Conserving Special Places - The Role of Environmental Impact Assessment

Since the dawn of civilization, people have identified and celebrated special places.

We do not know why our Bronze Age forebears hauled bluestones from Pembrokeshire to Salisbury Plain, but that herculean feat surely demonstrates they held the location at which Stonehenge was built to be a special place. The Ancient Greeks gave us the first known list of special places: Seven Wonders of the World, masterworks of human ingenuity and architecture. Today we recognise more special places than ever, ranging from listed buildings and scheduled monuments to sites of special scientific interest, special areas of conservation and world heritage sites.

The need to preserve many of these places has only been recognised relatively recently. Shakespeare’s last house in Stratford-on-Avon was demolished in 1759. Until the nineteenth century, the stone circle at Avebury (Wiltshire) and Hadrian’s Wall (Northumberland), both now world heritage sites, were regarded by local people as handy sources of building stone. As recently as 1994, a motorway was constructed through Twyford Down (Hampshire), now part of the South Downs National Park.

The rich floral diversity of an unimproved lowland hay meadow depends on sensitive agriculture and a suitable grazing regime. Most wildlife sites would lose their special interest if human management were to cease. In truth, every part of Britain is the product of a multi-layered historical landscape. More than anywhere else in the world, Britain excels in this integration of man and nature.

Environmental practitioners often divide environmental assets into “natural” and “cultural”. By and large these categories are subject to different designations, separate regulations and are protected by their own government agencies. Closer examination reveals that there is no neat division. Often, it is the harmonious blend of natural and human influences that lifts a special place above the ordinary. Removed from its setting, a monument would lose much of its significance. Would the Cornish tidal island of St Michael’s Mount (a site of special scientific interest) be a celebrated feature, had an abbey and castle (grade 1 listed buildings) not been built upon it? Would Wiltshire’s wooded valley from which springs Dorset’s River Stour be well known, had it not been transformed into an artificial lake surrounded by the world’s finest (Grade 1 registered) landscape gardens, Stourhead? Similarly, wildlife sites depend on management.

The intensity of land-use in Britain is the result of our island’s long history and dense population. Another consequence is our well-developed land use planning system. Its purpose is to direct appropriate development to the right places. Accordingly, special places are well protected; as well as planning consents and environmental impact assessments we have, amongst others, Listed Building Consents, Scheduled Monument Consents, Habitats Regulations Assessments and Water Framework Directive Assessments.
This amounts to a rigorous system of environmental protection, whose intentions are laudable. However, I wonder whether there is a danger of stifling creativity of the type they seek to protect. If the eighteenth century owner of Stourhead estate had required a Water Framework Directive assessment, would the famous lake and gardens ever have been built?

One of today's greatest environmental challenges is meeting future energy needs whilst reducing dependence on fossil fuels. Accommodating land-hungry renewable energy installations, such as wind farms, within our green and pleasant land sets the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions against preservation of existing landscape character. The prospect of new industrial development on rural hillsides engenders strongly-held and legitimate opinions on both sides. But turn the clock back two centuries and that is what happened when iron and steel making came to Blaenavon in South Wales; today the legacy of that industrialisation is a world heritage site.

Landscapes evolve. Habitats and gardens evolve. Even buildings evolve. There are many factors at work: ecological succession, changes in agricultural practices, competition for water, aging structures, increases in visitor numbers and not least the future effects of climate change. Successful conservation must allow for change.

Managers of the coastal environment already recognise this. Rising sea levels and coastal erosion inevitably bring coastal change. Our cherished coastal landscapes are the product of natural processes; as they were created, so they shall evolve and ultimately be destroyed. To resist this would result in ever more revetments, groynes and sea walls, which would inevitably destroy the essence of those places. We cannot preserve the status quo.

Where does this inevitability and desirability of change leave environmental practitioners? In an ever-more globalised world, many aspects of life seem to get more similar wherever you go. As this trend gathers pace, it becomes ever more important to retain local distinctiveness. That means conserving special places, whether the subject of formal designations or not. But at the same time we must embrace change and take a long view. Perhaps we should be asking: what was this place like a century ago and what will it be like a century from now? A proposed new landscape feature may seem strange now but could it be a future icon? The evolution of a habitat may lead to some species being lost at that site but will there be an overall, sustainable increase in biodiversity?

Environmental Statements are usually proficient at capturing detail but I wonder whether they always see the big picture. We must gather and analyse evidence but also raise our sights to see opportunities as well as constraints. My thesis is that as environmental practitioners, we should sometimes look beyond designations and seek the spirit of special places, whether it is cultural, ecological, scientific, aesthetic, or often a serendipitous combination. If we can conserve and enhance a sense of place, our work will have been worthwhile.

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