

BIODIVERSITY – WHO HOLDS THE KEYS?



The Foundation held a lecture and dinner discussion on “Biodiversity: the Public, Government & Industry – Who Holds the Keys?” at the Royal Society on 1 December 1999. The evening was sponsored by DETR, English Nature, The Environment Agency, The Natural Environment Research Council and Thames Water. The Rt Hon The Lord Jenkin of Roding was in the chair. The speakers were Mr Graham Wynne, Chief Executive, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Dr Ed Barbier, Environment Department, University of York, and Professor John Lawton CBE FRS, Chief Executive, The Natural Environment Research Council.

Synopsis of presentation by Mr Graham Wynne

Chief Executive, RSPB

Summary: Mr Wynne said biodiversity, an important factor in our lives, was being lost in the UK. He stressed the need for industry to take action and government a strong, long- term load.

Introduction

Biodiversity is being lost in the UK. This is true of specialised habitats that are home to equally specialised species, but also of familiar and “common” wildlife countryside. Over recent decades, some of the most serious losses have come about as a consequence of the destruction of important wildlife habitats by development or agriculture, and due to the intensification of agriculture itself. In future, climate change will have a major impact on biodiversity; in fact, there is growing evidence that it is already doing so.

Biodiversity is important, for the services and products it provides as well as for the way it enriches our lives, so we need to ensure its maintenance and enhancement. Industry could play a major role in achieving this goal, although it will not unless it adopts a greener agenda. This could happen in one of three ways: industry could voluntarily take action (this could be construed as altruism, or longterm self-interest, or both!); it could act in response to consumer pressure; or it could be forced to act by government regulation or financial control. Industry does not generally act altruistically to help biodiversity – though some companies are now supporting the work of conservation organisations in modest ways.

Industry as a whole, and the agriculture sector in particular, is beginning to listen to the environmental concerns of consumers; the

GM debate and growth in organic products are the best examples of this. Here, perversely, government policy acts as an obstacle to environmentally sensitive behaviour: the entire framework within which agriculture works (the CAP) needs to be changed. Climate change is still far in the future in the public's mind, so public pressure is weaker and government needs to take a strong, long-term lead; this is difficult in the face of the increasing need for politicians to pursue policies which are popular and seen to deliver in the short-term, with the next election always just around the corner. The UK government has made a modest start on addressing emission targets, but economic instruments such as the climate change levy will inevitably need to play a larger role. Industry's reaction to date does not suggest a mature grasp of environmental or economic fundamentals.



A break in the Foundation's workshop for younger scientists and engineers held in the rooms of the Royal Academy of Engineering on the subject of biodiversity. The workshops have proved to be extremely stimulating and bring views from younger people to the Foundation's evening events.