

Comment

Spread of the Noosphere

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Can we ever control the ever-expanding realm of human influence? The spread of civilisation and technology (sometimes referred to as the technosphere) has been phenomenal, but even more pervasive than this has been the ever-widening sphere of influence of the human mind – the so-called noosphere (from Greek 'noos' = 'mind') of Vernadsky (1945). Vladimir Vernadsky predicted that eventually all aspects of the biosphere would come under the influence of the mind of man. He described this as the last of many stages in the evolution of the biosphere. For those of us interested in preserving part of the planet free of human influence, this comes as quite a depressing prospect. But clearly this is becoming a reality. In Britain, for example, we know that even the remotest parts of our countryside have been subjected to some form of human control.

It seems to me that we can stem this flow of human influence only by actively preventing it. A tall order, you might say, and even with popular agreement it could be one of the biggest challenges facing the human species. I say this because gaining influence over the environment is one of the reasons why we have become so successful as a species, and the desire to expand our control is no doubt deeply rooted in our psyche.

Even our current conservation legislation incorporates elements of noosphere expansion. For example, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, the Government has a duty to notify as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) any land which in its opinion is of special interest by reason of any of its flora, fauna, or geological or physiographical features. So, you may ask, what is the problem with that? The problem is that we are then required by law to maintain those features. In other words, we are required to set up control mechanisms in order to prevent any natural development that may alter the species composition of these features, and essentially this means that many of the best wildlife sites in Britain are now frozen in time. It is ironic that even our so-called Biosphere Reserves (an international designation developed by UNESCO), in which we endeavour to have protected areas and surrounding lands that are managed to combine both conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, are also about retaining control of the environment. By rights we should be calling these 'Noosphere Reserves', although there may be a degree of non-intervention in their core areas. Our National Parks are also largely driven by economic forces, leaving little room for 'wilderness'.

What we need is a more flexible conservation charter, with legislation that not only protects sites of

conservation interest, but also incorporates the legal mechanisms for allowing unhindered natural succession to take place where this is seen to be appropriate. In countries, such as the United States and Russia, where significant elements of wilderness are still retained, allowing natural succession is seen as a crucial part of the conservation ethic. In fact, the United States' Wilderness Act forbids any action that could inhibit natural succession, and states that all plant communities in wilderness areas should reflect those that would exist in the absence of human impact. The US defines wilderness as land that generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable. Unfortunately, we now seem to be bereft of such land in the UK and have nothing that could be remotely described as wilderness.

I would argue therefore that one of our primary conservation objectives should be to reduce Britain's noosphere and to regain an element of wilderness. As part of that process, I should like to see the implementation of something akin to the 'wildlands project' of North America. This was established about ten years ago, with the aim of restoring the natural heritage of North America by allowing the natural recovery ('rewilding') of whole ecosystems along corridors connecting existing wilderness areas. Much work has now been done to identify where these corridors could best be established, but this is an extremely ambitious project and may work only in areas where the current human population is very small.

In the UK, we could initiate a far less ambitious programme of simply trying to establish, say, two or three areas of wilderness with the aim of removing as much human influence as possible. Clearly, this is not something that could be done overnight, and would no doubt involve a long consultation process, and even after areas were officially selected it would take decades or even centuries for their vegetation to reach maturity. On the other hand, this is nothing when measured against the millions of years of evolution it has taken to develop such communities. A much more ambitious programme would be to establish a series of 'natural climax' reserves with the aim of eventually gaining full representation of all of our natural-climax communities (see for example Rhind 2004).

All this may sound overly ambitious. Nevertheless, if we do not embark upon projects such as these, I think that we shall be doing a disservice to future generations.

References

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Acknowledgements

I should like to acknowledge with thanks Dr Mark Fisher, who provided some of the inspiration for this article.

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