

Countryside Consensus

LARA's Seminar, held at the National Watersports Centre, Holme Pierrepont,
by kind permission of Sport England
2 October 1998

Programme

- 10.25 Welcome **Geoff Wilson**, Deputy Chairman, LARA
- 10.35 Speaker #1 **Bob Cartwright**, Head of Park Management
Lake District National Park Authority
[Bob's paper is reproduced here.]
- 10.50 Plenary brainstorm **What are the characteristics of a consensus process?**
[All participants suggest items which are listed here]
- 10.55 Speaker #2 **Schia Mitchell**, Project Co-ordinator,
The Environment Council
[Schia spoke to bullet points and notes, and acted as seminar co-ordinator on the day - her input is reflected in the whole programme.]
- 11.10 Workshop session #1 **Listing questions to be answered**
[Seminar participants are invited to suggest the questions they want answered. These are divided into two lists: those that the workshop groups can address (internal) and those that the speakers might address along the way. Prioritisation is done by participants sticking one coloured dot per person against the question of their choice.]
- 11.30 Workshop session #1 **Dealing with these questions**
[Each group is allocated a priority question and a second question to get some spread. If someone in a group desperately wants to deal with a different question they can ask to move. Each group table has two flip chart sheets to be written on (flat on the table). Each group spends 15 minutes listing the PROBLEMS/ CONCERNS/ ISSUES on one sheet And 15 minutes listing SOLUTIONS/ OPPORTUNITIES On another sheet (with group number at the top) These sheets are transferred across to the picture gallery.]

- 12.10 Picture gallery **Delegates' comments on the answers**
[The participants have 20 minutes to go and look at the picture gallery of the previous session. Everyone has a pad of Post-It Notes and a black felt pen. Everyone writes comments (as they feel moved) and sticks these alongside each item on the flip-chart sheets. The Post-It Note comments are shown in this report in the shaded boxes.]
- 12.30 Speaker #3 **Steve Jenkinson**, Editor of *Waymark*, journal of the Institute of Public Rights of Way Officers
[Steve's paper is reproduced here]
- 13.45 Speaker #4 **Mick Presland**, Regional Development Officer, Sports England
[Mick spoke to bullet points, reproduced here.]
- 14.00 Workshop session #2 **Feedback on the morning session**
[Things raised, or missed, by the morning sessions - more Post-It Notes, more questions.]
- 14.30 Speaker #5 **Audrey Wedderburn**, National Trails Officer, The Countryside Commission
[Audrey did a participation exercise, with visual presentation - this will not reproduce here - our apologies.]
- 14.55 Workshop session #2 **How is this relevant to me? How do I take this forward?**
[More flip-chart sheets, which are reproduced here, with additional Post-It Note comments.]
- 15.15 Plenary **Feedback from groups & questions**
- 15.30 Chairman to close **Geoff Wilson**, Deputy Chairman, LARA & Chief Executive, Auto Cycle Union

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Question/task: **BOB CARTWRIGHT'S BULLET POINTS**

INTERLOCKING INTERESTS

HONEST APPROACH

INVOLVE THOSE WHO MUST BE INVOLVED

KEEP THE INTERESTED PARTIES INFORMED

MEASURE THE SIZE OF THE TASK

ESTABLISH THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ISSUE

ENSURE THE ABILITY TO SEE THE JOB THROUGH

IDENTIFY AND EXPOSE ULTERIOR MOTIVES

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Question/task: BOB CARTWRIGHT'S PAPER

Are you an *involved* party or merely *interested*?

The countryside is made up of an enormous number of interlocking *interests* and a large proportion might be directly *involved*. It depends on the issue. The Countryside March showed how many interest groups were around; the farmers with the desperate economics of agriculture today, the hunters, the access to the countryside lobby, those against genetically modified animals and crops, those fighting the closure of village schools and shops. Many sought to influence the message about the issues that *they* felt to be at stake, but will they all be actively involved in finding a solution?

We can talk glibly about getting stakeholders together to seek consensus, we can ask them to share 'ownership' of a problem and tease out solutions to be tried and tested. We can all explore opportunities for new ways of co-operating, sit down regularly to review progress, analyse the results, isolate and remove the weaknesses and share the strengths of the lessons learned. It all sounds so grown up, mature, logical and sensible. Yet how often does it happen? How often does it *work*?

An honest approach is essential: Are the 'conservation lobby' and local authorities laying a veneer of respectability and political correctness in exploring consensus management? In their heart of hearts, do they know that what they should really do is lead from the front - if only they had the powers? Are they giving the users just enough rope to hang themselves?

Is the 'recreation lobby' ingratiating itself with the environmentalists, extracting concessions and commitments that will later be used in evidence against them if they don't get their way?

If we assume for the moment that human beings are *normally* inclined to be open, honest and constructive, the only other requirements are:

- i. Involve those who must be involved;
- ii Keep the interested parties informed at every stage in the process.

Making Consensus Work

Measure the size of the Task

Assess the number of bodies with an interest - and their potential to help, if involved genuinely and respectfully. Do not lose sight of their ability to hinder progress if ignored, insulted or derided.

Establish the importance of the issue

Be aware that sometimes the issue at stake is of only marginal interest to those who must be essential to seeking a solution. If it is of a lower priority than some other pressing matter, how **do** you involve them? The issue has to be made relevant and important, not because **we** say so, but because **they** believe it to be so.

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BOB CARTWRIGHT'S PAPER 2/2

Ensure there is the ability to see the job through

Understand that a lack of resources available within organisations will inhibit their ability to achieve effective consensus management. Authorities must make their own minds up but I do know that many bodies relying on volunteers struggle to find able people willing to negotiate effectively and offer long term commitment. Somehow we need to train people to measure the cost of the alternatives, **and** to be courageous.

The Lake District National Park Authority showed considerable foresight and courage in being willing to break new ground with the Hierarchy of Trail Routes Experiment, trusting its staff to try something different, knowing that things could go badly wrong. They believe, however, that time invested now will pay dividends in the future.

Identify and expose the ulterior motives

Be astute enough to recognise that many interested parties - and some of the involved ones - have other motives (actual or perceived) for becoming stakeholders. Campaigning bodies in the countryside have traditionally achieved so much by lobbying from a partisan viewpoint to protect what is good about the British countryside. But can they be (are you) really committed to consensus? Will those that you campaign for think of you as collaborators with the opposition? Are you undermining the principles that led them to join your organisation in the first place?

I cannot stress too greatly, from my own experience, the difficulties involved in bringing opposing groups together, keeping them together, exploding myths and dismantling prejudices. However....

Consider the Alternative

Faced with these daunting obstacles to success, resorting to “hard legal processes” and “administrative management systems” (to quote from Alan Kind’s pre-conference papers) has some appeal doesn’t it? At your feet lie clear rules of engagement, limited personal risk, and a thoroughly boring way of enduring a career in countryside management.

Some people have spent much of their professional lives, and some recreationalists have spent too much of their leisure time, in adversarial roles. Some have enjoyed it (“my second hobby is being difficult”); many have not.

If consenting adults are involved, consensus management is worth a try. Some Authorities know from bitter experience that if both sides aren’t up for it, consensus is only worth pursuing once the Secretary of State’s report has thudded onto the mat. Where there is trust and a willingness to listen, the scope for progress is immense.

Bob Cartwright is the Head of Park Management for the Lake District National Park Authority