

Why climate change changes everything, Professor Adrian Phillips

I am proud to be a Vice President of the CNP. That cliché about punching above its weight must have been devised with CNP in mind. Or to misquote something once said not far from here “Never in the field of conservation endeavour has so much been owed by so many to so few!” So well done CNP in convening this event this evening.

And thanks too to our sponsors, the Corporate Forum for National Parks, which brings together a group of corporations to support CNP’s work.

And thank you all for coming and especially the Minister: your attendance here in person today (as well as hosting a recent high-level seminar on climate change and national parks) is most welcome.

60 years ago, the architects of our present day national parks were drawing up legislation. They knew these marvellous landscapes needed protecting in the face of change. But they assumed – as we all did till recently – that a stable climate was a given. How quickly that comfort has gone! So far reaching will be the effects of climate change that one might say that only the geologists amongst us will find it easy to recognise the future landscapes of rural Britain.

If that sounds cataclysmic, consider what climate change will do to our parks. Don’t bet on heather moorlands surviving for a hundred years –last year’s fires in Greece show what can happen in a blazing hot, dry summer. Our woods will be badly stressed by a climate like that of Bourdeaux. Boscastle is an awful warning of what may happen to other picturesque villages in upland valleys (and there are lots of them in the parks). Soil erosion will be a serious issue in steeply sloping countryside. Our coastal parks, the Broads especially, will be at risk from storm surges and saline intrusions. Today’s patterns of farming must alter when the very climate, to which they are adapted, changes too. New and not wholly welcome pressures will come from tourists fleeing hot cities and a torrid Mediterranean. And because our parks are replete with renewable energy resources – water, wind, tidal power - they will not only be in the front line of climate change but also of society’s response to it.

All this may sound frightening, but there’s an opportunity here for the parks to gain a new, nationally significant role. For there is a growing consensus that they need to be re-thought of as models of land management and public policy suited to a world where the climate is changing and transition to a low carbon economy is an imperative. This new role can be consistent with conserving treasured, lived-in landscapes– but it does *not* mean business as usual.

What’s needed is a target of carbon neutrality for the parks, and park-by-park strategies to get there by, say, 2025. This is the date that Exmoor has set itself –why not all the parks? It can’t be done by the park authorities alone: they need allies among the local authorities, and support from the local community. But there are four areas where the park authorities, supported by government and the RDAs, can lead:

- First, we need a research on what climate change is doing, and will do, to the economies, communities, wildlife and landscapes of the parks: and we should broadcast the results to park communities, visitors and the nation at large: in short a research-based information campaign.

- Next we need incentives, regulation and advice to deliver carbon reductions. In a few years, if not now, park authorities should make carbon neutrality a planning requirement for all new buildings. And we need many more energy conservation and micro-generation projects.
- Then we require a land management and water strategy for each park, which: keeps carbon locked up in peat, values trees and uplands for their role in managing water and river flows; and protects soils.
- And finally, because change is coming in any case, we need to adapt to a new climate and rising sea levels in ways that create space for nature and still offer wild places for people to enjoy.

There is an emerging grass roots movement called “transition towns”: places like Falmouth, Stroud and Lampeter that want to lead the transition to a low carbon economy. May I suggest that the new Defra/park authority working group - which I understand has just been set up by the Minister to look at the parks and climate change - should be charged to establish the national parks as “transition countryside”, so that they can be a model for rural Britain as a whole.