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# The voluntary sector and conservation for England: Achievements, expanding roles and uncertain future

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ABSTRACT

The voluntary sector is value driven, issue focussed and considered economically efficient due to volunteer engagement and low administrative overheads in meeting conservation objectives. Independence and flexibility make it an intermediary between stakeholders and government and it is proving an effective vehicle for public engagement. NGOs are emerging as a key player in environmental action, making them a partial replacement for 'big government action' and may be heralding a 'Big Green Society'. The sector ranges in scale from small, local conservation charities to nationally important organisations. This article focuses on functionality because resource issues relate to funding, competences of personnel, continuity of mission and access to expertise, and all are affected during times of austerity. NGOs were largely task-oriented, yet they rapidly developed a campaigning role encapsulating an ever deeper role in both planning and policy formulation. Subsequently, they have developed community inclusion at the core of their function. While the portents remain good, potential problems relate to economic resources, task allocation, impacts on labour markets, interactions with the statutory sector, operational independence and to relations with local democracy. Outlined in this paper are historic functions, operation and development of the sector and perceived issues for the future.



## 1. Introduction: terms of reference

The sector of the economy described in general as 'voluntary', 'third', or comprising 'NGOs' is distinct from public or private sector operations. It arises from voluntary action instigated separately from official state or supra-national policy, and likewise from activities directed and funded by private, profit-motivated organisations. NGOs may be either run by volunteers, or rely upon them to achieve their objectives (Burek, 2008). Perceived 'virtues' of the third sector include direct and positive citizen participation, (including engagement of groups considered to be marginalised). It is observed that many participants will give their time freely and there is a relative detachment from bureaucratic ties, and a saving on public funds. These features are to be found in the 'neo-liberal agenda' and yet none exclude the sector from having close operational relations with other economic actors. While it is the function of the sector to deliver environmental goods that is at issue, operations cannot be separated from matters of governance, social inclusion or democratic accountability.

Rogers (1987) discusses the voluntary sector in context of welfare for rural communities. He finds a complicated third sector that actually has the advantage of being driven by feelings of commitment, belief and ideology and (importantly) it is motivated by altruism rather than economic gain. It is therefore useful in building trust with communities, a prerequisite for communities to adopt new practices, for example, encouraging farmers to adopt new and (hopefully) sustainable management practices. Charities are not unregulated, for at the national level regulation is achieved via registered charity status in England and Wales where organisations are accountable in terms of finance and mission to the Charity Commission (2011). For reasons of historical persistence associated with the ethic of countryside management, England represents the best opportunity internationally to explore the role of NGOs in environmental conservation. However, the country is not unique, for examples from Australia and the USA demonstrate that charitable bodies can operate successfully in other governance environments.

For England, so close are the objectives of the public and voluntary sectors that NGOs assist in delivering 'official' environmental objectives, demonstrated by them covering ecological, geomorphological and geological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (Burek, 2008). Action can be instigated by the same motivations as 'official' public policy operating in a 'pluralist' countryside governance

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**Acronyms**

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| ART | Association of Rivers Trusts, subsequently 'The Rivers Trust' |
| BTCV | British Trust for Conservation Volunteers |
| CPRE | Campaign to Protect Rural England |
| EA | Environment Agency (for England and Wales) |
| FWAG | Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group |
| HWMT | Harnham Water Meadows Trust |
| HWP | Healthy Waterways Partnership |
| NE | Natural England |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| NNR | National Nature Reserve |
| NT | National Trust |
| NWT | Norfolk Wildlife Trust |
| RSPB | Royal Society for the Protection of Birds |
| SSSI | Site of Special Scientific Interest |
| USC | Upper Susquehanna Coalition |
| WFWT | Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust |
| WT | Woodland Trust |
| WWT | Wiltshire Wildlife Trust |

environment that parallels 'state welfareism' (Sheail, 2002: 16). At the time of writing there is furthermore a perceived convergence of voluntary action and public policy. The UK Coalition Government has promoted a flagship policy called the 'Big Society', the latest manifestation of a desire to foster voluntarism and it is now explicitly linked with 'public sector reform' (Cabinet Office, 2010).

Because it empowers communities and engages the citizen in ways that hitherto may have been in the domain of the state, right-wing critics of the voluntary sector claim it interferes with market forces, while left-wing critics have seen it as variously middle-class interference or maintaining class divisions (Rogers, 1987). Positively expressed associated gains include 'social learning', 'widening participation' and 'social inclusion' as well as delivery of environmental and social goods — in a cost-effective manner. In principle, technocratic and bureaucratic overload is avoided. However, this article aims to stress current uncertainty for voluntary bodies within new emerging environmental governance.

The Latin origins of the word 'governance' suggest a notion of 'steering'. It is used in contrast to the established 'top-down' approach whereby governments drive environmental policy-making and its implementation. Governance paradigms imply 'power to' (including governmental powers to make and implement policy) rather than 'power over'. Seen in the modern, democratic context of 'civil society', the citizen is free from coercion and operates within the context of rights and responsibilities. Collective and voluntary action flourishes on the back of a (very English) tradition of philanthropy and mutual aid (Deakin, 2001 ch 1). Commentators describe governance as being achieved in a shift away from state direction towards a regulatory framework based in *hierarchies*, *networks* and *markets* that may be delivered through *communities* (Pierre and Peters, 2000 ch 1). Analysis also provides for investigation of multi-level environmental governance with policy transfer issues between institutions extending beyond peer-to-peer networks of national governments or their agencies (Benson and Jordan, 2011). In context, hierarchy may not sound so desirable but the proportionate involvement of the Charity Commission may be an appeal to 'top down regulation', and only *in extremis* so that information and support through proportional intervention would prevent serious issues arising. 'Regulation' then, as normally understood, provides an operational framework.

While it is presumed that such a helpful description is transferrable in the conservation agenda, the reality is that there has long been a normatively defined role for the voluntary sector by UK governments of both left and right; from Atlee through Thatcher to New Labour. An emerging paradigm in environmental governance is variously described as 'polycentric', 'bottom-up' and 'socially inclusive' (Cook et al., 2011). Whatever else, the voluntary sector is recognised and respected. It may be seen as operating in the kind of governance environment described above, and while answerable to state agencies, it actually functions in a distributed way being reliant on inter-personal relationships, on informal networks among the committed, or linking communities with their local environment. This is despite being *amateurish* in the sense that participation is 'for love' and often by non-experts. It is open to question as to how far it might be usefully expanded into areas hitherto the domain of public sector organisations. In many instances, particularly with long-established environmental NGOs, the outcome actually is a highly professional and adequately resourced organisation. But this takes time.

New governance has to incorporate the language characteristic of voluntary engagement. BTCV (2010a) describes 'empowerment' for local people (nurturing 'ownership' of geographic areas and management problems), 'capacity building' (for practical skills, gaining confidence and building social networks), raising quality standards, providing training opportunities or paid employment while attracting funding and achieving judicious and efficient spending. Such imperatives wrap traditional 'amateurism' in a new cloak of professionalism. There emerges, more than ever, issues for the employment for staff, accountability, continuity of schemes, governance formulation, effective task allocation and both human and financial resourcing.

Effective environmental charities/NGOs at all scales are part of the national *psyche*. It is believed that it is timely to produce an article that presents both a statement of the *status quo*, but also (importantly) a scoping study that charts potential problems ahead. There are key central governmental statements prefiguring, or promoting, the Big Society, whereby voluntary action, a perceived neo-liberal virtue, comes to provide for citizen participation in a range of arenas, including environmental conservation and replaces state action. It is a serious shortfall in information and analysis relating to this displacement that has raised questions around economic provision and governance that prompted the writing of this article, so that appropriate policies might be developed. It is observable that voluntary groups, in conservation and elsewhere, are responding in ways that include deep concern over an uncertain future in which a lot may be asked of them and where there may be clashes of interests, notably over intervention in labour markets.

There remain unclear relations for statutory roles. Questions that naturally arise are: when might a non-statutory organisation act as a statutory consultee? Who is responsible for instigating issue identification and organising stakeholder-based solutions? To what extent, and specifically how, might the sector cover a broad spectrum of issues? How (and to whom) is it accountable for its actions? How can it play a role in conflict resolution? And this presumes that existing governance structures *within the sector* are capable of rising to the occasion. Such questions will be addressed in both a historic and a functional context.

## 2. Materials and methods

The research for this article requires both historiographical methods and a policy analysis based in contemporary (and near-contemporary) information emanating from agencies, central government, and naturally the voluntary sector itself. The historical