

UK environment

Conservation plans go awry

THE Wildlife and Countryside Act, introduced two years ago, has run into serious trouble. British conservation groups are complaining that the act fails to provide adequate protection to places designated by the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

The patchwork of 4,000 SSSIs in Britain is intended to be a key element of national conservation strategy, and owners of SSSIs are required to consult with NCC before undertaking any "potentially damaging operations" on them. But the 1981 act obliged NCC to "renotify" all owners and occupiers of existing SSSIs, specifying what operations might be potentially damaging. This process usually entails resurveying and has been averaging 20 man-days per site, with the result that NCC cannot comply with its obligations. Renotification is unlikely to be completed before the end of 1986. Earlier this year, a review of NCC by the Rayner unit, the government's cost-cutting team, reached the unusual conclusion that NCC needed more staff to carry out the task.

The snag is that until SSSIs have been renotified, they have no statutory protection from their owners. Many of NCC's manpower resources have therefore been diverted from designating new SSSIs to coping with threats to existing SSSIs.

Apart from the problems caused by the delay in notifying owners, critics of the act say that the controls granted after notification are also inadequate. When an owner notifies NCC of plans to carry out a "potentially damaging operation", NCC has three months in which to persuade him to modify the plan. If persuasion does not work, NCC may enter into a management agreement — an annual payment from NCC to compensate for loss of profits.

One consequence is that commercial companies have sprung up specializing in the purchase of SSSIs, opting for management agreements (and compensation) when development is denied. In one management agreement, NCC is negotiating to pay £20,000 a year for the next 60 years to the Marquess of Salisbury in return for his agreeing not to replant an ancient deciduous wood with conifers. The public is not at present allowed access to the site.

Although if an owner of an SSSI refuses to cooperate by means of a management agreement, NCC can as a last resort apply to the Secretary of State for the Environment for an order prohibiting the proposed development, these appeals (usually granted) are also a cause for complaint.

One recent case in Yorkshire exposed serious differences between the department and NCC. The underlying issues are the criteria for designation. The NCC criteria include scientific value, more subjective amenity value and consider-

ations such as the spacing of sites at suitable intervals so as to provide an adequate habitat for many less common species. NCC's request that the Yorkshire site should be protected was turned down by the Secretary of State on the grounds that the national importance of the site had not been demonstrated. The crisis may be averted, as an alternative site for development has been found. But the underlying issue has still not been resolved between NCC and the department.

NCC's estimates of the alarming rate of loss of wildlife habitats since 1949 have been publicized by Wildlife Link, a coordinating body for conservation groups. Ninety-five per cent of lowland rich herb meadows, 80 per cent of chalk and limestone grassland and 70 per cent of

acidic heaths head the league table of habitat losses. Dr Derek Ratcliffe, NCC's chief scientist, says in a draft document that "the rate and scale of loss is so alarming that the first objective of conservation must be to stem the tide".

Government ministers have recently defended the existing act, saying that voluntary agreements avoid the "conflict and bitterness" that blanket protection would entail, while NCC describes owners who have refused to cooperate on conservation agreements as "isolated mavericks". The question now is whether the isolated mavericks will become the norm. Despite the ministers' assurances, there is some serious concern in government circles about whether the act will provide the protection that the public demands. But another act so soon after the last one would be unlikely, and it will be at least another 18 months before a judgement is made.

Tim Beardsley

Finnish environment

New ministry's teething problems

FINLAND is planning a massive modification of its environmental legislation over the next ten years. At present, the laws of environmental protection are a confused collection of *ad hoc* acts introduced piecemeal to cope with specific problems. The need for a legislative review was underlined by the creation of a new environmental ministry on 1 October 1983 to deal with problems of housing and land use as well as of environmental protection.

The resettlement of upwards of 250,000 inhabitants of the territories ceded to the Soviet Union after the Second World War and the relatively late industrialization of the country (which led to the movement of over a million people from rural to urban areas) have put considerable pressure on housing and land use. More recently, there has been growing anxiety about acid rain. There is strong evidence that the acid rain acts synergistically with extremely low winter temperatures to cause considerable damage to the conifer forests which are Finland's major natural resource and ultimately the source of 45 per cent of Finnish exports. Aerial spraying with lime is impracticable in Finland — the areas involved are too great, there is little indigenous limestone and the cost is prohibitive. A recent survey has shown that one third of the 300,000 tonnes of sulphur precipitated on Finland each year originates from Finnish chimneys, and new standards on sulphur emission which will be included in a forthcoming bill on atmospheric pollution have been condemned by some ecologists as too lenient.

In all, it has taken twelve years to get the environmental ministry established. This is partly the result of Finnish politics, with a succession of coalition governments seeking consensus, and of vigorous opposition to the new ministry from within the existing

bureaucratic structure. Opposition came mainly from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, whose National Board of Health considers that its own municipal health boards already cover environmental matters. The new ministry hopes to use the network of local environmental health officers and inspectors operated by the Municipal Health Boards. This, some health officials fear, could lead to the boards in effect subsidizing the new ministry.

According to Olli Ojala, general director of the Department of Environmental Protection and Nature Conservation of the Environmental Ministry, it is precisely at this municipal level that environmental issues bite most keenly. Although Finland is divided into 12 provinces, provincial administrations are appointed from Helsinki and there is no elected level of government between the municipalities and the central government. As a result, the municipal level has gained considerable strength, and conflicts can arise when, for example, a pulp mill is both the largest source of municipal taxes and the major potential pollution hazard in an area.

This situation seems to have been fully recognized by Finland's newly emergent "Green" movement, which has gained strength during the public discussion of a possible fifth nuclear power station. In the general election last March, two Greens were elected to the Diet (sitting as independents as they have no formal party organization). Whether a formal party structure should be established was, indeed, the main topic of discussion of the 300 participants in the Green movement's congress at the end of October. They decided to concentrate on building up local support in preparation for next year's municipal elections.

Vera Rich