

The 'Native and Alien' issue - A discussion paper

There has been an increasing use of the terms native and alien without setting the issue in a sound scientific context and a socially sensitive context.

This paper aims to :

- Share some understanding of the scenario with respect to ethnic communities.
- Proposes the integration of sound principles which promote sound ecological practice combined with providing for a setting in which barriers to participation by all groups in society are not inadvertently created.

1.The Scenario

1.1 Multi-cultural Britain

Britain is a multi-cultural society. Ethnic groups have gravitated to living mainly in urban areas, but then 90% of all British people live in urban areas. The environmental manipulation of urban areas is therefore a major theme for most British people.

1.2 Recognition of the significance of presence

It should be borne in mind that small but distinct ethnic groups are to be found living and working in rural, village and small town settings, and that the presence of single persons of particular ethnic origins carry equal significance within the principles of Equal Opportunities.

1.3 Local realities

Ethnic minorities as defined by the Office for Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) make up 5.5% of the overall population on these islands.

However, the local reality gives a very different picture. 8 London boroughs carry nearly 20% of the entire ethnic minority population of this country and some cities carry high percentages of particular ethnic groups .

To give a feel to what it means, Birmingham has 21.5% ethnic groups within its population. This is equivalent to 206,000 people, more than the entire population of the city of Blackburn, whose total population is 136,000.

The London Borough of Brent's ethnic communities make up 44.9% of the local population, numbering 109,000 people. Leicester comes in at 28.5%, with 22.3 % being Indian. The London Borough of Lambeth at 30.1 % includes 15.3 % Afro-Caribbean's.

1.4 British ethnic communities

Beyond the immigrant generation, all ethnic persons, through being born here, are bi-cultural if not multi-cultural. Each of them is associated with at least 2 major cultures. They are British ethnic minorities. Although there is a special relationship to their country of origin, they are also British. Multi-cultural projects express a significant component of their identity, and taking part in mainstream projects confirm their belonging here.

2. Multi-cultural participation

2.1 Multi-culturalism

Multi-culturalism encompasses the intertwined themes of ethnicity and culture.

2.2 Multi-cultural participation

Multi-cultural participation in a multi-cultural society takes on 2 major strands:

- 2.2.1 The participation of those who are commonly called ethnic groups in activities that integrate aspects of the culture of their countries of origin and in mainstream activity.
- 2.2.2 The participation of the majority British population in multi-cultural activity. The majority population also needs to see themselves as an ethnic group in world terms. Within Britain itself, national and regional groups also see themselves as having distinct cultures, namely the Scots, the Irish, the Cornish, the Welsh and the English.

2.3 Local and global

The particular significance of multi-culturalism at this point in time needs to be recognised. The phrase 'global and local' is in common use, but the expression of it has not materialised significantly.

Multi-cultural participation is a vital link in the chain of events through which inter-cultural links and interest in the people and environment of different parts of our earth can be nurtured. A deeply felt connection to people across the world and to the earth beyond these shores is the basis for the consistent progress towards ensuring the positive future of our planet as our only home.

3. *The terms 'native' and 'alien' and ethnic communities*

In relation to ethnic communities it is most unfortunate that terms which echo immigration terminology have entered the environmental arena. Further terms like Rhodo-bashing resonate too closely to Paki-bashing.

4. *The popularisation of mistaken notions taken as fact*

4.1 Using terms out of context

The popularisation of the use of the terms 'native' and 'alien' have further given rise to the common use of the scientifically meaningless phrases 'native is good' and 'alien is bad', or 'native is best' without any reference to the characteristics of a site or to the context which it should refer to.

4.2 Awareness of the power of popular beliefs

Unwarranted associations are then made between plants and people.

Damage has already been done through the promotion of the use of 'native' plants without setting the work in a sound context. Once we feed the words 'native' and 'alien' as environmental terms into popular language it is very hard to retrieve them. It is advisable to use alternative terms when needed or not to use them at all.

In an era in which heart-rending pieces of news inform us of racist murders and ethnic cleansing, putting mortal fear into the hearts of every ethnic person, the distorted associations with these terms are extremely undesirable.

5. *The Search for Alternative terms*

5.1 Consideration of some existing alternative terms

Much less emotionally charged terms include 'indigenous', 'neophyte' and 'archetype' as used in Germany (The former meaning species of plants established since 1500 and the latter before 1500. They find this parameter a useful distinction. They do not distinguish between indigenous and introduced species.), 'exotic', 'local' and 'introduced species'. More thought needs to be given to find effective alternative terms .

5.2 Using terms in specific contexts

The use of any such terms however are not meaningful unless they are being related to a specific site and used in an appropriate context.

5.3 Descriptive alternatives

The use of easily understood specific descriptions should also be considered, such as :

- species established in the wild for a long time
- species relatively recently established in the wild
- species supporting a larger number of other species
- species supporting particularly desirable species
- species supporting attractive species

and so on

These would take place in the context of what we wish to achieve in a particular scenario.

5.4 Views who do not recognise the distinctions 'native' and 'alien'

Some experts point out that the whole focus of adventive ecology is to establish how a species got to where it was, and that this has little to do with nature conservation.

5.5 Terms for ordinary folk

It needs to be borne in mind that it is often futile to introduce technical terms or to explain elaborate concepts when working with newcomers to environmental involvement within the community. Ordinary people who need to be enthused by activity will only be confused by being confronted with unfamiliar environmental concepts. It is far more productive to side-step the use of terms which lead to simplistic misuse and set in its place easy to follow processes leading to sound practice.

6. The position of professionals and campaigns

There will be exceptions, but in general ordinary people who can be enthused to contribute to environmental matters do not initially delve deeply into hows and whys. They rightly depend on project leaders to enable them to engage in sound practice.

Environmental project leaders and campaign leaders on the other hand cannot afford to be unclear about the scientific, social and practical implications of their work. It is their responsibility to be accountable.

7. *Some essential concepts for planting trees*

7.1 Good practice recognises complexity

Essential concepts are not being addressed when trees are simplistically classified into being either 'good native trees' and 'undesirable non-native trees'

7.2 Recognising the specific circumstances of the area concerned

The term 'native trees' is often used as if it is a passport term, implying mistakenly that there is a recommended list of trees good for the entire UK.

The UK is enormously varied with many distinct locally valuable sites. Basically a list of 'UK native trees' does not help us to protect habitats or landscape. Scots pine, in Wales, is an introduced species. In the south-east within the New Forest, Scots Pine invades open areas and need to be eradicated.

7.3 All plants have a place in the right setting

All plants in the right setting, and therefore all trees, are intrinsically good for the environment and good for people, whether they are indigenous, introduced or horticultural cultivars. All of us privileged enough to have gardens can see that.

All of them support various animals, insects and other life forms. In many settings indigenous plants and animals, garden plants, introduced plants and animals all support each other, provide shelter and feed on each other.

It is the manipulation of a setting that creates either good or bad results, in relation to what our aims are.

7.4 Not all sites are appropriate for trees

Many sites have ecological value without trees. Even derelict land can have particular educational value because it is one of the few areas where one can study succession of plants and trees.

The characteristics of local areas without trees need to be respected too. Any kind of planting can intrude on local character. Planting trees just anywhere, indigenous or otherwise, is not necessarily always a good thing.

7.5 Thinking through purpose and appropriateness

7.5.1 Local distinctiveness

Local distinctiveness in certain cases already include introduced species of trees which have become part of a landscape without disturbing its ecological integrity. Often they are in small numbers and do not have destructive characteristics.

7.5.2 Planting for interest

Victorian parklands are common aspects of local distinctiveness in many cities, as the Victorians proudly gathered together collections of the many introduced specimen trees which so many of us enjoy. Many single trees do not produce viable seed, and many types of seed do not travel.

7.5.3 Valuing cultural connections and historical links

Many introduced species can grow in different areas of Britain without causing ecological disturbance. Sometimes in small areas there are micro-climates. These are all opportunities for varied planting for interest, and for expression of cultural or historical links for members of the community (not just ethnic communities). For example, you will see many single specimen Monkey Puzzle trees, which the Welsh plant as a link to their connection with Patagonia.

8. *Further understanding*

8.1 Developing sound practice by ordinary folk

Once we do engage people in any aspect of environmental participation, we can extend their interest and their awareness. Only then do we truly begin to build a framework within which we protect habitats and support the environment together with the community. Single issues need to be seen in context and specific action needs to take place as a result of many sound and well-understood concepts standing side by side.

8.2 Working towards an informed public

Some important pieces of information are :

- a. What a habitat is.
- b. How to understand the characteristics of plants and how to use them without disturbing valuable habitats.
- c. The concept of biodiversity.
- d. Ecosystems and the evolving natural scene.
- e. The value of trees and nature in general to people.
- f. How to support urban wildlife.

- g. Supporting wildlife in the countryside.
- h. Britain and secondary landscape (the creation of valuable habitats as a result of the impact of man's activities).
- i. Wilderness.
- j. Sustainable development.
- k. Resources for transforming our immediate environment.
- l. Where to get expert advice and support for projects.

Most of the above can be linked to a focus on trees.

This paper was written for the Trees of Time and Place campaign.