

SPRING CONFERENCE 2017 – EXMOOR’S NATURAL CAPITAL

A new role for Exmoor and its Natural Capital

The Government’s 25-year plan is a crucial testing ground for new approaches to decision-making regarding agriculture and the environment, delegates heard at a recent conference held in Dulverton, Exmoor. The Government’s objective is to improve the quality of the environment and see a net gain in its value over the next 25 years, and a Natural Capital Committee has been set up to advise on how this can be achieved.

Two world-leading experts, Professors Dieter Helm and Ian Bateman, Chairman and member of the Natural Capital Committee respectively, explained how it was important that the environment is recognised as part of the fabric of the economy, otherwise it would continue to decline and lose out to other pressures, such as population growth and major housebuilding programmes and other infrastructure development.

Professor Dieter Helm, in a powerful presentation, stated that natural capital was everything that nature gives us for free. Certain building blocks had to be put in place to prevent further decline in environmental assets such as wildlife, water, soils, and beauty, and instead to maintain and increase their value. Starting with the compilation of an assets register, the next step was to define assets at risk, then to decide what was needed for their capital maintenance and further enhancement, and finally to produce a balance sheet. He envisaged a new role for national parks such as Exmoor, with their many natural assets and a strong sense of a place of much beauty. Exmoor now needed to enhance its five-year Management Plan, prepare for the end of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), compile a database of its natural assets and budget for capital maintenance. ‘Crucially,’ he said ‘we must continue to build the case for enhancement so that the next generation inherits this extraordinary place.’

A detailed explanation of how nature can be valued in monetary terms was given by Professor Ian Bateman, Director of Land, Environment, Economy, Policy Institute (LEEP) at Exeter University. He emphasised that some goods and services provided by natural assets had a market value, others did not. Through measuring the value of ecosystem services in monetary terms using cost-benefit analysis, environmental economists were able to incorporate these services into economic decision-making. This allowed resources to be targeted in ways that increased their value for money.

The annual Spring Conference, a partnership between The Exmoor Society and the Exmoor National Park Authority, heard from Rob Wilson-North and Dr Helen Blackman that it was necessary to see the environment around us as a product of nature and people in a complex interaction between them. It was not always easy or necessary to encourage a divide between natural and cultural capital. Exmoor ponies and the red deer well illustrate the ways in which, seemingly, wild animals have been shaped by human activity. Rachel Thomas, Chairman of The Exmoor Society, said after the conference: ‘Exmoor is well-placed to take forward the natural capital approach with its wealth of different landscapes, of moorland, woodland, coast, rivers and valleys and farmland and the wide range of goods and services they provide. The onus is now on Exmoor to present a strong case of its overall value to people locally, nationally and for future generations.’