

INTERNAL NOTE TO LINK MEMBERS

SNH dinner, Thursday 29 June 2017

Present Mike Cantlay, Chair SNH
 Ian Jardine, CEO SNH
 Marcus Sangster, Chair Paths for All
 Robin Harper, Chair SWT
 Colin Galbraith, Chair RSPB
 Peter Pearson, Chair JMT
 Craig MacAdam, Conservation Director, Buglife
 Helen Todd, Chair LINK

The context for the dinner was Mike Cantlay's new appointment and his desire to take soundings in a frank and informal way from the environment sector. He wanted to know what SNH was doing well and badly and what they should be looking to do in the post-Brexit world. He did say that the new board were looking to be bolder and so wanted ideas about what this would mean. There was quite a lot of fairly cryptic comments about the political context, the meaning of which I wasn't always aware of. Mike said at the end that he wanted to continue these meetings on a 6-monthly basis, and perhaps the next meeting would be able to focus more on the emerging Brexit issues.

A few points that I remember:

- There was a fair bit of discussion about deer and SNH and Roseanna's more robust approach was welcomed.
- I did say that we would be looking to SNH to stand up for environmental regulation not being watered down post Brexit but also recognised that eNGOs needed to do a lot more public engagement on this issue to demonstrate public support.
- On boldness, I said that LINK members were frustrated sometimes about the stated need for balance in government decisions, where sometimes the balance was being found between sustainable land management and illegal activity so in fact there was no room for balance. SNH should therefore not be afraid to be bold, robust and radical in terms of standing up for the environment. The FM had said in her speech that the Scottish government would be bold and radical and so ministers would be politically receptive to such a position from SNH. Mike did say that Roseanna had been very disappointed that in returning to this portfolio she was being faced with exactly the same issues, and was sorry that nothing seemed to have been resolved or moved on.
- We were asked what SNH could cut down on (though Ian pointed out that their budget had been cut from something like £68m to £47m in the past few years) and we couldn't suggest anything! However, it was pointed out that they needed to ensure that the regulatory duties that only they could perform should be their priority, but that they could gain better wins for the environment more efficiently in funding NGOs to deliver their goals.
- Mike pointed out that John Swinney had once said to him that he'd cut a bit of money from the Scottish Enterprise budget one year and nobody had protested, so he cut more from it

each year. This to me seemed to suggest that he felt SNH had been quite supine over their budget cuts in previous years and he would be more outspoken in standing up for them.

- One area it was suggested they could look into re cost cutting was the bureaucracy surrounding grant funding management. There's a huge amount of form filling to be done and yet if SNH trusted the NGOs more, they could save money in the excessive monitoring and procedures and enable more activities to be carried out. However, there was concern also expressed that by funding biodiversity projects based primarily on government objectives of increasing public engagement, etc, this meant that biological imperatives were not always the most important outcomes of a project and these were being compromised in having to work with, eg, communities in the Central Belt.
- SNH's role in supporting volunteers is hugely important in enabling more capacity in conservation efforts and needs to be better recognised (internally by SNH as well) and promoted.
- There was general support for SNH celebrating and promoting what it does more widely. I did make the point that they shouldn't be seen as being in competition with the NGO sector and Mike said he clearly recognised the different roles.
- National parks – they didn't think that more national parks was realistic at all, but I pointed out that smaller model NPs were also an option and while they might only provide a handful of government jobs, these would be particularly important in retaining young people in remote communities.
- Year of Young People flagged up as being a major driver for next year's activities. I was able to talk about Ramblers family walking groups and young walkers groups and how they are using non-traditional ways of meeting up.
- I said that outdoor recreation was being neglected, and what a shame it was that the Scottish Recreation Survey question on expenditure had been stopped as it demonstrated the economic value of recreation (and why it should be invested in), as compared to golf tourism, field sports, etc. That went down well with the former VisitScotland chair who massively promoted golf while he was in post!
- There was concern expressed that the government might be looking to merge more agencies, including SNH.
- Threats to future of NGOs – there was a sounding out about whether NGOs ought to be looking at mergers themselves, which we rebutted (on the basis that all NGOs have their own niche, sense of identity and loyalty for members). We recognised that membership levels were falling and ageing membership was an issue, but actually there's more of a change to identifying and nurturing supporters rather than members. Younger people want to support specific activities rather than signing up to the organisation straight away so this needs to be maximised.
- Craig said some very good things about the value of LINK from his perspective as providing a voice for smaller bodies, and we did thank SNH for their funding.