

DAMPENING THE SWINGS ROGER CROFTS

Whenever there is a crisis which affects government finances and the money in people's pockets, we hear the siren calls to stop spending money on the environment. Unfortunately, this has been a constant call over the decades since the seminal global agreements collectively known as the Rio Accords. Yet, stop/start mentality is not what nature and indeed human society needs to survive as it ignores the fact that caring for the environment is a long-term matter.

Let's face the fact that even when working with nature seems to be the order of the day, it is based on fundamental misunderstandings of the environment and the way that the processes of nature work.

There are many examples. In his recent book *A Trillion Trees* Fred Pearce provides a forensic analysis of forestry around the world. Take for example the mad dash to plant more trees with government incentives on the grounds that they will have a beneficial effect on climate change by sequestering carbon. When I travel around Scotland or read about what is happening in other parts of the world, I see a disconnect between action and nature. What species are we using? Non-native of course, whether it is eucalyptus in Portugal or Sitka spruce in Scotland, when there are plenty of native species which scientists tell us would do a better job. And incentives, favourable to commercial growers, are readily provided from government funds. Why is this? One view is that the commercial timber industry has most of the power as it creates jobs and provides useful products for the construction industry, in order to achieve house building targets and reduce timber imports. But the industrial techniques result in loss of carbon, soil and nutrients. More significantly the producers have no notion of natural capital and how they are squandering a priceless, long-term asset.

The same can be said about demands to increase local food supply through intensification and land reclamation, and to produce more energy from non-renewable sources by fracking and re-opening more fields in the North Sea. International markets and short-term shifts in approach by governments seem to rule the day.

I have a simple adage 'stop the wild oscillation of the pendulum of allocating public money'. What do I mean? And what should ecologists and environmental managers be doing about it?

We should be arguing for long-term thinking and its application to strategies and policies and their supporting financial instruments. It is therefore about us influencing resource using sectors and the government departments that sponsor them.

We need to take a forward-looking view of our world from the other end of our telescope. We should think about how we are to provide the energy we need in the most environmentally sensitive manner possible, how we should be planning the future of transportation and how we envisage feeding our ever-increasing population.

You might say we are powerless to influence these major decisions. We should extend our influence further in who we work with. Our power base has increased enormously as we have expanded as a professional membership organisation and as we have worked with those with similar objectives. We have increasingly recognised the need to have meaningful dialogues with those of opposing values and approaches. The more we work at a professional level with economists and business analysts, with development planners, and with transport engineers, for example, hopefully the more they will understand our approach and we will increase our influence professionally.

We need to take our message into government even more effectively. It is about engaging with those in the seats of real power, such as the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, political advisers and think tanks, as well as the environmental advisors.

Put simply, our role is to help to dampen the wild swings of the pendulum on environmental policy and resourcing. As a professional chartered institute, we have more power than we might image. Let's learn even more how to lever greater influence by assessing how other chartered institutes operate to promote their profession and influence the agenda. In the process we can begin to educate others on better practices favouring nature.