

THE WALES TOURIST BOARD

This quango was first established under the 1969 Development of Tourism Act and it is funded to the tune of £31 million per annum by the National Assembly for Wales. Tourism in Wales is of great economic importance. The Welsh Affairs Committee publication of 1998 stated that tourism contributes twice as much to GDP as agriculture. The Wales Tourist Board's (WTB) own figures for 2002 show that in that year it contributed £2 billion to the economy— about 7% of the gross national product. 16% of the workforce are involved in tourism – around 117,000 people. In 1997 (last available figure) the consolidated electricity, gas and water utilities contributed only 2.2%. As wind generated electricity is no more than a small proportion of the whole supply, its GDP percentage contribution is a minute fraction. For this unimportant, marginal and destructive industry we are putting at risk the £2 billion per annum from tourism.

Given tourism's importance to the Welsh economy, one might expect that it would be recognised and respected politically. This acknowledgment of its vital role should ensure its place in the heart of Government.

Not so. Not only does tourism not merit its own Minister within the National Assembly (England has one: the Minister of Tourism is the robust Kim Howells who opposes turbines very forcefully and publicly), but it is sidelined to a peripheral role as part of the Department of Economic Development, and letters to the National Assembly regarding tourism are answered by the Steel and Energy Branch!

At one stage early in the life of the National Assembly, Rhodri Morgan was not only constituency AM for Cardiff West, he was also First Minister and Minister for Economic Development. Pleas to him to consider the impact of massive wind turbines on tourism in rural areas fell on deaf ears. It was clear that he was far more interested in promoting inward business investments, the Welsh Development Agency and Wales as 'a global showcase for renewable energy' – never mind the livelihoods and pre-existing jobs within small-scale rural tourism, dependent upon fine landscape. Rhodri Morgan appears indifferent to his country's last remaining natural asset.

The first major report from the NAW Economic Development Committee (EDC) 2003 is on renewable energy (why not energy conservation and efficiency first?) – in effect, this is a promotional exercise for the British Wind Energy Association (BWEA) – it has warm words for solar, biomass, micro-hydro etc., but the reality is a massive expansion of land based wind turbines to assist New Labour in Whitehall to meet its self-imposed renewable energy targets. (It is noteworthy that the views of the WTB were not sought. Nor was there a representative of the WTB on the EDC Committee.) Cited in the report is a discredited Mori Scotland poll

(commissioned by the BWEA and the Scottish Renewables Forum 2002) which purports to show that wind turbines do not put tourists off. This poll was thrown out by the developers themselves at a public inquiry into the An Suidhe wind power station, Inverary, in November 2002. They realised it would not stand up to cross-examination.

Why wasn't the 2002 VisitScotland poll referred to? This was commissioned by the Scottish equivalent of the WTB, which originally believed that visitor centres attached to wind power stations might be a tourist attraction. To their surprise, the majority of respondents let them know that increasing numbers of wind turbines in the landscape would deter them from returning. Why did the Assembly EDC choose to ignore this poll that was truly independent and not representing vested interests?

Developers claim that wind 'farms' are tourist attractions. A few wind 'farms' have visitor centres that do attract tourists. But it is unlikely that these visitor centres are primary attractions. Even the visitor centre at Sellafield nuclear power station attracts 180,000 people a year, but no one claims that nuclear power stations attract tourists.

The remit of the WTB is to *'promote Wales and encourage the provision and improvement of tourism provision'*. One would expect that the preservation of the landscape, which is what visitors come to enjoy, should be part of that remit. Their own research shows that most visitors come to Wales for the environment. In a letter from Chief Executive Jonathan Jones he stated that :

*'There is a clear need to find alternative sources of energy in order to reduce the detrimental impact of the Green House Effect but at the same time we as the lead statutory body on Tourism have pointed out to the National Assembly that all our research consistently shows that **the main reason for coming to Wales on holiday is the beautiful, natural and unspoilt environment.***

'If we kill that then we kill an industry, which currently represents 7% of our GDP and 10% of our employment.' [Editor's emphasis]

When first made aware of the Cefn Croes proposals in March 2000 and asked what the official position of the WTB was to further wind power stations in beautiful areas of upland rural Mid Wales specifically, and more wind factories in Wales generally, the response from Jonathan Jones, Chief Executive Officer of WTB, was to send a copy of their Windfarm Policy from 'Tourism 2000 – A Strategy for Wales' which was produced in 1994.

- 10.35 Windfarms are a recent development in Wales. They conjure up mixed emotions being, on the one hand, an environmentally benign method of generating energy but, on the other, a potential intrusion, or dramatic focus in the landscape depending upon the observer's point of view.

- 10.36 The privatisation of the electricity supply industry in 1989 opened up new investment opportunities for private developers interested in the production of energy from renewable sources. The Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO) places a statutory duty on electricity providers to contract for a certain amount of electricity from non-fossil fuel sources, giving an added incentive for the development of windfarms. By implication, windfarms must be sited to exploit optimum wind conditions, and they occur over much of Wales. Even when sieved to exclude designated areas, the locations suited physically to wind generation cover a large proportion of Dyfed, Powys and Gwynedd.
- 10.37 As interest in the development of windfarms has grown, so has the discussion about their merits and disadvantages. We were reminded of the intensity of the debate during consultation for this strategy. Proponents of windfarms emphasise their role as clean and renewable energy sources. It is further argued that they can provide a tourist attraction in their own right and that research shows them to be perceived favourably by the public as safe, environmentally benign and appropriate symbols of progress. To their opponents, however, windfarms are a major and unnatural intrusion in the landscape, which bring disbenefits to the resident and tourist alike.
- 10.38 Many of the policy issues regarding windfarm development lie beyond the statutory remit and technical competence of the Wales Tourist Board. Our interest in this subject derives from the fact that there is a natural coincidence between areas most valued by tourists, such as the uplands and coastline, and those exposed to high winds. Windfarm developments can threaten both the real and perceived tourism potential of these areas. Although it is noted that research has shown a favourable public attitude to windfarms, the situation may change as their novelty value lessens. While seeing one windfarm during a holiday or day trip may be quite acceptable, the sight of two or three could result in visual saturation and an adverse reaction – a symbol of overdevelopment in the countryside. Again, there needs to be a cautious and co-ordinated approach to developing tourist products associated with windfarms. In most cases, windfarms will have modest tourist interest, with simple signing and interpretation being sufficient.
- 10.39 The Board welcomes the proposal that applications for wind generators will be added to the categories of projects in Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning [Assessment of Environmental Effects] Regulations 1988. This means that applications for windfarms will have to be accompanied by an environmental statement if the development is likely to have significant environmental effects. The effect on tourism is among the issues which will need to be considered in the statement. The Countryside Council for Wales has issued a detailed policy document on Wind Power Stations. This does not favour the development of commercial wind turbines and wind turbine power stations in primary

designated areas (i.e. National Parks, AONBs, Heritage Coasts and Marine, International Nature Reserves).

Jonathan Jones said that at a recent Public Board Meeting, appeals had been made to strengthen the policy statement, and that Mr Philip Evans, the new Chairman was to review the policy urgently. It was pointed out that the visitor research they referred to was old, and Nigel Adams, Development Planning, said WTB was attempting to get hold of some more recent research from the west of England.

On June 1st 2000 a further letter from Jonathan Jones indicated that more work on a revised policy statement was in progress, not only opposing developments in primary designated areas (National Parks, Heritage Coast, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty etc.) but on areas visible from those areas and opposing off-shore turbines adjoining coastlines which are designated areas. He stated: *'We are looking very carefully at the wind farm issue and their potential impact on tourism.'*

Examination of the files at Ceredigion County Council offices in Aberaeron, after the Cefn Croes application was submitted showed that the WTB was not one of the official consultees. Given tourism's importance to Ceredigion's rural economy, this appeared to be a serious oversight. It was brought to the attention of both the WTB and Ceredigion Council by the Cefn Croes Campaigners, and finally the WTB were consulted.

On September 9th 2000 (with a planning meeting scheduled for September 13th) no response had been received. It was pointed out to the WTB that if they did not comment, the absence of any response would be interpreted by the developers as tacit approval.

In reply Jonathan Jones quoted a tourism survey from Denmark; *'The research found no evidence to support the theory that tourism had been adversely affected by windfarms.'* Yet it is known that opposition to wind developments in Denmark, and elsewhere in the world is growing. People are realising that the landscape is important. Did the WTB investigate the research? Why are no references quoted?

In October 2000, the revised policy was endorsed and conveyed to the Campaign in a letter dated October 5th 2000 and signed by Michael Price, Development Officer. It read: *'The Board has agreed to revise its policy on wind farms and specifically to endorse the following position:*

- **The Board opposes the introduction of commercial wind turbines and wind turbine power stations in both the primary designated areas and on natural sites that are clearly visible from the primary designated areas. We consider**

that elsewhere proposals should demonstrate that there will be no detrimental effect on tourism.

- That the Board oppose the development of offshore wind farms adjoining the coastline, which is either within a National Park, designated Heritage Coast or National Marine Nature reserve. Elsewhere, in assessing the suitability of locations for offshore wind farms in the proximity of traditional coastal resorts should be a material consideration in the determining of applications for such developments.
- That the Board recommends that the National Assembly for Wales provides clear land use policy guidance on the provision of wind farms and that the scope for less intrusive forms of renewable energy be investigated.'

Michael Price added: *'The WTB will be writing to the Welsh Assembly, DTI, and all planning authorities and other interest groups in Wales to advise them of our revised policy.'*

At a Public Board Meeting of WTB in Aberystwyth, questions from the floor from tourism providers stimulated some discussion on wind developments in Wales, although Board members appeared less than enthusiastic to discuss same.

Jonathan Jones repeated that the new policy had been sent to all planning officers, but that the Board had a policy *'not to object to individual planning applications'*.

WHY NOT if planned proposals seek to destroy the very assets which WTB promotes?

A letter to Robert Gwyn dated October 13th 2000 on behalf of the Cefn Croes Campaign pointed out that of the 200 plus letters of opposition to the DTI, with copies to Ceredigion County Council, 25% came from regular English visitors to the area, who had learned of the plans, were appalled by them, and felt strongly enough to write. Many stated that they would not return if the Cefn Croes development proceeded.

40% of the 200 letters referred to the importance of tourism revenue to the area. Many letters came from local tourism providers, fearful of the impact on their businesses of this industrialisation. These included small hill farmers diversifying in a difficult economic climate into B&Bs, self-catering accommodation, and campsites. (This predated the devastation of the disastrous foot and mouth epidemic.)

A letter in the planning files showed that on October 17th 2000, WTB had still not responded, or sent its wind 'farm' policy document to Ceredigion Council's Consultation request of July 26th 2000.

So much for its defence of its country's most precious natural asset!

By January, a further letter to Jonathan Jones pointed out this omission, and the fact that developers were already capitalising on the lack of response, as predicted. They were gloating: *'WTB have raised no objection.'*

Following the award of a large Objective 1 European Funding Grant to WTB in October 2000, one campaigner asked if some of this money could be used to fund an up-to-date visitor survey on tourist attitudes to the continuing proliferation of even bigger wind power stations on our precious Welsh uplands. Such research is long overdue especially as 'green' or 'cultural' tourism is being promoted.

Attention was drawn to local initiatives in Mid Wales such as the Pentir Pumlumon tourism group, the Headwaters of Wales project between ADAS and Lampeter University and Professor Peter Midmore's 'Walking Revenue' study from the Institute of Rural Studies, Aberystwyth.

Mr Jones also received a map of mid Wales showing pre-existing wind power stations, and the 'zones of visual influence' anticipated from the Cefn Croes scheme, so that the WTB were not in ignorance of the facts relating to this massive development .

In May 2000, the Automobile Association (AA) designated the route between Knighton and Aberystwyth, which includes the mountain road between Rhayader and Cwmystwyth, as one of the ten most beautiful road routes in the world. The Cefn Croes turbines will be readily visible beyond the watershed of the famed Elan and Ystwyth rivers, from Pont-ar-Elan and adjacent high points, and up the little valley of Afon Diluw close to the Powys/Ceredigion border. This is the Elenydd SSSI, European Special Conservation Area, and famed for its sense of 'wilderness'.

The developer's carefully chosen photomontages (which always underestimate the visual effect of turbines in the landscape) do not show these three viewpoints in their plans. It is likely that the magical quality of this very special wild, remote upland landscape will be destroyed by the turbines.

After Ceredigion Council's decision on July 11th 2001 not to oppose Cefn Croes, WTB received furious letters from campaigners, and further pleas were made for the WTB to look again at the proposals, and ask the DTI for a Public Inquiry. It was again pointed out that in the 1970s the Cambrian landscape came close to designation as a National Park. Its landscape was regarded by the Countryside Commission as being of the highest quality.

The paradox of WTB promoting the beauty of the scenery in its glossy brochures with superb photographs, then failing to protect same was pointed out. The hypocrisy of chasing grants

for tourism initiatives, which similarly were 'selling' the landscape, whilst not officially opposing blanket turbines was also highlighted. WTB bosses were accused of spending too much time in hospitality suites and not getting out into the countryside they were promoting.

Requests were made that the WTB make its views known to the NAW, in advance of the Assembly's response to the DTI, and also directly to the DTI. The devastating effects of the foot and mouth epidemic on rural tourism revenues were stressed, and the WTB challenged about its passive approach in overseeing the destruction of Wales' finest landscape.

A letter from Jonathan Jones dated July 30th 2001 stated;

'As a statutory body sponsored by the National Assembly for Wales, we are not in a position either to support or object to planning decisions which are quite rightly the responsibility of the local planning authority.'

He said that their policy document had been sent to all 22 planning authority officers in Wales. He added:

'I am somewhat surprised therefore that Ceredigion County Council have stated that WTB had not objected – we neither condone nor object, but they should certainly have had sight of our policy statement and I am disappointed that this was not reflected at the planning meeting.'

The developers seized upon the WTB's lack of objection.

WTB's problem is referred to in the first sentence – *'It is constrained within its remit and funding. It relies upon the NAW.'* The old adage 'He who pays the piper plays the tune' springs to mind.

The NAW's consultation paper on Renewable Energy published in April 2002 invited responses. The WTB had not initially been consulted by the Economic Development Committee. Its formal response in June 2002 to Gareth John from Nigel Adams follows:

'The Board broadly welcomes the NA Energy Review research shows that Wales already has a reputation as being a 'green' destination, a country of high environmental quality. However, the Board is concerned that this image could also be harmed if there is a proliferation of intrusive onshore windfarms in sensitive locations.....WTB will be considering how Section 4 grant system can be used to support the development of renewable energy within the tourism sector of Wales.'

Pretty bland stuff and very 'politically correct', but maybe things are changing. A letter from WTB's Director of Strategy to Kaye Little dated March 11th 2003:

'The WTB acknowledges that the wind farm issue is unlikely to diminish in importance in the foreseeable future and it is an issue that will affect not only the WTB but a number of other Government agencies. For this reason, we have identified a need to undertake research to investigate the impact of wind farm development (onshore and offshore) on visitor perceptions of Wales as a tourist destination. We have also extended an invitation to the CCW, the Environment Agency, the Association of National Park Authorities, and the Welsh Local Government Association to participate jointly in this research. We are obviously mindful of previous research that indicates that scenery, landscape and the unspoilt rural environment are regarded as key tourism strengths amongst visitors to Wales.'

At last!! Let us hope that the research asks the right questions, in the right way, to the right people – those who walk, ride, drive, photograph, birdwatch, camp or cycle in Mid Wales, and those who provide them with the facilities to enable these visitors to enjoy their stay, and one hopes, return for further visits.