Largescale conservation and neoliberalism: a UK perspective

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Abstract
Biodiversity conservation in the UK has until recently been focussed on relatively small scale protected sites predominantly owned by or regulated by government. However, initiatives being led by non-governmental organisations are increasingly concentrating on much larger areas of land under Large Scale Conservation areas (LCAs), and this approach has recently been endorsed and promoted in England by the government's recent Natural Environment White Paper (DEFRA, 2011). This shift in scale is a response to the limited achievements of small scale areas especially under the threat of climate change, developments of thinking in ecology supporting larger scale and better connected areas of habitat, and broader options opened out for the control of land under neoliberal governance. These LCAs are primarily led by private conservation NGOs and implemented through partnerships in a variety of types of arrangements with other private and public organisations. They now cover a substantial proportion of the country. The government's vision in the White Paper is to restore ecosystems across the country and yet its policy relies on voluntary initiatives supported by small amounts of money. Neoliberalism has opened up a much wider range of mechanisms that can be used in support of public objectives, but the actions of the LCAs are fundamentally dependent on the agri-environment funding provided under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Biodiversity conservation requires security for management in the long term, but current initiatives are vulnerable to both changes in commodity prices and to changes in the CAP. Government needs to move towards a new post-neoliberal approach that is more interventionist, implementing more formal legal agreements and land purchase to secure conservation land management against serious but uncertain threats.

Introduction

Biodiversity conservation in the UK has until recently been focussed primarily on relatively small scale protected areas. However, initiatives being led by non-governmental organisations are increasingly concentrating on large scale conservation initiatives, and this approach has recently been endorsed by the government's Natural Environment White Paper (DEFRA, 2011). This shift in scale is a response to the limited achievements of small scale areas, developments of thinking in ecology, and options opened out for the control of land under neoliberal governance. This paper briefly reviews the background to biodiversity conservation and outlines the nature of the largescale initiatives underway. We argue that while the neoliberal approach offers potential mechanisms to promote and co-ordinate land management at this scale, government needs to become more actively involved in order to achieve the vision that has been elaborated.

Postwar conservation policy

Prior to the Second World War, the lead in biodiversity conservation was taken by the private sector as either wealthy individuals or voluntary bodies, such as the Society for Promotion of Nature Reserves, gained control over sites that were recognised as holding threatened conservation values. However, since the late 1940s the great majority of the most important conservation sites have been either managed directly or regulated by government. The postwar legislation, under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, gave the state powers to own or lease land for National Nature Reserves (NNRs) or to protect Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) on private land from urban development through the Town and Country Planning system. This presumed that agricultural land management did not represent a threat to the conservation value of the designated sites. However, through the 1970s it became clear that the modernisation and intensification of agriculture was a source of environmental damage that threatened the conservation of SSSIs (Adams, 2003). This promoted a debate as to how further protection could be achieved. It is perhaps an indication of the weakening capacity of the state to intervene directly, or else the residual political power of rural landowners, especially in the House of Lords, that the outcome of that debate under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, was the introduction of environmental contracts rather than site acquisition or direct regulation. Landholders wishing to undertake potentially damaging actions were offered essentially voluntary management agreements under which they would receive compensation for the opportunity costs of any restrictions that the government conservation agency sought to introduce over their management options.

At the same time, more general support for rural environmental values has been provided through agri-environment schemes funded under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In a context where market price support was generating costly surpluses of agricultural commodities within the European Community and there was an emerging recognition that agricultural intensification was having harmful environmental impacts, there was an inevitable attraction to paying farmers to reduce their intensity of production in favour of the environment while saving government expenditure on dealing with surplus production (Baldock and Lowe, 1996). Agri-environment schemes have subsequently been introduced in various forms representing an increasing, but still modest, proportion of total agricultural policy expenditures (Hodge, 2013).

The first waves of privatisation in the 1980s prompted a debate as to whether it would be possible to sell off National Nature Reserves. The perception was that state ownership was allowing conservative managers in the public sector to stifle the potential to open up reserves for wider public use that could be liberated through private ownership. In the event, the plans for privatisation were not pursued because it was not clear that sales would generate a substantial financial return due to the liabilities incurred in the management of reserves, and because of the problem of how contracts might be written and implemented that could establish appropriate incentives for profit-maximising owners to conserve biodiversity values in the long term in the face of an uncertain ecosystem (Hodge, 1990).

The emergence of largescale initiatives

The emergence of largescale conservation areas in the 21st century reflects a response to the limits of what has been achieved under existing conservation arrangements. For instance, the Natural Environment White Paper (DEFRA 2011, p.9) reported that in England in 2008, 18 out of 42 priority habitats and 120 out of 390 priority species were in decline. There has been similar ambivalence as to the effectiveness of government expenditures on agri-environment schemes. Kleijn and Sutherland (2003) have reviewed the available evidence on European schemes and concluded that, while just over half of the studies found an increase in species richness or abundance, research design was often inadequate to provide reliable results so that they could not reach a general judgement on the effectiveness on agri-environment schemes. Kleijn et al. (2006) reviewed agri-

environmental schemes in five European countries concluding that in all countries agri-environment schemes had marginal to moderately positive effects on biodiversity but that rare species were less often benefited.

The shift of emphasis towards a larger scale has been promoted by the recognition in ecological thinking of the importance of the interconnectedness of areas of habitat at the landscape scale. From the 1960s, there was recognition of the implications of research on island biogeography (MacArthur and Wilson 1962, 1967) for small isolated areas of habitat and nature reserves. This work contributed to developments in landscape ecology (Forman and Godron 1986), and a growing literature on the connections between ecosystem fragments (Lindenmayer and Fischer 2006, Fischer and Lindenmayer 2007, Crooks and Sanjayan 2006), and the ecology of linked populations (Southwood 1977, Hanski 1999, Tilman *et al.* 1994). From this basis, the idea grew that conservation should be pursued through sets of protected areas managed as part of 'ecological networks' (e.g. Jongman 1995, Jongman and Pungetti 2004). This approach was given strong support by the Lawton committee which reported in September 2010, concluding that existing nature reserves and designated wildlife sites in England did not form a 'coherent and resilient' ecological network (Lawton *et al.* 2010, p. v). Areas rich in wildlife in England were small and widely separated ('highly fragmented') and unsuited to coping with pressures such as climate and population change and economic growth. An ecological network containing 'more, bigger, better and joined' areas of wildlife habitat was needed (p. 3). These concerns have been emphasised by the potential impact of climate change (Hopkins, et al., 2007).

The recent move to create large scale conservation areas that has emerged represents a substantial shift in conservation strategy and ambition. The lead actors in these schemes are not government, but non-governmental conservation trusts, notably the Wildlife Trusts (in their 'Living Landscapes' programme, Wildlife Trusts 2007), The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds ('Futurescapes', RSPB 2001, 2010), and the National Trust (Harvey 1995). Other organisations include the National Trust for Scotland, John Muir Trust, and Butterfly Conservation. They are partnered by government agencies, particularly Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency, and statutory undertakers such as water companies.

Some of the characteristics of these Largescale Conservation Area (LCA) initiatives have been revealed in a recent survey of over 200 such initiatives in the UK (Adams, Hodge and Elliot, 2011). The survey does not claim to be comprehensive and further work is underway to obtain more systematic data. However, it does reflect the general trends. The total identified by the organisations as being area covered by these initiatives amounts to nearly 8.5 million ha, equivalent to about one third of the total land area in the UK, although there is overlap across some areas. The range in project areas was very great: from a minimum of 500 ha to 257,000 ha, but fewer than a quarter of sites were over 20,000 ha. The mean size of all UK projects was 19,405 ha, with 83 projects over 10,000 ha and 8 projects over 100,000 ha

LCA initiatives have a variety of aims. The most commonly cited were conservation of species or habitats; all projects cited one or other of these, or both. Two thirds of project descriptions (66%) mentioned promotion of cultural ecosystem services as a project purpose (including the improvement of access to nature, recreation and health benefits, sustainable tourism, preservation of scenic beauty, culture, and natural and historic heritage). One third mentioned regulating ecosystem services (improvement of water quality and storage, flood risk management, soil erosion control, carbon storage and improvement of habitat for pollinators). Only 8% of projects listed 'provisioning ecosystem services', such as timber and sustainable local food production, as a conservation purpose, while 21% of projects aimed to 'support the local economy or employment'.

Although 18 different organisations led LCA Projects (if the 42 Wildlife Trusts are collectively considered to be one organisation), 86% of the projects are led by the just three organisations, the Wildlife Trusts (46%), Butterfly Conservation (24%), and RSPB (16%). A wide range of types of organization are involved as partners in LCAs. They include central government departments, non-departmental public bodies, local authorities, private businesses, non-profit organisations or charitable trusts, educational institutions, and utility companies. The most common partners were non-governmental organisations, with many of the lead organizations involved in LCAs collaborating with each other in complex projects with overlapping (but not identical) spatial extent and branding. Three quarters of all projects involve an approach that 'encourages landowners to manage' (74%), and only slightly fewer involve land management by the lead organisation itself (70%); many involve both (45%). While initiatives can be centred around property owned by a conservation organisation, fewer than half of the initiatives used this approach and the proportion tends to decrease as project size increases. A larger proportion of projects, around three quarters, emphasise encouraging landowners to manage their land in ways supportive of the conservation objectives.

The contributions of neoliberalism

The Natural Environment White Paper introduces initiatives aimed to address the shortcomings of the conservation efforts in England, under the headings 'reconnecting nature', 'connecting people and nature for better quality of life', and 'capturing and improving the value of nature'. It proposes substantial re-territorialisation of conservation, with expansion of the area managed for conservation, and changes to the way conservation is conceived. The key element in this new approach to conservation territorialization is the endorsement of the development of largescale conservation areas. The White Paper also gives an important role to non-state actors, thus extending the reach of conservation interventions, not through top-down designation and restriction of the freedom of private landowners or direct control of land (e.g. by purchase, lease or rent), but through the voluntary participation of non-governmental actors.

Two specific initiatives were proposed: Local Nature Partnerships (LNP) and Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs). NIAs are established by 'partnerships of local authorities, local communities and landowners, the private sector and conservation organisations', based on 'a local assessment of opportunities for restoring and connecting nature on a significant scale'. Government is also providing £7.5 million in the current Spending Review Period to support the creation of 12 initial areas. Partners are be expected to pool resources and draw together funding from a variety of sources, such as the National Lottery, environmental charities, business, local authorities and communities. Government provides support 'where joint priorities have been agreed which meet national and local needs' (DEFRA 2011, p.21). Local Nature Partnerships are established (DEFRA 2011 pp.19-20) 'where local areas wish to establish them' and aim to 'engage and win the support of the local people and communities they serve'. They will 'demonstrate local leadership', 'work in a co-operative and constructive fashion' and 'influence local decisions and promote an ecosystems approach'. Crucially, partnerships will 'co-ordinate actions across individual organisations, aligning efforts and making the best use of resources'. They will be 'recognised' by government, and be supported by a one-off fund worth £1million in 2011/12.

The development of largescale conservation areas under the leadership of non-profit organisations may seem to represent a success of neoliberalism, perhaps even free market environmentalism (Anderson and Leal, 1991). Private organisations have taken the initiative in promoting biodiversity conservation across a substantial area of private land and this approach is endorsed by government in the White Paper. The development of largescale conservation is not a consequence of direct government policy or intervention. Private, voluntary organisations have taken the lead in promoting the provision of public goods through the management of private land. They have established partnerships across private and public sector organisations through the implementation

of different forms of land ownership, formal contractual arrangements and informal agreements affecting a much larger proportion of the land area than could be affected through conventional protected area approaches. This is a long way from the rather staid and restricted approach to public regulation of small conservation sites that characterised the statist postwar nature conservation policy or the approach based purely on private landownership that preceded it.

However, there is an inconsistency at the heart of the White Paper in the government's wish to direct land use change and management in support of its vision to restore ecosystems across the country (DEFRA 2011, p. 15), but yet its unwillingness to intervene directly in order to ensure its implementation. The government emphasises the need to 'take direct action to support our most precious and endangered wildlife', but proposes the somewhat unspecific strategy of 'working together to safeguard ecosystem services and restore ecosystems through more cost-effective and integrated approaches (DEFRA 2011, p. 17) as the means for delivering it. The White Paper outlined a generalised vision of a partnership approach to achieving large scale conservation, while failing to provide direction or resources to make it happen. Yet, as the journal *Nature* noted in an editorial in 2011, also urging conservationists to 'think big' in the context of conservation in the USA, coordinating diverse governmental and private landowners and interests across large areas is a massive job (Anon 2011). The White Paper does not explore what mechanisms might be used to create incentives in order to secure substantial changes to land use and management over areas of land under different uses and ownerships for a sufficiently long period of time in order to secure substantial biodiversity and ecosystem gains, or the implications of this for relations between government and non-state actors in conservation governance and policy delivery. This is a clear illustration of Sandberg's (2007) observation on the paradox between the doctrine of a 'lighter state' and the reality of an increasingly fragmented state, in contrast to the 'new heavy scientific paradigms of sustainable nature resource management', which 'we would think would demand a sovereign state that was in full command of both its territory and its extractive sectors' (p. 614). Resolving this tension is the conservation challenge for the next phase of neoliberal environmental governance or perhaps rather for a post-neoliberal phase.

But it is too simplistic to attribute the emergence of largescale conservation areas to some spontaneous neoliberal order. A major factor has been the availability of funding provided for agri-environment schemes under the auspices of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Thus what may appear to be an independent voluntary movement is in fact substantially oiled by the old fashioned largesse of the CAP. Private landowners, both farmers and non-profit organisations have been able, indeed encouraged, to adopt less financially profitable land management approaches under various agri-environment schemes, currently Entry Level Stewardship and Higher Level Stewardship in England. This context has provided space and resources for more ambitious approaches to biodiversity conservation. We may contrast the funds being channelled to agri-environment schemes, currently over £400 million per annum in England[1], with the contribution of £2.5 million per annum pledged by government to support the creation of NIAs. The scope for land managers is further extended through the provision of the decoupled Single Farm Payment. A total of £1,860 million was paid to landholders in England in 2009 under the Single Payment Scheme (DEFRA, 2011b) for ill-defined reasons (Tangermann, 2011). Clearly government backing for conservation is dwarfed by the level of funding being allocated to rural land managers under the CAP.

Towards a post-neoliberal conservation policy

Neoliberalisation has opened up a new range of approaches towards public governance. But the breadth, complexity and inherent contradictions amongst the phenomena that have come to be embraced within its ambit have undermined the usefulness of the term itself. We have argued

[1] Natural England, *LMupdate*, April 2012.

elsewhere that the range of institutional arrangements is better termed as institutional blending and distinguished from the miasma of neoliberalism (Hodge and Adams, 2011). Neoliberalism has also been challenged more generally as a political doctrine by the global financial crisis (Peck et al., 2010). The current developments on conservation policy in the UK expose the critical distinction between means and ends in the neoliberal agenda.

The Natural Environment White Paper espouses a positive vision of conservation in its use of a positive language of success and expansion, rather than the more traditional language of threat and retreat. But at the same time, it offers very little by way of institutional innovation or new resources in order to bring the vision into reality. Its neoliberal premise appears to be that initiatives will come forward in response to the symbolism of being identified through identification an NIA or LNP or the limited funds that have been promised. The problems are, of course, that such a bottom up approach will identify areas where there are already the initiative and institutional capacity available to submit an application for the status on offer, rather than areas where there are the most valuable marginal conservation gains to be achieved from increased investment in new institutions and altered land management. It also leaves unresolved the issue as to whether and how any conservation gains that may be achieved are to be sustained in the longer term. An absence of formal legal arrangements for the implementation of altered land management means that conservation gains will be vulnerable to a changing market and agricultural policy environment. Biodiversity conservation requires long term adaptive management to restore or create new conservation values. Given the recent forecasts of forthcoming global food shortages and commodity price rises (e.g. Beddington, 2010, Godfray, et al., 2010), the opportunity costs of biodiversity conservation could see substantial rises in the coming decades, making conservation vulnerable to market forces and there is no reason to suppose that the increased spending on voluntary agri-environment schemes will be available to withstand the pressures.

There is thus a need for a postneoliberal approach towards biodiversity conservation. This would take the institutional innovations of neoliberalism that can harness market incentives, disintegration and reintegration of property rights, novel contractual arrangements and new forms of partnerships alongside a more interventionist state that is willing to promote institutional change and reallocate resources in advancement of its avowed vision. The leaders of LCAs need to be given the means to influence the variety of different land owners and managers involved in largescale initiatives with the incentives to manage land in co-ordinated and sensitive ways. This will often mean foregoing income and investing in capital initiatives. The irony is that the government is already committing public expenditure on land based sectors that could be redirected towards the fulfilment of its vision. As noted, the level of funding committed to the CAP far outweighs resources allocated to conservation. Relatively modest redirection of funds could be targeted on specific conservation values and on long term legal commitments. And the debate about CAP reform provides an opportunity for reform (Hodge, 2012), even though current proposals from the European Commission provide little encouragement that there will be radical reform (European Commission, 2011). It remains to be seen whether such a challenge can be taken up, perhaps especially in a context of a period greater public austerity.

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