

ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2021 REPORT

ADA's 84th Annual Conference took place virtually, via the Microsoft Teams webinar platform, on the morning of Wednesday 10 November with 148 delegates attending from across ADA's members and associate members.

The Conference focused on three presentations from our guest speakers.

SPEAKERS

REBECCA POW MP MP FOR TAUNTON DEANE AND MINISTER FOR NATURE RECOVERY AND THE DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT [RECORDED ADDRESS]

In her speech, Rebecca Pow spoke of the importance of working together to tackle flood incidents, and building resilience for our communities through an integrated water management approach. She highlighted the government's efforts to mitigate climate change, presidency of COP26, the 25 year environment plan and their ambition to reach net zero by 2050.

Ms Pow emphasised that how we use our land and natural processes to address these challenges will be key. In particular she welcomed the work of the Lowland Agricultural Peat Task Force, chaired by Robert Caudwell, set up to consider how we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions from our farmed lowland peatlands. She explained that the Task Force was exploring new solutions, including how a range of farming practices might be carried out in wetter conditions and what landscape scale changes might be required in water management. She was very much looking forward to receiving the task force's recommendations in Summer 2022.

Ms Pow stated her pride in the government's flagship environmental legislation, summarising its key changes, such as a statutory environmental improvement plan and targets, to be consulted on early next year, and the creation of a new office for environmental protection, to hold the government and public bodies to account.

She recognised the role of ADA's members in protecting and enhancing our diverse wildlife and biodiversity. She was grateful for ADA's work on a new Environmental Good Governance Guide and the recent biodiversity survey of internal drainage boards. She said that the government "*can strengthen the duty of all public authorities to take action, to enhance biodiversity and introduced a reporting duty for designated authorities. And this will likely include internal drainage boards.*"

She also said that the government was "*supporting local choice and support for water management by removing a barrier to the creation of new internal drainage boards and the expansion of existing ones. And my officials are working with stakeholders on the secondary legislation with the aim of consulting on it as soon as possible.*"

Ms Pow said that Defra would be reviewing legislative powers, roles and responsibilities

in relation to flood and coastal erosion risk management assets, and wanted to ensure that they are clear and understood. This review would include riparian owners who have a key role and responsibility in helping protect communities to raise awareness and clarity on this and the Environment Agency would be creating a new product for risk management authorities to support effective engagement.

On surface water flooding and development control, Ms Pow reported having commissioned a new national infrastructure commission study on the effective management of surface water flooding in England and was committed to reform local flood risk management planning. Defra had published the terms of reference for a new advisory group and approached a broad range of stakeholders to join, including ADA.

Rebecca Pow concluded with a challenge for ADA members to go further in their efforts in tackling climate change and preventing biodiversity loss, and being champions for sustainable water level and flood risk management.

PROFESSOR SIR DIETER HELM [RECORDED ADDRESS]

One of Britain's foremost experts on 'green' economics, Dieter Helm is a Professor at Oxford University, a Fellow of New College, Oxford, and previously chaired the Natural Capital Committee. In his most recent book, *Net Zero*, he addresses the action needed to take to tackle the climate emergency.

In his presentation, Professor Helm recognised that our water systems, catchments, coastlines, and drainage

arrangements have all been manmade, and man-managed for a very long time, but are built upon the consequences of billions of years of natural processes. This highlighted how we are all leaseholders of our landscape and not freeholders, and our responsibilities are to maintain and enhance those natural assets for future generations. He said we should be looking at this challenge in terms of assets - At what natural capital assets there are, what manmade capital assets there are, and what human capital assets there are - and then make sure that we and future generations end up with a set of assets at least as good as the ones we inherited.

For drainage and water systems, he said it was enormously practical to think in this way, and that river catchments gave you an integrated ecosystem approach to assessing these systems, *"because once you start looking at the world through the lens of assets, rather than through the lens of utility, you start to think about the natural capital that we have and what we have to do to maintain those natural capital and pass them on to future generations."*

He equated our natural environment to being natural capital assets in perpetuity, but in need of maintenance by us to ensure this. He argued therefore that capital maintenance of these assets comes first before moving on to enhancements. Here he said that we need to look at the effects of those enhancements across the system as a whole, so that the next generation gets something better than we have currently got.

He strongly argued against exporting our carbon costs around the world, and that we

must make sure that our carbon footprint includes all the stuff that we import.

Around water management, he highlighted that a number of the things that you might do to reduce carbon emissions and increase sequestration, turn out to be things that provide multiple benefits and are good for biodiversity, such as planting trees along riverbanks [in the right places], which may improve the water quality of those rivers, slow down flows, and improve flood management.

Professor Helm concluded that when putting together our future business plans and thinking about carbon, we should first consider the baseline of those systems and assets (natural, manmade and human), then recognise the capital maintenance they need, before looking at the sequestration, offsets and enhancements that we could make to improve them for future generations, and the multifunctionality that those enhancements could bring to other natural capital.

LORD DE RAMSEY
PRESIDENT, ADA
[VALEDICTORY ADDRESS]

Ladies and gentlemen – good morning. This is my last AGM as your President – it has been an honour for two generations of my family to have served you.

On a farm visit in the West Country, I invited the group to ask questions and not to worry if they felt it might be a stupid one because it was probably just the one that no-one else dared ask. “I think I may have got the stupid question” one visitor said – “Why do you farmers always put the

gateway in the muddiest part of the field?”

However, if you think about it, this gives practical people like us an enormous advantage which we must not waste – more of that later.

There are two iconic mementoes on my desk. One is a brightly painted piece of concrete from the Berlin Wall – I showed it to one of our local builders who was impressed by the quality of East German concrete. We went to Berlin two years ago and were taken aback by still unrestored bomb sites, by Putin’s KGB house and by distressing holocaust reminders. I recommend a visit – the evidence between east and west is still obvious to see as West Berlin still sneers at the East.

The second is my father’s World War 2 dog tag with his name on it - one side in English and on the other in Japanese. In 1962, not that long after the end of the war in the Far East, I went to Singapore with my father and visited the derelict camp site at Changi where he had been imprisoned for three and a half years. Standing in the dust and destruction of a civilian gaol built for 900 which was crammed with 10,000 prisoners of war he said “I ran the camp piggery for the sick in the hospital and when we killed a pig, I got some of the blood which helped to keep me alive. Unless you have actually starved, you can have no idea what starvation is like.” That is why every one of China’s five year plans starts with food, currently something that does not headline for Defra, or Dieter Helm.

No-one is imagining self-sufficiency, but we must retain our skills and continue to

develop our knowledge and technology for the long term. To lose them would be a mistake, because we have seen where technology can take us. Do not forget the results of Norman Borlaug's green revolution, which reformed India's wheat and rice crop production and saved the country from starvation. That is the sort of brilliant research that will deliver the technology we need for zero carbon farming. We are extremely fortunate that we have remarkable research stations such as John Innes and Rothamsted – the oldest research station in the world. Both of them are owned by charities who think long term as opposed to politicians who can only think until the next election. Both would have been privatised and sold if they had been in the public sector.

Rothamsted at Harpenden has Broad Balk and Park Grass fields where the research plots were laid out in 1862. They are even more relevant today thanks to 160 years of research. There is a childish belief in the media promoted by some NGOs that if we wind the clock back, nature will solve all. Let me give you an example of why we need solutions based on sound science. After the War, road transport increased from five million to over 40 million vehicles. Nitrogen Oxides from their exhausts raised the deposition of N on Park Grass and shrank the diversity of plants. In the late 1980s, the losses plateaued and then started to reverse, restoring some of the lost species. What caused the change – catalytic converters. We had caused the problem with our selfish technology and we reversed it the same way. What we need is sound science, not wishful thinking and greenwash.

Over the centuries, the changes in land use have been triggered by the rise and fall in population - we did not need much arable land after the Great Famine of 1315-17 and the Black Death later that century when the population halved. Self sufficiency was only needed during the Napoleonic Wars and the world wars of the 20th Century, with the result that some quite unsuitable land was ploughed out of grass – for instance Knepp Castle in Sussex with its heavy Wealden clay was ploughed up in the War; but now has had to resort to so called "Wilding" in order to survive out of tourism or even show business.

I said earlier that in these troubled times, those of us with practical expertise have an advantage. The recent changes in the politics of agriculture and the countryside have required a large intake of intelligent young graduates to Defra, fresh from university and strangers to the farming world, but well versed in theory. Some have even accepted the myth that we only have 40 harvests left. There we can help them. They can call on the help and practical knowledge of ADA and of our Chairman when it comes to soils and water.

I am lucky enough to have spent most of my life in one of the most beautiful countries in the world and I do not recognise the inaccurate description of its desolation by some authors. From 1086 we have inherited that extraordinary record called the Domesday Book. The tree cover at the Conquest was 15% - sinking to 12% by the 19th Century. What is it today? – 15%, but much less diverse because of the planting of conifers. The majority of the damage to our ancient countryside and its biodiversity has

been done since the industrial revolution and the enormous rise in population whose damage is increased by the 40+ million vehicles and by our pollution such as the run off of sewerage from water companies. Since privatisation the water companies are easy targets for anti-capitalist programmes like Panorama. They blame greedy shareholders for pollution when it is the organs of the state - the Treasury and Ofwat - who are refusing to let them spend the funds to keep sewerage out of rivers. In case you think I am an apologist for the companies, you need to realise that when I was Environment Agency Chairman, we budgeted for £12.5 billion to spent by the companies on the environment with their support. What happened? In spite of O-Jags Prescott's attempts, Gordon Brown and Ofwat cut it down to £3.5 billion and now we have Conservative MPs throwing pollution clauses out of the Environment Bill. Populism and the short term rules the day and they dare to preach greenwash to us about the natural world?

Do not forget that Ofwat's remit is to keep water charges low, so why build reservoirs when we can rob precious chalk aquifers at half the cost.

So what is ADA's role? We must build on the sound science data to protect our countryside and river banks. Our countryside is made of land and water so, of course, agriculture and the natural world are inseparable. We must match that science with our practical experiences gained over centuries and then we will be proud of what

we achieve together. Not least because there is also a spiritual side to working for the long term of the natural world.

Do not allow yourself to lose heart and despair even though we have to admit we are all in the gutter – some of us are looking at the stars!

OPEN DISCUSSION FORUM

A panel of Innes Thomson (ADA), Catherine Wright (Environment Agency), and Will Harrington (Defra), chaired by Robert Caudwell (ADA) answered 29 questions from delegates covering a wide range of topics including: reducing sewage releases and stormwater overflows from sewage treatment works, ADA's response to the consultation regarding the release of beavers in England, the adoption of 'Shoreline Management Plans' into planning regulations, managing increasing flood risk to hospitals, the use of biodiesel such as HVO by RMAs and contractors, the need for multi-year revenue maintenance settlements for the Environment Agency to assist IDBs working under PSCAs to invest in long-term resources, solutions to phosphate pollution and the consequential planning issues, finding the balance between capacity and conveyance and attenuation and habitat enhancement, seeking more effort to ensure developers provide effective sustainable development and SuDS, recognising the ecological value of IDB watercourses, making use of green finance to fund improvements to watercourses, and the prioritisation of main river maintenance, particularly within rural catchments.