

MAKING CYCLING AND THE NATURAL HERITAGE COMPATIBLE AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE: ROGER CROFTS, SNH

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Introduction

I take as my title “making cycling and the natural heritage both compatible and environmentally sustainable” in the sense that any conflicts should be avoided or resolved and environmentally sustainable in the sense that cycling should have minimal environmental footprint.

In my talk I will: give examples of environmental sustainability and cycling, report on recent surveys, point out some of the challenges about cycling and the natural heritage, illustrate by way of examples, some of the work we are involved in Scottish Natural Heritage’ and finally, speculate a little about 2 major Government initiatives where we would like to see cycling more connected.

Cycling and the natural heritage

There are many reasons why we in SNH see cycling and the natural heritage going hand-in-hand. First, cycling is about the sustainable use of re-invigorated and re-generated infrastructure like the Caledonian Canal and the Union and Forth and Clyde Canals. Surely we should be able to cycle safely, if we wish, between Bowling in the West on the Clyde and the Leamington Basin right in the middle of Edinburgh. Equally, sustainability is about utilising what we might call redundant infrastructure, such as old railway lines: and I would like to pay tribute to the works which Sustrans and the local authorities have done in the Central Belt. For instance, at Caldercruix where cycling and leisure walking work well together. Sustainability is also about regeneration of degraded parts of the countryside so that they are very attractive for day to day users near to where they live. Sustainability is also about integrated planning. This does not always work, for example, in East Lothian where a cycle track along an old railway line is rudely interrupted by an open cast coal mine. In such circumstances, one has to ask the question of where is the integrated planning in the local authorities between giving planning permission for an open cast coal mine and the development of that cycle path? Sustainability in this context, therefore, is about cycling provision near to settlements and ensuring that there is an integrated approach between planning and management and other activities.

There is also the link between cycling and enjoyment of the natural heritage. There is sustainability, surely, in terms of human use of the environment about the quietening of the roads, and sustainability about making extra provision for touring cyclists so that they can enjoy the countryside when they need a break. Sustainability is also about increasing knowledge about the environment and improving understanding through individuals such as Rangers - making a connection between people enjoying the countryside and the wildlife and the landscape that they are looking at. Take, for instance, on major important land areas like the Mar Lodge Estate on the south side of the Cairngorms now owned by Scotland’s largest

conservation charity, the National Trust for Scotland. Here the effort is to get a fix, so to speak, between sustaining the wildlife and the landscape, improving those parts that are heavily degraded and allowing for access along the estate tracks by cycle. There are sometimes problems with the attitude of owners and managers of land about cycling access and we have got to find some practical fixes.

Sustainability is also about using further long distance routes in Scotland. In the Great Glen, for instance, there is parallel development of a long distance walking route with the national cycle route. But there remain issues about whether cycling and walking can be compatible on the same route and we have got to come up with some practical fixes there also.

There is no use, ladies and gentlemen, me pontificating here if we are not doing something back home in our own organisations and environmental bodies. So our attitude in SNH is to promote cycling within our organisation, to make sure all of our staff, including our senior managers, do experience what cycling is all about even though they are not regular cyclists. To help them we have an interest-free loan scheme - this is available to all staff - and we also have preferential cycle rates of 12p per mile which is above the norm. Also, as a major owner of land, we own about 35,000 hectares in Scotland, we need to make sure that our land is accessible at least for cyclists to get there. Obviously, on the mountain properties, like Beinn Eighe, one would not really want to take a cycle. It is not safe but it can be extremely damaging to the natural heritage. Even to provide facilities for walkers on the mountain trails is quite difficult. We must bear in mind that recreational cycling in the countryside does not mean that we take the bikes everywhere. We do not want to encourage cycling over some of the mountain passes, certainly not over the very sensitive mountain tops or through very fragile habitats such as bogs.

So from our perspective in SNH we believe that cycling is a very important contribution to the natural heritage. It encourages sustainable use of resources, it encourages greater enjoyment and understanding of the countryside, it stimulates regeneration particularly in urban areas and, of course, it has a much lesser environmental footprint in terms of emissions than other forms of transport (which from our point of view is important in itself as obviously air pollution and acid rain have quite an impact on the quality of our landscape and wildlife in Scotland). We actively promote Scotland's natural heritage as an asset locally, nationally and globally. There is an important point there about cycling because we have heard a lot about the level of cycling in other countries, we are now seeing many more people wanting to come to Scotland to walk and hopefully to cycle so that they appreciate our wildlife and our landscape and also bring economic benefits to local communities. So our aim in SNH is to promote the care and improvement of the natural heritage, its responsible enjoyment - and I would underline the word responsible there from the point of view that we do not want people to have a negative environmental footprint on the environment when they are using it and enjoying it - greater understanding and appreciation and sustainable use for now and the future.

The challenge facing cycling

Well how do we relate that to the information we have about cycling? The results from the survey that was commissioned jointly by the Scottish Sports Council, the Scottish Office and SNH show that leisure is by far the main reason for cycling and we must bear that in mind. This does not denigrate cycling to work, cycling to school, they are very important but it is my organisation's business to promote this other - recreational - element of cycling. But, of course, when we look into the factors why people are concerned about participating in cycling the survey flags up the lack of safe local routes, route markers, secure parking facilities and information about cycling. Those are all critical issues which will need to be addressed. They will certainly need to be addressed if the Government is to achieve its target of doubling the number of trips made by bike by the year 2002. We in SNH strongly support and applaud that target but I think most people would recognise that there is still got a long way to go to making cycling mainstream in Scotland in terms of journey to work, journey to leisure and for leisure in itself. Curiously, if one looks at statistics of journeys by car and by cycle, there is quite a coincidence. Most car journeys are short, most cycle journeys are short as well but most cycle journeys are on road. Does this not suggest a modal split change from cars to cycles should be encouraged providing we take into account all of these other factors that cyclists have said are worrying them?

But how do we get there? I think really that there are twin challenges and it is important that we achieve both of those. Firstly, a better integration of policy and action and, secondly, more effective promotion. What do I mean by these points? Well, on better integration, this is needed between cycling and planning at the local level, between health and cyclists, between tourism and cyclists, and between social inclusion and cycling etc. It is the so called "joined-up thinking" which is right at the heart of the policy of the Partnership for Government in the Scottish Executive, that is absolutely critical. But it is not just about policy, there is a need to change people's mindsets. The statistics I quoted earlier make it very clear that people feel that it is only the young and the healthy that cycle: so we need to have a change of perception about that, particularly connecting to the health agenda. There is a need to promote much more the concepts and benefits of what I would call "environmentally sustainable travelling". These are the modes that have a lesser impact on wildlife, on landscape, and on atmospheric emissions. There is a need to make sure that more facilities are being provided and that enjoyment can be had from exploring the countryside by bike. These are the key ingredients which I advocate.

The role of SNH

What are we doing about it in Scottish Natural Heritage? There are a number of initiatives which we have in hand and I would like very briefly to talk about 4 of them: Paths for All, local recreation and access strategies, strategic routes and the Cycling Development Project. I should emphasise from the outset that on none of these are we doing them on our own - we are working in partnership. We are an organisation that believes in partnership and work actively in partnership around the country.

First, Paths for All. The development of path networks particularly in the Central Belt is a major effort and key component of the Government's new approach to access in Scotland. These are not just paths for people to walk on, although that is the

predominant demand as we have discovered from public opinion polls, but includes cycling and horse riding where appropriate. Some 60 are planned in the next phase of this work which begins in the spring of next year and lasts for another 3 years. We are making progress collectively: Local Authorities, the Paths for All Partnership group of some 20 partners, all working together, public, private and voluntary organisations.

Second, we are working with Local Authorities to prepare and implement recreation and access strategies. We sought to help Local Authorities by publishing guidance on the preparation of strategies and I am sure that there are many Local Authority officials here this afternoon who are aware of that and I hope it has helped you in your job. Strategies are an important element but these are not just about making provision, they cover analysing what are the requirements, what have we got at the moment and where would we like to get and how do we get there - that's what the strategy preparation is all about. As a member of SPOKES, I was leafing through their most recent survey which shows, unfortunately, that quite limited progress is being made in some parts of Scotland but with some notable exceptions which we have heard about during the course of this Conference. I think it is very important also that, as part of this strategic development, we in SNH advise Local Authorities on these strategies, on quiet road networks and other features so that there are much greater opportunities for recreational cycling, especially in and around the main settlements in Central Scotland.

The third area is what we call the strategic routes. We have a statutory role to advise the First Minister on long distance routes: the West Highland Way, the Southern Upland Way, the Speyside Way and coming up shortly, the Great Glen Way. Other bodies, of course, such as Sustrans, have a very established approach to this and have achieved a great deal particularly in linking various routes to create an extensive national network. If we are going to develop these routes then we have to recognise that there is a cost involved. There is a cost in preparing them but there is also a cost in maintaining them at a level that makes people want to use them and also allows them to enjoy them. And there is a critical cost to ensure that we do have compatibility between walking and cycling. So it is clear to us that, whilst we will provide money as the strategic authority for the long distance routes, we are looking to the Local Enterprise Companies to provide some of the basic funding of capital and revenue and also, of course, to the local tourism bodies to promote those routes to be used, not just the long distance routes that I've mentioned but many others. I very much welcome, therefore, for instance, Fife Enterprise's lead on the Kingdom of Fife Cycle Network and the Scottish Tourist Board's Cyclists Welcome Scheme.

Fourth, we provide funding to support the work of the Scottish Cycling Development Project which you will have heard quite a bit about this morning. This initiative, fronted by the Cyclist Touring Club and Scottish Cyclist Union, is extremely important. We are joint funders with the Health Education Board for Scotland and we believe that this is a critical initiative. It is interesting, of course, that it is a natural heritage agency of Government and a health promotion agency of Government that are working together trying to connect, if you like, in policy and practice the links between cycling and better health and greater knowledge and enjoyment of the natural heritage. There are lots of initiatives that are going on and there are many

achievements from the Project already. I am sure most of you are well familiar with, for instance, the first Pedal for Scotland charity bike ride between Glasgow and Edinburgh a couple of months ago, winning the Velo City 2001 International Conference for Scotland and, of course, as you heard this morning, the Cycle Friendly Employer Scheme. It is very pleasing to see the Minister give the first 2 awards to Greater Glasgow Health Board and to Glasgow City Council's Land Services Department and I would like to add my congratulations to those 2 organisations and to look forward to future awards under this scheme.

Where next?

But where do we go next from the point of view of the natural heritage and SNH? There are 2 areas of Government policy that I would like to highlight from the point of view of cycling: Access legislation and the establishment of National Parks.

You are, I am sure, aware of the Government's intention to bring forward legislation to clarify people's state of access on to private land, fundamental being the importance of responsible access for recreation and passage. We look forward to seeing the Government's proposal hopefully early in the new year. We have been working with many organisations - walking, cycling, and other user organisations and also with landowning and managing organisations like the Scottish Landowners Federation and the National Farmers Union, to bring together a code of practice about liability, about privacy, about land management operations like farming, about protecting wildlife etc, that will help everybody, walkers and cyclists and horse-riders to behave responsibly. This will help us to make a great leap forward in Scotland on access. One element is the further development of infrastructure on the ground and we are very pleased with the Scottish Executive's proposal for increased resources for Access, routed through SNH, and we do hope that the Parliament will give its approval to these extra resources. Without that neither we, nor our partners, can make the progress on the ground which is so necessary and which both politicians and public alike are looking for.

One tends to think of National Parks, of course, as areas of very fine scenery and wildlife usually in the mountains and not necessarily connected with cycling. But if any of you have walked on some of the vehicle tracks in parts of the Cairngorms it can sometimes be very uncomfortable when other people come shooting round the corner on their mountain bikes hired from the local village shop. All good local enterprise, but what we need to ensure is that the encouragement of cycling is compatible with the other uses in the National Parks which the Government has said it intends to establish. What we would like to see in these areas, and especially in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs, is collaboration with public transport providers so that visitors can plan car-free trips to the area in confidence. It is very pleasing to see that Scotrail are now providing more spaces to get your bike on the train. Certainly the times I have tried to do it in years past, it has been extremely difficult. Making also provision, therefore, for the multi-modal trip to use the jargon: bikes on boats, bikes on trains, bikes on buses. How many buses do you see in rural Scotland that can take bikes compared with wherever else you go into the French Alps, and the Austrian Alps for example? We do not seem to have that mentality yet in the businesses and I wonder if something could be done about that as well as also cycle-friendly accommodation for tourists. So there are plenty of opportunities as part of the National Parks strategy.

Conclusion

So, Chairman, in conclusion, cycling is potentially in danger of falling between several stools: a function of transport options, a tourism and income generator, a sport, informal leisure activity, health benefits, a means of getting to school. That is why I think it is very important that Government stated Policy provides the great opportunity to integrate and to collaborate with a common aim, putting it prosaically, for getting more bums on saddles and reaping multiple benefits. So the planned Green Tourism and Public Awareness Campaign that was announced in the Integrated Tourism White Paper is an essential component of that. Our part in Scottish Natural Heritage we will ensure that we are working to make the policy links and to maximise the opportunities working in partnership and delivering on the ground.

Thank you very much.