

The Linnean Society and the National Trust

The National Trust Council comprises 52 members, half of whom are elected. The other 26 are nominated by appropriate organisations, including the Linnean Society. At the NT's 2006 AGM in November, this arrangement was ended when the list of nominating bodies was put before the membership for approval of modifications recommended by a special Nominations Committee. There were nearly 5,000 votes cast in support of the Linnean Society (well done!), but these were swamped by the 20,000 or so votes that were cast by members simply ticking a box to accept the list of 26 bodies recommended by the Nominations Committee. Other non-recommended bodies fared even worse.

Under the present rules limiting terms of office for Council members, my own period as the Linn's nominee ends in June 2007. So I am not defending a personal position. The correct administrative procedures were followed, although the Council did not accept the original list of suggestions made by its Nominations Committee, who were asked to reconsider. As a result, the RHS was reinstated, although not the Linnean Society. The Committee had sought to broaden the expertise of Council and also to create a 'balanced slate' of suggestions. The Linn lost out, despite vigorous protests.

The Linnean Society was one of the organisations whose help was sought when the National Trust was first established. Beatrix Potter/ Mrs Heelis, one of the three prime movers in the foundation of the NT, was a keen mycologist and personally associated with the Linnean Society, and it was represented on the NT's governing body when that was set up in 1895. The Linnean was thus one of the Founder Members of the National Trust and may well have been the last remaining one. Now, after 112 years of service to the NT, the Linnean Society has been eliminated from the Council without any comment being made during that process concerning the historical background or historic change. This prompts the wicked thought that perhaps History doesn't Matter after all, contrary to the NT's recent very successful heritage campaign slogan.

The purpose of having Nominating Bodies is to ensure that the Trust has access to a broad range of expertise and experience that might not otherwise be available through the process of electing members. In my view, the most important lesson to be learned from the present situation (apart from the fact that the Linnean Society and what it represents is not well or widely understood) concerns the need to ensure a balanced and capable Council membership for the NT. The Trust operates in a world that is increasingly dominated by scientific and technical issues. It needs scientifically competent Council members (from whom are appointed most of the Board of Trustees). For example, it needs people who know what eutrophication is and why it might cost the Trust millions of pounds (especially following the imminent implementation of the Water Framework Directive). It needs people who can understand a statistically based argument, and who can challenge one that has no statistical substantiation. Yet, year after year, such people fail to stand for personal election to the other 26 seats on Council. Those who put themselves forward from among the membership rarely offer scientific expertise. Owning land or enjoying the countryside are not substitute qualifications and do not offer an alternative way of thinking to the many BAs and arts-based people that are attracted to the Trust.

The Council includes excellent and highly intelligent people, many of whom can certainly understand a scientific case if it is explained to them. Such explanations are usually provided, eloquently and professionally, by NT staff. But the principle of external scrutiny is undermined if Council members are not able to appraise an argument for themselves and reach their own independent conclusion- to support the staff or challenge them as appropriate. Since suitably qualified people rarely stand for election to Council, the list of nominating bodies should be arranged to ensure that balance is maintained and full competence is represented among the Council membership. This didn't happen in 2006, when efforts were made instead to ensure the nominating bodies formed a balanced list, to include a broader scope and without a full assessment of the competences represented among existing Council members. This is why the Linn was dropped from the list and also why it was not replaced by another obviously scientifically based organisation.

All is not lost. The BES is still there, and so are the Wildlife Trusts, but professionally based scientists are not very evident among the Trust's 52 Council members. Inexplicably, the RSPB declined to be considered as a nominating body and my letter asking for that decision to be reconsidered never received a reply. The less that biology, and science in general, is represented on Council, the more likely it is that the situation will be perpetuated and even worsened, especially as the list of nominating bodies is not now due for revision until 2012.

I believe there are three lessons to be learned from all this:

1. The NT should ensure that its list of nominating bodies is used explicitly to fill gaps in scientific and technical expertise that are not being filled by ordinary NT members who stand for election. I shall be pressing for this.
2. Members of the NT, including a lot of Linnean Society members, biologists and others scientists and technical specialists (including soil scientists, geologists, IT specialists, ecologists, meteorologists) must put themselves forward for election to Council in a personal capacity. My experience suggests that it is thoroughly worthwhile, so get on and do it!
3. The Linnean Society needs to raise its public profile as the World's oldest scientifically based forum for biodiversity expertise.

I was very flattered to be invited to follow the impressive footsteps of my predecessor as Linnean Nominee, the late Professor Bob Savage. He was a very civilised and likeable man and I soon discovered that he had been a very popular member of Council, for 17 years. It was made plain to me, in no uncertain terms, that I had a tough act to follow! My nine years have been enormously interesting and enjoyable and I have met some admirable and highly intelligent people whose path I would not otherwise have crossed. Council membership has also enlarged my own experience and knowledge in many useful and interesting ways. At a personal level, I feel my time has not been wasted, far from it. I am also happy that I have fulfilled the intended role of the Linnean's Nominee in providing biological input to discussions and decision making, perhaps most significantly in the controversial area of deer hunting, where some objective science was particularly needed. There have also been important discussions about the future of farming (especially in the uplands), climate change issues, the management of SSSIs and the policy of allowing natural processes to take place in respect of coastal re-alignment.

Although Council members are not supposed to campaign for any particular cause, throughout my time I made no secret of the fact that, in my view, the arguments that justify the preservation of our cultural heritage should apply equally and exactly to the conservation of our natural heritage. I believe my repeated challenges to assumptions helped to develop a more balanced approach to the NT's policies and actions. Being an impatient fellow, I regret that there are not greater signs of having had some effect. However, getting the NT to change course is like trying to steer a supertanker. Perhaps that's as it should be. The National Trust exists to preserve our heritage 'forever and for everyone'. It must not be hijacked by particular interest groups (even our own!), or steered this way and that according to whims and changes in public attitudes.

I am happy that wildlife issues and environmental conservation are now high on the NT's agenda, more than in the past, and rightly so. Because of its huge landholding, the NT (Britain's biggest private landowner) has huge responsibilities for wildlife conservation, many of them constituting legal obligations (e.g. in respect of SSIs, SACs, NNRs etc). It owns seabird colonies of international importance, most of our key butterfly sites, more red squirrels than anyone else, 700 miles of coastline, historic parklands and horticultural sites. Nearly half of Britain's water falls on or flows through National Trust land, much of which lies in the vital upland catchments. I am disappointed that the public perception of the NT remains rather one-dimensional, focussed on stately homes, yet between a third and a half of its annual expenditure goes on the countryside and open spaces. That's upwards of £100,000,000 per year, probably more than all the wildlife conservation bodies put together. It's sad that it does not get appropriate public recognition for this huge commitment to wildlife and the environment. Sadder still if its Council and Trustees are short of people who can proclaim this at frequent intervals, based on personal and professional experience.

Pat Morris
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