
British Estuary Conservation Groups

What are they and what is their role ?

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In early February 1990, The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), Slimbridge, hosted the first ever gathering of Britain's Estuary Conservation Groups (ECGs). The forum, jointly organized by the WWT and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), provided the opportunity for already established ECGs to share their experiences with other interested parties, and allowed the future role of such groups to be discussed. The meeting was attended by over 60 delegates.

After a brief introduction and outline of the aims of the forum from Dr. Myrfyn Owen (WWT), Dr. Mike Pienkowski of the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) provided a brief overview of the national importance of estuaries and the policies that exist to conserve them. It was alarming to hear that despite the existence of international designations to protect important sites, for example Ramsar site and Special Protection Area (SPA) status, very few areas have yet been designated. For example, of the 215 proposed SPAs in Britain just 33 have been formally recognized as

such by the UK government to date. Dr. Pienkowski stressed the complex nature of estuaries and suggested that assessments made by simply ranking sites in terms of the numbers of birds present were too simplistic; many more factors, for example the role played by particular sites during cold weather, should be taken into account. Furthermore, the importance of whole (intact) sites should be emphasized more strongly; the continual erosion by development of small pieces of estuarine habitat is far more significant to birds than is currently perceived, he warned.

Following this brief overview of the national situation, Dr. David Norman, chairman of the Mersey Estuary Conservation Group, enlightened the forum on his views of what comprised an ECG and what role such groups had to play. He defined an ECG as "a group of environmentally-minded organisations and individuals who are interested in an estuary, its flora and fauna, and who are concerned with anything which may affect the natural environment in and around the estuary". Existing ECGs are attended by representatives of both national

and local conservation bodies, by wildfowlers, planners, borough councillors, academics and others with a particular interest in the site. They provide the opportunity to talk, disseminate information and keep in touch with the broader aspects of estuarine ecology and conservation. There are currently just four such groups in Britain concerned with some of the country's largest sites: the Severn, Humber, Mersey and Dee. Through their activities, ECGs are able to increase public and political awareness of estuaries and, where appropriate, voice concern about particular threats. In their members ECGs hold much detailed, local knowledge that can be beneficial to the national conservation bodies in preparing to oppose a particular development. Dr. Norman reassured us: ECGs do have a vital role to play!

To illustrate a particular example of the united opposition from ECGs and the national conservation organizations, and to focus delegates' minds on procedures and likely pitfalls/difficulties, Phil Rothwell of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds provided



details from a particular case study, Cardiff Bay. Rothwell outlined the history of the Private Bill that has recently been with the British Parliament, and highlighted the lessons learnt from this debate relative to the role of ECGs. He identified the following roles as priority objectives for ECGs in the future:

- they should maintain as much local, biological, expertise within their group as possible;
- they should maintain contact with local planners, councillors and so on;
- they should strive to educate and inform the local community both before and during any threats to the site;
- they should stimulate public protest to adverse development proposals and use all press and publicity channels effectively, whenever the opportunity arises;
- they should maintain and further create links with other like-minded local groups, preferably before threats arise.

A united opposition to a development threat carries more political clout than diffuse and uncoordinated objections. These were the recommendations to ECGs arising from experiences in the Cardiff Bay debate.

After lunch, Dr. Tony Laws (BASC) introduced the afternoon's programme. This

was largely a series of workshops, running concurrently, in which interested parties could focus their minds specifically on one aspect of the work of ECGs. The workshops covered five topics: priorities and targetting for ECGs, public relations and public awareness, parliamentary procedures, influencing decision-makers and motivation/organization. Each was chaired by an individual with expertise in the relevant field, notes of the main suggestions of each working group were taken, and these were reported back to the whole forum in the penultimate session of the day. These workshops proved to be very valuable and many useful ideas and suggestions were shared.

To close the forum, David Norman was given the difficult task of summing-up the day's discussions. His message was simple and to the point: "ECGs, in whatever form, are a good thing. They provide a forum for research and a pool of local knowledge. ECGs should speak up for conservation and all participants should be proud of their estuary". I couldn't agree more!

All in all, the ECG forum proved to be very enjoyable, very interactive and most useful. I certainly learnt a lot and would lend support to the work of ECGs in any way that I can. It was suggested that this should represent the first of a series of such meetings, a viewpoint that I share. Thanks must go to the confer-

ence organizers, to the speakers and to all the participants. Congratulations to these people for making this meeting such a success.

Full proceedings of the ECG forum will be available shortly, and a ECG Handbook is also to be produced. For further information contact *Jane Claricoates, Developments Officer, The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, GL2 7BT.*

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