

Institute for

Environment
Sustainability
and
Regeneration



STAFFORDSHIRE
UNIVERSITY

Public Lectures in Regeneration 2007

The Urban Environment: Complexity and Sustainability

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Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution

Ashley Building, Leek Road campus,
Staffordshire University

Thursday 29 November 2007

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Sir John H. Lawton

John Lawton is an ecologist, entomologist, and passionate natural historian. He is currently the Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. He was Chief Executive of the Natural Environment Research Council from 1999 until 2005. John was educated at University College and the Department of Zoology in the University of Durham, where he did his PhD. From 1968 until 1971 he was Departmental Demonstrator in Animal Ecology at Oxford University and Lecturer in Zoology at St Anne's and Lincoln Colleges. He moved to the Department of Biology at the University of York in 1972 and was progressively Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader and Professor. John left York in 1989 to establish the Centre for Population Biology at Silwood Park in the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, and was Director of the CPB until 1999, when he moved to NERC.



John currently holds Honorary Professorships at ICSTM and the University of York, and has honorary degrees from the Universities of Aberdeen, Birmingham, East Anglia, Lancaster and York, and the Fellowship of ICSTM. He is an Honorary Life Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society.

John was a member of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution between 1990 and 1996. He is currently a Vice President of both the RSPB and the British Trust for Ornithology, and was Chairman of RSPB Council between 1993 and 1998. He is currently President of the British Ecological Society.

John has been awarded numerous national and international prizes for his scientific work, including the President's Gold Medal of the British Ecological Society (1987), the Society for Conservation Biology La Roe Award (2002), the Japan Prize for Conservation of Biodiversity (2004), and the Ramon Margalef Prize for Ecology and Environmental Science (2006).

He has published over 320 scientific articles and has edited/written five books.

John was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1989, awarded the CBE in 1997 and knighted in 2005.

He is married to Dot and has two grown-up children and five grandchildren. In his recreational time he enjoys bird-watching, botanising and bug-hunting, natural history photography, travel, gardening, walking and recovering from playing with his grandchildren.

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The Royal Commission:

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution is an independent standing body established in 1970 to advise the Queen, Government, Parliament and the public on environmental issues. The Commission's terms of reference as set out in its Royal Warrant are:

To advise on matters, both national and international, concerning the pollution of the environment; on the adequacy of research in this field; and the future possibilities of danger to the environment. Within this remit the Commission has freedom to consider and advise on any matter it chooses; the government may also request consideration of particular topics. The Commission has interpreted 'pollution' broadly as covering any introduction by man into the environment of substances or energy liable to cause hazards to human health, harm to living resources and ecological systems, damage to structures or amenity, or interference with legitimate uses of the environment. It now approaches issues within the framework of sustainable development.

The primary role of the Commission is to contribute to policy development in the longer term by providing an authoritative factual basis for policy-making and debate, and setting new policy agendas and priorities. This requires consideration of the economic, ethical and social aspects of an issue as well as the scientific and technological aspects. In reaching its conclusions, the Commission seeks to make a balanced assessment, taking account of the wider implications for society of any measures proposed.

(above taken from <http://www.rcep.org.uk/about.htm>)

The report: the urban environment

Background

The study examined the environment within urban areas and the wider environmental impacts of towns and cities, and considered the relationship between the urban environment and human health and wellbeing.

Who were consulted?

During the course of the study around 180 organisations and individuals submitted evidence or provided information on request. The Royal Commission hosted a seminar in Belfast to review the impact of the environment on health in urban areas. Four consultancy studies were commissioned on topics of special interest, namely: the environmental impact of housing; green infrastructure; the role of local government; and legal and planning issues. The Commission also commissioned five short literature reviews. Members of the Commission and its Secretariat made visits to Ashford, Belfast, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hull, Manchester, Milton Keynes, Poole, Poundbury, Southwark, Swansea and the Building Research Establishment at Watford. Additional information was gathered on visits to France, Denmark, Brazil and Mexico.

The issues

In the UK, over 80% of the population already lives in urban areas, and the country is going through a new phase of urban expansion and regeneration that will affect the way we live for decades to come. At the same time, the world is facing tremendous environmental challenges in terms of climate change, resource use and protection of the natural environment. Urban areas have major environmental impacts that can be felt globally, but they may also experience severe environmental problems within their own boundaries. Tackling these problems not only benefits the environment, but improves the health and wellbeing of citizens

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and should be seen as central to economic viability by making towns and cities more attractive places to live and work. Urban areas can be exciting and fulfilling places to live. Compact urban areas can also offer significant environmental advantages such as encouraging greater use of public transport and more efficient energy systems. We have a rare opportunity to make a real difference through the way we build the new developments planned in the United Kingdom. We need to act quickly or we will squander this opportunity.

Urban environmental issues owe much of their persistence to the complex and interactive nature of towns and cities, which is determined by households, communities, businesses and non-governmental and voluntary organisations, as much as by local and national government. They present a classic case of what has been described as a 'wicked problem'. However, there are many opportunities to improve towns and cities if the complexity of the forces at work within society is taken into account, and interventions made in the right ways and at the right levels.

What was recommended?

It should be a fundamental requirement of government policy that towns and cities become more environmentally sustainable and healthy places to live. However, such aspirations will not be met unless:

- urban management is guided by an explicit policy for the urban environment;
- health and wellbeing are recognised as being inextricably linked with environment;
- urban growth and renewal are planned within environmental constraints;
- the environment is placed at the heart of urban design, regeneration and management;
- there is an integrated approach to the urban environment that takes account of social, physical and economic factors;
- there are incentives to reduce negative environmental impacts; and
- knowledge, capacity and skills to reduce environmental impacts and promote health and wellbeing are increased and maintained.

To put these principles into practice we call for:

- a policy for the urban environment and its impact on health;
- an environmental contract between central and local government which also involves the private, voluntary and community sectors;
- a major programme to improve the environmental performance of new and existing buildings;
- promotion of the natural urban environment and green infrastructure through planning policy;
- driving up a range of environmental standards (through the Code for Sustainable Homes, utility pricing and incentives to reduce waste and traffic in urban areas); and
- provision of appropriate skills and information.

The above is an extract from the summary document also available at <http://www.rcep.org.uk> (published under HMSO PSI licence C2007001353)

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