical new look at the morning milk round, but 'a report on the delivery of government policies in rural England', including nature conservation. Some might think that Haskins, a man dubbed 'the junk food king' by George Monbiot, was scarcely an intuitive choice for writing such a report. Anyway, write it he did, and, predictably, there was much gloom and gnashing of teeth. Has the reorganization really been a disaster, and what does it mean for bryophytes and bryology?

In the 1980s and 90s, statutory species conservation gradually began to expand to include 'lesser known' species groups, including bryophytes. This led to a great increase in the credibility of bryophyte conservation that was, with hindsight, scarcely affected by 'the split' of the Nature Conservancy Council into separate country agencies in 1991. Sites of Special Scientific Interest began to be designated specifically for lower plants, Red Data Books were published, and threatened species were added to Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the EU Habitats Directive, the Bern Convention and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. All the country agencies plus the Joint Nature Conservation Committee had lower-plant specialists in some form or another (even if only part-time), and EN started up the Botanical Network.

More recently things have slowed down a bit, largely because government funding has been reduced. Lower-plant initiatives, such as the *ex situ* bryophyte project, have been shelved. Survey and monitoring has subsided. All the country agencies are strapped for cash, but the situation in England is worse because the newly formed NE has had to take on the additional responsibility of countryside access. Indeed, to judge from their press profile, it appears that this may now be

their primary concern. The financial situation has been further exacerbated by the farm payments debacle, a huge blunder by DEFRA for which smaller outfits, including NE, are having to pay the price. And of course nature conservation has never been a priority for any government, in spite of becoming increasingly important to the general public.

Still in its infancy, NE has yet to find its feet. It seems as yet to have no clear direction, and is to some extent an organization at war with itself. From the little that I can see from my position as an outsider, there appear to be two processes going on. One is driven by DEFRA and the management, and is a process of attrition whereby science is eroded by persistent withdrawal of funding. The second is driven by the excellent and committed staff at NE, who are still trying to do their best for nature conservation in spite of the obstacles. There have been some really great ideas lately: things like the Great Fen Project, or the concept of gradual withdrawal from eroding coasts to create massive areas of marshland – wonderful, visionary (and controversial!) stuff.

It is certainly a worry that bryophyte conservation will suffer as funding is reduced, that in-house expertise will not be enough even to provide quality control, let alone to actually 'do work'. On the other hand, the British government has international responsibilities to fulfil – it is signed up to some important and far-reaching conventions, so bryophyte conservation must continue in England in some form. Hopefully NE will continue to have some in-house lower-plant expertise, but such a role can do little more than co-ordinate the activities of others. Perhaps, then, the BBS should seize the opportunity to become more influential – after all, our members are almost the only bryophyte experts in the country, and we must make the case that our expertise should be appreciated and listened to.

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