

Build on countryside, urges English Nature expert

English Nature's environmental information manager, Dr Keith Porter, told the Festival of Science in Salford on 9th September that the UK's conservation regime had "largely failed", and that housing estates in the English countryside would support more wildlife than arable agriculture.



Dr Keith Porter

Describing his comments as a "bizarre self-indictment of its own failure", the Countryside Alliance said it would demand an explanation for Dr. Porter's "extraordinary claim" that the Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI**) system had failed. It also condemned his call to suburbanise swathes of the British landscape in order to provide greater artificial wildlife habitat.

Alliance chief executive, Richard Burge, described as "half-baked" Dr. Porter's proposals that large areas of farmland and countryside should be replaced with low-density housing estates merely to provide artificial cover for wildlife.

He said: "If this really does represent the Agency's level of strategic thinking, then the idea which has been mooted in Whitehall that this agency could be a candidate for becoming the Government's main implementing body for rural policy is laughable. We have one of the most bio-diverse landscapes anywhere in Europe and this is not despite, but because of, the human communities who have traditionally had to live there and work the land.

"The biggest threat to our countryside is not urbanisation, nor intensive agriculture, but suburbanisation - both of the countryside itself and its people's values. What the countryside actually needs is more high-density housing, with the crucial emphasis on affordable homes.

"One need look no further for a model for this than our traditional villages. What we need is to develop our village network and to maintain the countryside's social diversity - not to swamp our landscape under yet more suburban sprawl for a middle-class commuter monoculture."

To help you understand the Alliance's response, here are extracts from Dr Porter's address:

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"Emotive comments about concreting over the countryside and destroying our natural environment cannot apply to all the areas being considered. In many of the areas identified for housing, intensive agriculture dominates the landscape. The wildlife interest of these landscapes has already been degraded.

"We no longer have a policy of self-sufficiency in food production, neither do we have a policy of needing a strategic reserve of farmland, yet we still operate as if this were the case.

"We are not calling for unconstrained development, nor are we saying that housing development is better for the environment than sustainable managed agricultural land use. However, our agricultural policy of the last 50 years has led to major environmental damage. In some areas most of the once common wildlife has been lost through intensification of production of crops and livestock, or the specialisation of agriculture and the loss of extensive livestock or mixed farming systems.

"We are now seeing major changes in agricultural policies that will help make agriculture more sustainable. For example, the Curry Commission report on Farming and the Government response; the major reforms of the CAP agreed recently in Luxembourg and the development of the Entry Level Agri-Environment Scheme. English Nature will play a full part both in advocating a more sustainable agricultural policy and in implementing recent reforms to create a better environment that benefits people and wildlife.

"At the same time there has been a massive growth in demand for land for development in some parts of the country. We are not advocating unconstrained development. Previously developed built up areas must be recycled and developed in an economical way and we believe all development on greenfield sites needs to be planned and designed in ways which are more sustainable.

"Nature can be built into the design for new development in a multi-functional way, for example, through sustainable urban drainage and accessible greenspace. The way we use land - a precious resource - in the future needs to be much more integrated so that BOTH farming and built development are more sustainable. Through careful design and location and environmental assessment, built development can use land more efficiently and incorporate green space for people and wildlife. Farming systems must change so that they can deliver a wide range of benefits to society - including an attractive, diverse and wildlife rich countryside."

If you would like to tell us what you think, particularly in the context of development in the Dever Valley, please write to Jacqui at the address on the back page. We'll find space for some of your letters in our next issue.

Record land shortage

According to estate agents FPD Savills, new home developers have just two and a half years' supply of land with appropriate planning permission left - a record shortage. The stock of residential land banks open for development was nearly a third smaller by 2001 than in 1999. Housing starts are now at their lowest levels since the end of the Second World War.

According to some observers, the shortage may scupper the Government's newly overhauled planning regime, designed to tackle the logjams frustrating developers. John Prescott's plans to build 200,000 homes in the South East around Ashford, Milton Keynes, Stansted and Thames Gateway could well be affected.

Zurich in the black

Insurance group Zurich Financial Services, behind the threat to build a 'new town' at Micheldever Station, returned to profit in the first half of 2003 with an income of £442m against a loss of £1.3bn in the same period last year. Zurich was forced into a major cost-cutting programme, including job losses, in its attempt to return to profitability.

Electronic Newsletter

A reminder that the newsletter is now available via email in pdf format. You will need Adobe Acrobat loaded on your PC to be able to read it. This can be downloaded (free of charge) from www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html. Every newsletter sent out in this way saves The Dever Society money in printing and postage costs.

If you would like to receive the newsletter electronically, please let Jacqui know your email address.

Society plans major art event

Calling all artists, photographers and sculptors. Next autumn, we plan to mount an art event focusing on the landscape qualities of the Dever Valley, 1,000 acres of which are under threat of 'new town' development.

Our idea is for people who paint, sketch, sculpt, take photographs or are in some other way creative, spend a day recording what they can see from selected outdoor locations. Some may wish to go further and create the scene as it would appear blanketed with housing. All works will go on display at local venues yet to be determined.



Our threatened heritage

A small planning team has been set up to organise what could well be one of Hampshire's most notable events of 2004. Sponsors are being sought for cash prizes, including a first prize of £600.

Notice of AGM 2004

Plenty of notice for our 2004 AGM which will be held at 7.30pm on 26th January at the Community Hall, Micheldever Station. A copy of the AGM 2003 minutes may be downloaded from the Society's website.

Events

The summer solstice trailer ride, barbecue and overnight camp on 21st June was a great success. On a fine summer afternoon, with local farmers James Dockray and Adrian Dixon as guides, more than a hundred people piled on board two tractor-drawn trailers to take a largely off-road journey through the Dever Valley's rolling countryside. Following an evening barbecue, eleven adventurous families then camped overnight.

This year's carols in the barn will be on Monday 8th December, so put the date in your diaries. Venue to be confirmed, but probably West Stratton Farm, just off the A33 between Winchester and Basingstoke. Come and join the festive celebrations, sing a multitude of carols and enjoy some mulled wine and a barbecue. There may even be a visit from a jolly old fellow usually seen wearing a red suit!

We need your help

In recent years we have helped fight the very real threat to our countryside from Zurich Financial Services (Eagle Star) which wishes to build a new town at Micheldever Station. Until Zurich Eagle Star can be persuaded to finally abandon this plan, the Dever Society must and will continue to actively fight to prevent the needless destruction of a beautiful area, and protect what is our heritage, and that of our children and theirs too.

To continue to run a successful campaign, the Dever Society needs your support. We urge you to become a Friend of The Society, as by making a regular financial commitment, even if just a small one, you will be helping us in this very important environmental cause.

Please join the Friends and encourage your friends and family to do likewise. Contact Jacqui on 01962 774040 who will send you the form with the Gift Aid Declaration.

Forthcoming events

Carols in the Barn

Classical evening

Monday 8th December, location to be confirmed

First quarter of 2004

Why should I be a member of The Dever Society?

Area Co-ordinators are sometimes asked this question. It's not surprising is it, now that the threat of a 'new town' at Micheldever Station appears to have receded. Well, let's nail that myth straightaway.

Q: Is Eagle Star/Zurich still proposing to build on 1,000 acres at Micheldever?

A: Yes. It has not changed its mind once during the last 14 years.

Q: Why does it want to build there?

A: Because it can make an absolute fortune for its pension fund by allowing developers to build on its land.

Q: So why's it all gone quiet then?

A: As a result of pressure from the Dever Society and opposition from Hampshire County Council and Hampshire residents, Eagle Star has failed twice to get its new town proposal into the overall Structure Plan for Hampshire. The current Structure Plan, which covers the period up to 2011, does not include a new town at Micheldever. Hampshire County Council, which is responsible for developing Structure Plans, has consistently opposed Eagle Star's scheme. So has Winchester City Council, the authority responsible for individual planning applications in this area.

However, the County Council's opposition could count for nothing if the government's new planning structure is introduced.

Q: Why's that?

A: Because county councils will no longer have a say. A regional body will approve or reject major planning proposals such as this. The City Council may only be able to tinker with the detail and possibly the exact location of the new town proposal, not prevent it from being built entirely.

Q: I should continue to support the Society, then?

A: Most certainly. Believe us, the threat has not gone away and one day soon it will return.

Tell us if you move house

Following the introduction of the Welcome Packages mentioned in our last Newsletter, our membership has risen modestly to just over 8300. We expect this trend to continue as a result of events planned during the remainder of 2003 and throughout 2004.

When people move house they often forget to tell us their new address. We accept that we may be a little way down the priority list from utility companies, banks and so on, but if you are planning to move soon, please let us know. Even if your new address is outside the county, we hope that you will continue to support us by remaining a member.

If this Newsletter was addressed to the former householder, please let Jacqui Lindsay know so that she can update our records, hopefully with your details as new Society members.

More Area Co-ordinators wanted

We are trying to establish a wider hand distribution of the newsletter in Colden Common, Hursley, Littleton, Otterbourne, Owslebury, Twyford and Winchester (various districts), and need volunteer Area Co-ordinators in these areas. If you can help, please let Jacqui Lindsay know. Not only does hand distribution save us postage, but time as well.

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