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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Public perception of the countryside

Edited by F A Miller & R B Tranter

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Public perception of the countryside

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Preface

In May 1987, the Countryside Foundation commissioned CAS to undertake a background study of countryside matters, to establish what was already known and what remained to be done.

The study resulted in a voluminous report, only highlights of which are included here. These served as the first paper at the Conference on *Public Perception of the Countryside*, held at the Royal Society on 7th January, 1988. This Paper contains all the invited papers presented at that Conference, from a wide range of organisations and individuals who either reflect public perception or actually influence it.

It is clear that the number of organisations with an interest in the countryside is enormous and that particular countryside activities are well-represented by interest- or pressure-groups of one sort or another.

Whether public opinion is adequately represented by the sum total of these interest groups is far from clear, however. Indeed, it is extremely doubtful whether it is sensible to think about public opinion as if there was a homogeneous public who had an opinion. Nevertheless, many speakers tend to call in aid of their case 'what the public thinks' or 'wants' or is 'against'. Many others believe that the 'public' is ill-informed about the countryside and needs more or better information. In nearly all of these cases, we should more accurately refer to some specified sections of the public and it would be healthy if we were better informed as to 'who' is worried about 'what'.

If we wish to go further and actually inform or influence public opinion, we also need to have a better knowledge of how these activities can be carried out. Thus, we need to know how different sorts of people are influenced and this probably varies with the issue being considered. Many people can see stubble burning but relatively few see endangered species, for example.

The contributions from 'the media' are revealing and do not simply confirm widely-held beliefs.

The same information is also needed if we are to encourage a public debate about the kind of countryside 'we' want.

Since many of us want different things, and may not be aware of some of the consequences of achieving them, and many of us are ill-informed, especially about the views of others, such a debate needs careful structuring and does not happen by itself.

One of the best places to start such a debate might well be in schools and encouraging school children to think about what sort of countryside they really want, might also be the best way of stimulating a thirst for more information about the great variety of ways in which the countryside is, and can be, used.

CRW Spedding
Director
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Abbreviations

AA	Automobile Association
ALURE	Alternative Land Uses and the Rural Economy
AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAS	Centre for Agricultural Strategy
CC	Countryside Commission
CEC	Commission of the European Communities
CLA	Country Landowners' Association
CPRE	Council for the Protection of Rural England
CRC	Cobham Resource Consultants
DAFS	Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland
DANI	Department of Agriculture, Northern Ireland
DES	Department of Education and Science
DOE	Department of Environment
EC	European Community
GB	Great Britain
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
ITV	Independent Television
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
MORI	Market and Opinion Research International
MP	Member of Parliament
NCC	Nature Conservancy Council
NFU	National Farmers' Union
NOP	National Opinion Poll
RSNC	Royal Society for Nature Conservation
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
UK	United Kingdom

Part I

The background