



Parliamentary and Scientific Committee



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Natural Capital

On the eve of the United Nations ‘World Oceans Day’, we heard from four expert speakers about ‘natural capital’, a way of quantifying the natural resources available to us. Prof. Nicola Beaumont, the Head of Science—Sea and Society at Plymouth Marine Laboratory, gave us the what, why and how of natural capital. Prof. Ian Bateman OBE from the University of Exeter explained how the natural capital approach is being used in policy making, followed by Dr Stephen Watson from the Plymouth Marine Laboratory who discussed marine natural capital and how policy making is taking this into account. Lastly, we heard from Dr Vicky Morgan, the Leader for Marine Natural Capital at JNCC, who gave many examples of how natural capital has been used successfully in conversation projects. The Q&A session at the end focused mostly on how this approach can be used in policy making, and also why the speakers felt the tide is turning with regards to climate action.

The term ‘natural capital’ can appear far more complicated than it actually is. As we heard from Prof. Beaumont, it’s simply a way of describing stocks of natural assets. These assets can be commodities in of themselves, like timber, but they are also services which the natural world can provide, such as pollination of crops. As a general rule, we look for three things when discussing natural capital; the natural capital itself, the ecosystem in which it flows to us, and the benefits and wellbeing it provides.

The systems in which these mechanisms work are incredibly complex, and there are many feedback loops running through them. As with ecosystems in general a small change can have a big impact, so it’s vital that we are able to track of these changes when exploiting natural assets. Prof. Bateman described how the LEEP Natural Environmental

Valuation Online tool allows policy makers to see how changing policy will affect resources in a given area, which will allow for a far more accurate account of these complex systems. We heard from all speakers that taking an account of these natural resources and services will be absolutely crucial to building sustainable businesses, policies, and societies. When we break it down all forms of capital are fundamentally reliant on natural capital, so policy must take these mechanisms into account.

Dr Watson explained the importance of marine natural capital, which is estimated to account for two thirds of the global natural capital. Many services are reliant on this natural capital, but we are seeing a great loss in marine biodiversity which endangers these mechanisms. There have been many success stories with accounting for marine natural capital. For example, scientists are looking at The Solent Marine Sites to see how we can measure the amount of carbon which is stored in marine ecosystems (blue carbon), which will be vital for our defence against climate change.

The natural capital approach is absolutely vital for conservation and our environmental policies, since -as Dr Morgan explained to us- the best policies have always been about people and places. Natural capital shows us that we cannot consider there to be a trade-off between the economy and the environment , since the first is reliant on the second.

Alfie Hoar

P&SC Discussion Meeting, ‘Natural Capital’

7th June 2021