

Accessing All Areas

Planners should play a part in reforms to rural public access instead of ignoring countryside issues, Marion Shoard tells Caron Lipman

**published in Planning
11 June 1999**

"If the town in the town and country planning system is a tiger, the country is merely a mouse. It's time to take a look at the rural planning agenda."

So says Marion Shoard, lecturer at the Bartlett School of Planning, vicepresident of the British Association of Nature Conservationists, and the author of a new book, *A Right to Roam*, which tackles the thorny issue of countryside access.

Seeing herself as a "maverick" rather than a part of any establishment, Shoard's interest in the countryside was fuelled by watching "lovely bits of woodland cleared away for great big barley fields" and being denied access to large landed estates on the edges of towns she has lived in.

She studied zoology at Oxford University during the late 1960s when many environmental campaign groups were establishing themselves. Wanting to be involved in the political struggle, she took a two-year postgraduate diploma in planning at the then Kingston-upon-Thames Polytechnic, and in 1973 became the first ever planning specialist at the national office of countryside campaign group the Council for the Protection of Rural England.

Since then she has undertaken a number of research projects and in 1987 published *This Land is our Land* which looked at alternative models for the division of land rights. It called for a new social contract for the countryside and a refined planning system.

Shoard acknowledges that the Government's promise in March to legislate in favour of public access was an historic breakthrough, given the expectation that it would opt for a voluntary approach. But she believes the it does not go nearly far enough.

Not only will public access open up only ten per cent of England and Wales, she claims, but it merely adds a list of exceptions to the existing law of trespass rather than turning the law on its head. And the Government is likely to wait for the reform of the House of Lords before putting the legislation through.

Shoard sees the access situation in Scotland as particularly exciting just now. The country has a "dynamic new parliament wanting to do things" and momentum behind universal rights of access covering all the countryside. "If universal rights are agreed in Scotland, they may decide to go down this route in England and Wales," she predicts.

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Restricted access rights, she argues, pose problems of land definition. If, for example, access is allowed to a meadow, but not a down, someone has to produce a definition to differentiate the two. "The universal approach is more logical: you just have to say where universal access might cause harm. There is also a philosophical objection to restricted access. What is involved is a right. You don't have a partial right, say, to vote."

Tellingly, she says, Scottish planning authorities, unlike their counterparts in England and Wales, are examining how they can play their part in access reforms. "It seems to me that local authorities, which control the public rights of way system, should think carefully to what extent they want to be involved in the implementation of partial rights." The planning establishment has neglected countryside issues, Shoard argues. At least 80 per cent of Britain is countryside, she says, and yet a great deal of discussion is about urban matters. "Planners should take far more interest in rural affairs."

She notes that this year is the 50th anniversary of the National Park system, yet there has been little debate in planning circles about whether or not national landscape designation has been a triumph. She has her doubts about its success. "People think we've got national parks so assume the countryside is safe and perfectly preserved. Of course it is not. The parks also make the rest of the countryside seem second-rate and less important. But I don't think they are the most important landscapes in England and Wales. They embody spectacular landscape, but not the typical lowland countryside which is more threatened, particularly by housing, industrial development and the intervention of agriculture."

Huge changes - for instance, the massive loss of farmland birds and the erosion of landscape features by modern farming- should be issues for planners, but "by and large they're not," she says. Shoard says the time is right to consider extending planning controls to protect hedgerows and other landscape features. "We have to make do with landowners volunteering to leave features in place. Poor old rural planners have to use tools, such as conservation areas, which have been devised within an urban environment. But some models, such as listing buildings, can be applied in a rural context."

The access debate itself has been shoe-horned into this stereotypical confrontation between the rambler and the landowner, she adds. "But there's no point in having access to the countryside if the countryside is not worth visiting."

Planning for the rural environment is more challenging than for the urban one, she maintains. "It's a changing thing; nature is a shifting creature. People don't understand a lot about the countryside. Few of us can figure out the age of a hedgerow. And people think the countryside can repair its own wounds. Things grow up all the time. A lot of farmland isn't interpreted as part of our heritage. and yet it should be seen as an inheritance of the whole nation."

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It's an argument she has expanded in her books. Her first, *The Theft of the Countryside*, published in 1980, brought the environmental damage caused by food production into the public eye for the first time. It created a national debate, with one review prompting 30 letters to *The Times*. But the issue of tighter planning controls, she says ruefully, has "got lost over the intervening 20 years" because the farming lobby argued for "bribes" for conservation, and that approach was adopted by conservationists.

"This was a wrong turning," she says. "I don't think subsidies have been effective enough in conserving the farmed landscape. Planners need to look again at the issue, now that more sophisticated mapping techniques exist to make enforcement easier and planners are more experienced in managing landscape features."