

LINKING PEOPLE AND THE OUTDOORS: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: ROGER CROFTS

Text of speech to Frilufsrådet (Danish Outdoor Council) Copenhagen March 2012

This speech addresses the challenges which outdoor organisations have in persuading citizens of the benefits of the outdoors and how the various blockages can be overcome. It also comments on the 7 challenges which the strategic review process undertaken in Frilufsrådet (the major Danish NGO of 100 member organisations engaged in the outdoors for recreation and for nature).

Unhelpful realism

There are a number of perspectives which cast a negative view on use and value of the outdoors. Many people feel that they have **no time for outdoor activities**. They are overworked, they have many domestic commitments and they have other priorities for leisure related to use of electronic communication, such as twitter, face book and web sites. The ever increasing costs of feedstuffs and fertilisers, reductions in income from ever more competitive markets and the stranglehold of the large multi-national supermarkets, and the impending reduction of support through the Common Agricultural Policy place farmers in a very difficult position with an uncertain future. As a result, many are not prepared to release land from food production for outdoors activities and nature. In short, they argue that there is no space for outdoor recreation. In turn, traditional doctors are very hasty to prescribe drugs to help patients cope with stress, heart conditions, breathing irregularities and many other ailments. In short, they have no recognition of the potential benefits to their patients of engaging with nature and the outdoors.

The situation has been exacerbated by the economic crisis. Many people who have lost their jobs are subject to a downwards spiral which can involve loss of home, breakdown of relationships and tremendous stress. As a result, they fall prey to drugs and alcohol as a solution, but in the end there is no cure in sight. Those who steel to gain money to purchase drugs and are sent to prison are readily drawn into the drug culture and on release find that they have no home and no relationships.

On the land, there is an increasing awareness of the competition from different uses. We are familiar with the arguments to maintain food production on the grounds of guaranteeing food security for our domestic consumers given the increasing demands made by the rising global population and changes in diet which result in demands for more meat products. We are also familiar with the need to protect biodiversity if we are to have any chance of reducing the loss of biodiversity never mind retrieving the position. Water supply demands good stewardship of the land and the protection of water courses from diffuse and other forms of pollution. The imperative to produce more energy from renewable sources means that there is increasing competition for the use of land for biomass crops and for establishing wind turbines. The need to kick start economies with major infrastructure projects increases habitat fragmentation and along with housing and industrial development uses valuable productive land which cannot be returned to its most socially beneficial use. So is there room for outdoor recreation and for nature with all of these competing demands and with the resultant conflicts and the lack of effective mechanism for negotiating solutions? The short answer has to be no but the imperative is that solutions must be found.

This brief analysis may seem gloomy but it represents a number of realities in our societies, especially in the western world, which we cannot ignore. But, we have to think and creatively if we are to turn the corner.

Let's view the evidence

We have a great deal of evidence to suggest that the negative views and current behaviours are not appropriate and alternative approaches have a basis in research and assessment.

Take, for example, the evidence building over recent years that people who visit the outdoors suffer less stress. Also, there is evidence that people doing outdoor activity, such as nature restoration work or gardening, are healthier than those who do not participate in such activities. So the health benefits are clear and the wider applications of outdoor activity, as used to be practiced as part of mental health treatments in the nineteenth century institutions with their parkland surroundings, should be a matter of prescription by family doctors and hospitals. The Sibthorp Trust seminar *Ecosystems and health* published in 2010 brought together some of the recent evidence.

Visits to the countryside help to break down the barriers of understanding between an increasingly urban world and those who live and work in the countryside. And visits also improve people's understanding of nature, rather than just watching nature programmes on TV, good though they are. And, there is plenty of information available on the web about activities to do and places to visit to have a satisfying outdoor experience. And, finally many farmers have proved that outdoor recreation and space for nature can readily be provided on their farms without loss of income and indeed with potential to increase income from the provision of visitor facilities.

In view of this evidence, we have the basis for a new approach.

The business unusual approach

The so-called business unusual approach is purely reflection of the facts that carrying on as before, business as usual, will not result in addressing the many challenges and resolving the conflicts already identified. Unusual has a number of ingredients.

First, in relation to the use and management of land we need a new land use model and the development of multi-purpose and multi-objective spatial planning. The old approach of determining winners in terms of preferred land use results in, rather than resolves, conflict and does not achieve the range of public benefits which are needed. Setting out clearly defined objectives which reflect multiple rather than single issue approaches needs to be the guiding light. Scotland is a good case as the arguments originally put forward by the national academy, the Royal Society of Edinburgh in its report on *The Future of the Hills and Islands of Scotland* established the case for a national land use strategy. This was agreed by politicians and is a requirement under the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. Following an action plan published by government at the end of 2011, the stage is now set for demonstrations of how this plan can be made a reality through the work, for example, of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership Board in south west Scotland as a collaborative approach between public, private and charitable sectors engaging land

holders and land users. Ultimately, this approach will require a move away from land use planning focussed on enabling development to one which embraces, in an integrated manner, the whole range of demands placed on the land.

In turn, the business unusual approach demands that the oft stated point by farmers that ‘we are the stewards of the land and have been for generations’ needs to be realised in practice. A radical revision of the codes of practice and environmental cross compliance under the reformed EU Common Agricultural Policy, so that stewardship in its transitional meaning of looking after our natural and cultural assets in the land in perpetuity is at the heart of financial support to farmers. It also means that all constituencies should achieve a much greater understanding of natural systems and processes as embraced in the concepts of natural capital, ecosystem functionality and environmental services and adopting these concepts in practice. This is what is often termed greater **environmental literacy**.

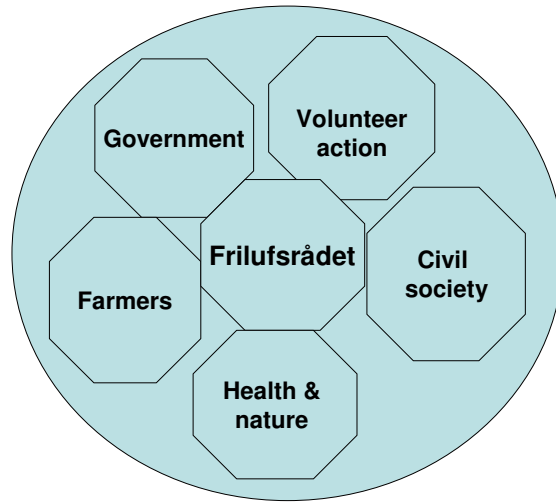
The business unusual approach also places demands on civil society to argue for and lobby these new approaches, as well as its active engagement in enjoying the outdoors and helping to improve the landscape and provide better space for nature through volunteer programmes.

And, finally, the unusual approach requires some fundamental changes in societal and individual behaviour towards natural resources and towards their own personal health and wellbeing. Becoming more conscious of the effects of ones lifestyles and actions on the environment and on oneself and taking steps to ensure beneficial effects on both is a big ask but an essential ingredient. Providing incentives, information and exemplars of good practice are ways to make progress.

But there also needs to be action on the ground. There are many examples of providing for access to the outdoors and to nature in our countries provided by municipalities, state agencies, NGOs and communities. We can do even better. For example, maintaining our urban parks as part of the green lungs of towns and cities, and seeking to link greenspace in urban areas along valleys and other linear routes. In the countryside, the example of the green corridors established, for example in The Netherlands, as ecological networks and places for people to use can easily be emulated elsewhere. Perhaps nowhere is the concept of providing for outdoor recreation and space for nature for the benefit of people and non-human species better achieved than along valleys. There are so many benefits to be gained: habitat for declining species, nutrient supply to water bodies, reduction in diffuse pollution from runoff from surrounding productive land, and space for cycling, horse riding, running and walking. A truly multiple purpose solution. Similar types of facilities can be provided on farms, in woodlands and along the coast. The overall motivation should be to benefit people and nature by making all of these spaces more natural in their functions and enticing for people to use.

The outdoor solution: getting everyone switched on by building the constituency

The outdoors solution: let's get everyone switched on by building the constituency



In Denmark, Frilufsrådet has the key role to play. It is a relatively unusual body in the environmental NGO movement by combining nature and outdoors activities interests within its membership and in its mission and objectives. Certainly, this is not the case in the UK, except interestingly at government agency level originally in Scotland and Wales and now also in England. There is a clear message for other bodies in other countries of the benefits of integration of functions in one organisation. In addition to the orchestrator, many other constituencies have a role to play. Government is essential by providing the policy and legal framework and some resources. Municipalities are crucial by working with and for local society and community and acting as the implementing force locally. Farmers are absolutely essential as the land holders and land managers in being persuaded of their positive role in stewarding the land and water resources for wider public benefit. Health and nature interests are also vital constituents: working together to provide the new 'pill' in the outdoors by persuading patients of the benefits of seeing and experiencing nature at first hand and being active in volunteering to make nature and the countryside better. In addition, nature bodies have a clear role in improving the functioning of the environment and ensuring that there is good knowledge of trends and their causes and the actions which need to be taken to make sure that these are on the positive course.

Frilufsrådet rising to its own challenges

In your strategic review process you have identified 7 challenges. It is important that these are recognised by all of your members and plans of action developed. Some thoughts from an outsider might prompt action in certain directions.

1. Engaging children: a good way is to link schools, especially town and city schools with rural schools to bridge the urban/rural divide. We have done this as part of our Watson Bird project in south west Scotland by linking Dalry primary in rural Galloway with Dalry Road primary in Edinburgh. Remember that it is easy for these links to be maintained through blogging.

2. Biodiversity gain: it is essential to argue for greater use of the CAP resources as incentives for nature management and outdoors activities. Use your technical knowledge to devise schemes, and then use your lobby force of 100 organisations to make these part of the revised CAP through the Danish Rural Development Programme and funded under both Pillars 1 and 2.
3. Persuading citizens to participate: gather and disseminate the information on the health benefits of visiting the outdoors and taking part in outdoor voluntary activities. Use the argument that this is enjoyment at low cost but with high health and wellbeing benefits.
4. Developing new bodies: be careful not to create yet more bodies without merging or reducing the number which already exist in what is already a very crowded field institutionally. Rather make links with other bodies where there might only one single shared issue or objective and seek to work productively with them to develop a shared common agenda.
5. Ensuring organisational modernisation: governance systems can easily become ossified and out of touch with best practice and individuals can stay in positions for far too long. So make sure that Friluftsrådet and its member bodies have modern governance structures and clear separation between member and executive roles, ensure turnover of elected members and bring in new blood.
6. Stimulating outdoor life: ensure that central government and municipalities develop accessibility networks in the outdoors, both urban and rural, and provide appropriate resources to stimulate their development and maintenance. State lotteries are often a good source of funds for this purpose. And continue to provide good information the web and through apps on phones where to go and what to do.
7. Documenting benefits: continue to work with researchers to ensure that the body of knowledge about the outdoors and the benefits of outdoor activity and the interaction with nature is developed and made accessible to everyone.

Finally, it is important not to forget the overseas outreach of bodies in the western world. It is not a luxury, but a moral imperative as well as an enlivening experience. Partners in the developing world need technical assistance, new ideas and approaches which can be translated into their social and cultural milieu, help in raising resources and most of all the confidence boost from encouragement and from interaction with bodies from well established NGO systems.