

Living with our landscape

It's a privilege to be here today to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Act that has done so much for our natural heritage – knowing that, if we continue to work in the spirit of those who campaigned long and hard for this legislation, we can build on their achievements.

And this has never been more important. Why?..... Because society – at least, western society – still does not understand that our natural environment is the life support system for mankind. It provides us with the basic resources that we need to survive – clean air, pure water, food from productive soils and oceans – and with shelter. It does this through natural processes that regulate our climate, that form soils and breakdown our wastes and pollution, that control diseases and pests, that reduce the effects of flooding and that pollinate our crops. It supports our economy through being the source of all our raw materials for industry and agriculture – and through our landscapes and wildlife, which underpin tourism and recreation.

And the benefits of our natural environment don't stop there. It contributes to our physical and mental well-being through access to green spaces, parks, countryside and coast – where we can take part in physical activities or simply relax and enjoy the surroundings. It is also the source of many of our most widely-used medicines. All in all, the alternative NHS – a truly natural health service.

And it facilitates our social, cultural and educational development. Our landscapes and seascapes are part of our national heritage. Our sense of place, our very identity, is associated with **our** local natural environment, from which we also gain knowledge and inspiration.

And it is through this personal link with our landscapes – stronger perhaps in Wales than in most countries – that we can connect

people with the fundamental importance of the natural environment to their health and well-being.

How we do this was really the purpose of the *Living with our Landscapes* initiative – ably led in its formative stages by the late Merfyn Williams.....Merfyn Croesor, to whose memory the resultant publication being launched today is dedicated.

The initiative upon which we have embarked is aimed at gaining recognition and support for the true value to us of landscape, a value not easily measured in purely economic terms, because much of this value is provided as goods and services (clean air, pure water, space to relax and re-energise) that are freely available and therefore have no market. And conventional economics cannot cope with valuing something that has no market, no matter that it is absolutely essential to human life.

Let me quote someone who knows about these things:

'Not all that is very useful commands high value (eg. water) and not everything that has high value is very useful (eg. diamonds)'

This was Adam Smith, the father of market economics, writing in 1776 – he recognised then what society still fails to recognise nearly 250 years on! In the undeveloped world, where people live closer to nature, dependency on natural systems is well understood – yet it is these people who so often bear the brunt of the impact of our unsustainable lifestyles. But gone are the days when we could simply assuage our guilt by sending off a cheque to

Oxfam – some of these impacts are now being felt much closer to home and they are hurting.

Living with our landscapes set out, through seminars and now this report, to better understand the value of landscape and how it contributes to addressing the key challenges we face in our countryside, key challenges that centre around climate change and rural regeneration.

Today's report is a major milestone – it does not mark the end of the initiative! It provides the context for future constructive debate about the intrinsic value of landscape.....and of the goods and services that it provides to all.

Evidence for the importance of natural systems is growing. For example, a recent analysis in the journal *Science* of almost 100 wide-ranging ecological restoration projects from across the globe indicates that, on average, they increased the provision of biodiversity and environmental goods and services by 44 and 25%, respectively. However, values of both remained lower in restored versus intact reference systems; the message is that conservation is preferable to restoration.....and by implication that landscape is really important as the context within which our life-support system.....the natural environment.....can be protected and nurtured.

Living with our landscapes places landscape in this modern context of sustainable development – and suggests that there is much to be gained from an integrated approach that:

- Gives national recognition to the strategic importance of the landscape environment to the well-being of all parts of Wales
and
- Recognises the role of rural communities in developing innovative solutions to the challenges of today and the future.

I look forward to some interesting debate – but more importantly, to the action that will follow.