



EEAC Conference 2013 : Managing ecosystems for people, nature and economy – Bangor University, Wales, UK 18 October 2013

Over 220 delegates drawn from 20 countries attended this year's annual conference, the first time that it had been held in Wales. Co-hosted by Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and the EEAC, University Vice-Chancellor Professor John Hughes provided the welcome before delivery of the host nation address by Dr. Shaun Russell, on behalf of the incapacitated Lord Dafydd Ellis-Thomas AM (former Speaker of the National Assembly for Wales and Chancellor of the University). Peter Davies, Sustainable Futures Commissioner for Wales, chaired the day's proceedings.

Lord Ellis-Thomas stressed the importance of the difficult task facing those who are working on the introduction of an ecosystems approach to our management of the natural environment. The historical invisibility of nature's contribution to mankind's well-being required addressing – and with an urgency that necessitated collaboration between organisations and nations, if we were to avoid further adverse global change. Recent developments in Wales, with the establishment of NRW as an integrated environment agency designed with the ecosystems approach in mind, gave the potential for Wales to be at the forefront of meeting this challenge – a challenge that, if not met, could have severe economic, social and environmental consequences. He identified three key themes: *turning science into policy and then action on the ground*, noting that this was the focus of today's conference; *establishing markets and monetizing ecosystem services*; and *achieving a universal understanding of what we mean by 'ecosystems' and 'ecosystem services'*. He expressed the hope that today's conference outputs would assist the work of the Environmental and Sustainability Committee of the National Assembly for Wales, a committee that he chairs.

In her keynote address Professor Jacqui McGlade, until recently the Director of the European Environment Agency and now the Director of the UNEP, gave an incisive analysis of the problems we faced, coupled with proposals for how they should be tackled, that set the tone for the day. Professor McGlade reminded us that we are in the

business of transformation; we could not continue with the recent and current social and economic cliffhangers of climate change, demographic change and economic uncertainty. The stewarding of our resources, built up through an understanding of how they are perceived both locally and internationally, would help the move to a more equitable base. Ecosystems management was fundamental to this transformation.

Describing some of the adaptation practices in Europe, she recognized that the EEAC and its member Councils brought people together from historically separate disciplines into the very necessary new partnerships. On the ground, the most successful initiatives were those that comprised of many small projects that engaged very many people, of which the Copenhagen urban flooding response was a good example.

At the policy level, Europe was committed to managing natural capital; the issue was that 'natural capital' and the associated terminology was not explicitly defined. Life cycle thinking was also clearly articulated in policy, but not often evident in practice, whilst the thematic strategy for resource efficiency was intended to help catalyse (the undefined) sustainable growth. She hoped that the integrated thinking behind these initiatives would be sustained after the next European elections and that policies would also catch-up with the evidence base; the latter was showing that our bid to decouple resource use from growth had led to an increase in imports.

The way to make the evidence base more visible was to ensure that all our data were available in every possible way, getting information in accessible formats to as many people as possible. For example, the currently widely held belief was that our growing populations should be increasingly concentrated in urban areas for resource efficiency reasons; the evidence base in fact showed that our cities have become profligate in their use of resources.

The change we were living through was not predictable, greatly reducing the potential for real long-term planning but, through ecosystem assessment locally, regionally and nationally, the difficult but essential task of planning over shorter horizons was possible.

Conference then split into two parallel sessions, in the morning covering European Policy and European Research. After a lunch break and poster session, the spotlight moved to UK Policy and UK Research. Twelve speakers at the leading edge of their fields contributed to these sessions, with conference reconvening for a closing plenary led by Professor Gareth Wyn Jones. He identified some questions for debate; the first, *How do we prioritise services?*, identified scale as an issue, as this was spatially specific and needed to involve all the people. The different scenarios for ecosystems services, with the probability of gains and losses, had to be presented in ways that made it clear how the evidence had been explored and with an audit trail of the decisions made. We were reminded that the CBD's first principle of ecosystems management was that it is a matter of societal choice. The creation of NRW was an institutional advance, but real progress depended on engagement of the other sectors. Perhaps the greatest challenge was changing the sectoral approach of governments.

Professor Jones' second question, *In valuation, how do we go beyond economics?* led to a discussion on societal values, which it was suggested were the product of a robust approach to stakeholder engagement rather than something that could be easily defined in a generic sense. Language was important; talking about the benefits people got from a place or what farmers provided from their land engaged them, whereas using terms like 'ecosystem services' did not. We must also explain why we are talking about this, linking the need for discussion to the unprecedented change that we are seeing. The ecosystems approach might or might not produce sustainable solutions, but the discussion would

expand people's horizons and their understanding of the consequences of their decisions.

The debate continued with *How do we allow for change?* and *Moving beyond designations*, contributors noting that the conversation had progressed from just protected areas to the consideration of all land. Protected areas had provided a base for experimenting with ecosystem services, but it was clear that they needed to be linked into an holistic system rather than continue to be considered as specific, spatially-separate sites. The legislation of the middle last century had dealt with nature conservation, agriculture, forestry and planning in isolation of each other. A belief had developed that, if special sites were designated, then the rest of the land could be used for whatever purpose was desired. This legislation was clearly not designed for today's integrated approach.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Jones suggested that we needed another conference *Managing the **economy** for people, nature and ecosystems!* He drew on two examples from Wales – the current opposition to windfarms from local people and the drowning of a valley 60 years ago, with the loss of a Welsh-speaking community, to provide water for Liverpool – to illustrate the challenge of deciding which ecosystem services took precedence. Even a government decision to increase the extent of native woodland in Wales had made very little progress because of a lack of interest from landowners. This surely emphasized once again that we need to engage all people, rural and urban, in this debate and our decisions.

The conference was brought to a formal close by our EEAC Chair, Professor Miranda Schreurs, who reflected on a day of engaged and wide-ranging debate before thanking the conference organizing team and co-hosts NRW and Bangor University.