



The rejection of the Lewis wind farm this week highlights how environmentalists are lining up against each other in countryside battles. **Mark Lynas** reports

Green v green

Environmentalists are used to fighting battles. But with environmentalism going mainstream – wind farms, biofuels and nuclear power stations, for example, are fast becoming some of the most controversial issues in British politics today – environmentalists increasingly find themselves skirmishing with one another as they see-saw between pragmatism and idealism.

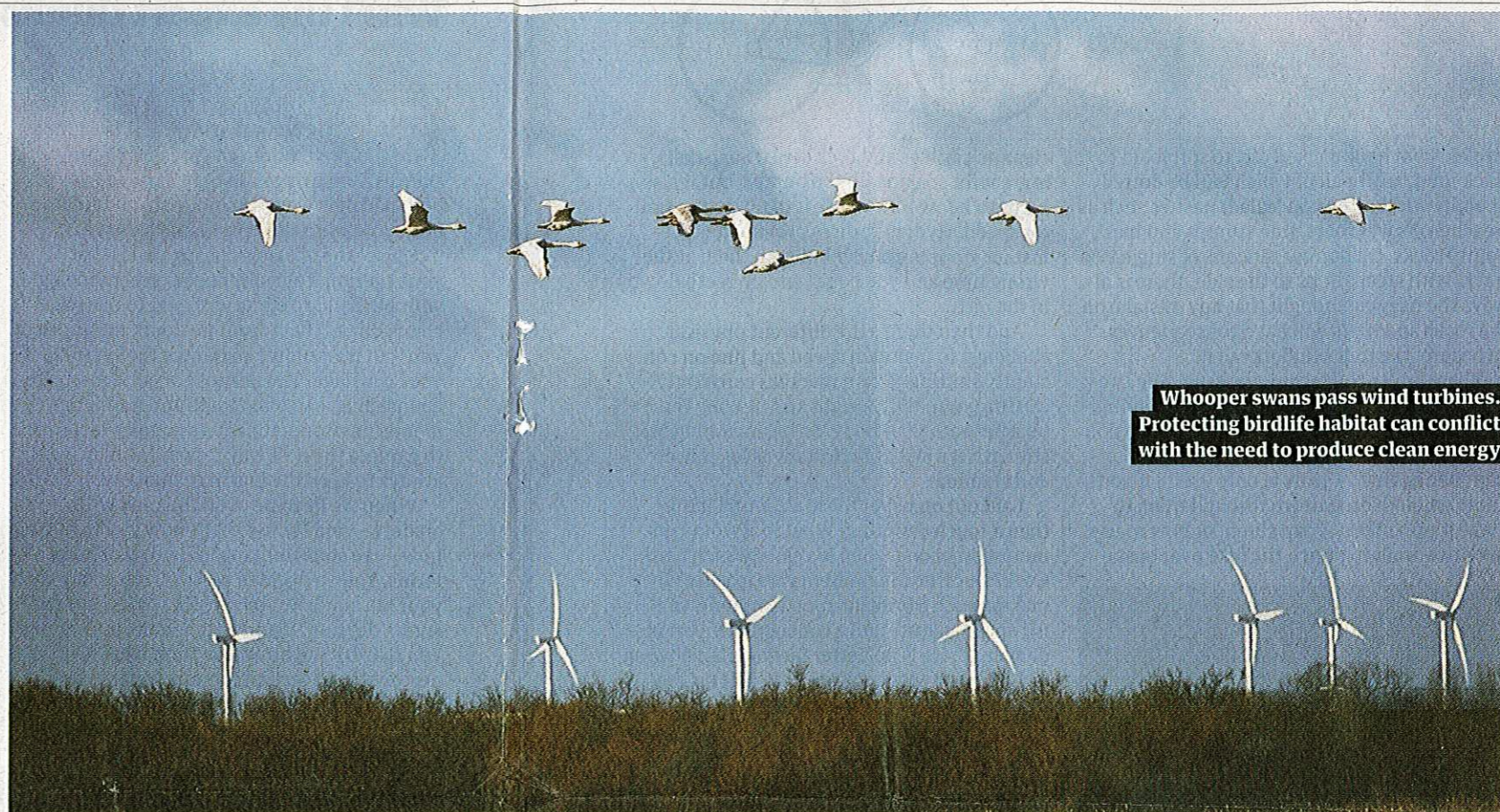
The Lewis wind farm – rejected by the Scottish Executive earlier this week – is merely the latest example. The Scotsman reported that “environmental agencies welcomed the news” of the massive wind power project’s demise, thanks to concerns about impacts on rare peat bog and birdlife habitat. Yet according to the developers Lewis Wind Power – a coalition of AMEC and British Energy – the wind farm would have made a substantial contribution to reducing Britain’s greenhouse gas emissions, wiping out a quarter of a million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions every year. With climate change at the top of the list of political priorities, most now agree that Britain desperately needs to expand its renewables sector. How this can be done without major negative impacts on wildlife and landscape remains one of today’s toughest challenges.

Wildlife groups such as the RSPB have a particularly difficult task in deciding where they stand. The Lewis wind farm’s impact on the landscape would have been substantial – with 181 turbines each standing 140 metres tall, erected on massive concrete bases drilled into the fragile peat surface and connected by dozens of miles of new stone roads, this

was unavoidable. And while the developers insisted that strenuous efforts would be made to mitigate the effect on birds, including not putting turbines in areas important to rare species such as merlins and golden eagles, the RSPB objected strongly to the proposal.

Yet the real-world result of defeating the wind farm is that the electricity that would have been generated cleanly from the wind will now be generated using conventional means – a mixture of coal and gas. This in turn will worsen climate change, which will in the long run have a far more serious effect on fragile habitats such as Lewis’ peat moors than any number of wind turbines, as temperatures rise and rainfall patterns shift. Indeed, global warming is now thought by many biodiversity experts to be the greatest extinction threat facing the planet today. Up to a half of all species could be consigned to oblivion with just two or three degrees of further warming.

But with wind farms consistently opposed by a powerful coalition of conservationists and locals concerned about the landscape impact of turbines, it is difficult to see how the planned emissions cuts – or indeed the new renewables target of 15% of UK energy by 2020 – can even be approached. The Lewis project, although supported by the Western Isles Council, received 11,000 objections from members of the public, with only 100 comments in favour. Lewis Wind Power responded to the news of its project’s refusal by saying that it was “bitterly disappointed”. Similarly, the British Wind Energy Association – environmentalists all – is furious that



Whooper swans pass wind turbines. Protecting birdlife habitat can conflict with the need to produce clean energy

£5m has been wasted on a failed scheme, and warns that this will damage investor confidence in new wind projects.

Conservation bodies such as the RSPB are, of course, well aware of the global warming threat – the RSPB was a founding member of the environment and development agency coalition Stop Climate Chaos, and has also launched its own green electricity tariff, RSPB Energy, in partnership with electricity company Scottish and Southern, to supply consumers with renewable electricity, much of it generated from wind.

Some contradiction perhaps? RSPB doesn’t think so. “We are committed to tackling climate change,” it says. But “we cannot support any renewable generation proposal which would have a significant and adverse

impact on wildlife and habitats, particularly sites which are protected by law specifically for their wildlife value.”

It denies that there is a conflict between meeting renewables targets and protecting wildlife. But this conflict keeps on happening. The biggest single source of renewable power in the UK would be the tidal barrage that is proposed across the Severn estuary – it could potentially generate 5% of the country’s entire supply. But building it would have severe ecological consequences on the tidal mudflats, which host a panoply of aquatic life and wading birds – and once again, the RSPB, this time supported by Friends of the Earth (FoE), is strongly in the anti camp. FoE has proposed an alternative system of tidal lagoons, but these would generate less power and might not be economically feasible. Jonathon Porritt’s Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) last year proposed building the barrage but ensuring that compensatory habitats were established elsewhere for displaced wildlife – especially if these new habitats could help birds and other species adapt to rising sea levels and other impacts of climate change.

What is clear is that all energy-generation technologies have an impact on the environment – and environmentalists are going to have to think more deeply about what their hierarchy of priorities is. For example, nuclear and hydro power were both anathema to environmentalists for decades but are slowly and reluctantly being accepted back into the fold due to their perceived potential for producing low-carbon energy. The nuclear option was

recently considered by the SDC – and although it was still ruled out on cost and proliferation grounds, its report did have to concede that “nuclear is a low carbon technology”, which “could generate large quantities of electricity, contribute to stabilising CO2 emissions and add to the diversity of the UK’s energy supply”. This is a world away from Greenpeace’s flat refusal to even consider moving away from its outright and long-standing rejection of nuclear power. Similarly on biofuels, even as environmental campaign groups lobby against the new government-sponsored biofuels mandate (a reversal from their favourable position a few years ago), the Royal Society still insists that biofuels “have a potentially useful role in tackling the issues of climate change and energy supply”.

All this suggests that environmental concerns of a generation ago – which were conservation-based, principally – are increasingly being trumped by the climate-change concerns of today. Indeed, if climate change does come top of the list, given its potential to devastate both biodiversity and the British landscape, then it certainly needs to be given more weight in planning decisions.

As Sir Martin Doughty, chairman of Natural England, said in response to the SDC’s Severn Barrage proposals: “We have some difficult choices to make if we are going to get serious about reducing the impact of climate change on the natural environment.” And making these difficult choices means knowing what we value most, and how to protect it.

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Green re Sue Cliffor director of Common C

What is your biggest green secret?

I grew up above a garage driving.

Do you know your car?

I seem to have two big ones. Being a vegetarian who works, hasn’t flown for years, has spent decades chasing things local.

What was the last green you did?

Planting some wild chives in the corner of a field, and bees and the birds as well.

What is your favourite food?

An apple a day, from June to May, from the community garden.

Or it might be cider from the makers for the two months without home-grown apples.

If you could buy any green technology, what would it be?

Photovoltaics – why are they cheaper and on every roof? I want ground-source heat pumps to get better. Why can’t we have communal pipes under the roads providing underfloor heating to neighbouring properties?

What wakes you up in the middle of the night?

The plight of all those who have to carry water every day for miles; and that the swans will come back this year.

What skill do you have in a post-oil world?

Enthusiasm for making things and creating things from what already exists – a hand saw and a bucketful of soil in an unadulterated garden.

the continuity of Darwin’s words on the importance of the “worm in the world”.

Common Ground for “local distillations” (common). The



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