

# DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RATIONALITY

---

By Dr Stephen Elstub

---

## Introduction

The hegemony in environmental theory, has for sometime been, that environmental sustainability is most likely to be achieved through democracy. More recently, with the rise to prominence of deliberative democracy, within democratic theory and practice, the current hegemony in environmental theory is that not just any form of democracy will achieve environmental goals, but participation in public debate, as this will encourage participants to offer public reasons, commensurate with common goods like environmental sustainability. However, this connection must be empirically tested in deliberative decision-making. The empirical evidence linking deliberative democracy with sustainability is inconclusive. Significantly, most of the evidence that supports the link is from instances of unpartisan deliberation that is not linked to decision making. Essential to the idea of deliberative democracy is that it

involves public debate that leads to binding decisions and, therefore, if instances of democratic deliberation do not culminate in more sustainable decisions then we must be sceptical as to whether environmental sustainability and deliberative democracy can be synthesised. In which case, we must conclude that there is nothing specifically environmental about democracy, deliberative or otherwise, because democracy is a set of procedures for making decisions, while environmental sustainability is a substantive issue. The empirical evidence is clearly inconclusive, and more is required, especially from instances of deliberative discussion that culminates in binding decisions.

Consequently, this article will review deliberative democracy in practice to investigate whether this instance leads to more environmentally rational preferences, amongst the participants, and more sustainable decisions. The case study is the Stanage Forum, the




purpose of which was to produce an effective Management Plan, through the participation of all key stakeholders, for the North Lees Estate, an area in the Peak District, a national park in the UK. It provides a suitable case study because the decision-making structure, in the Stanage Forum, approximates the norms of deliberative democracy, and environmental issues are at the heart of the conflicts in the North Lees Estate. This conflict derives from a tension between recreational use, cultural, economic and environment concerns, however, the Forum aims to build consensus upon a Management Plan, through facilitating the participation of the conflicting stakeholders in dialogue. This is not to say that this one case study can make amends for this lack of empirical research, only that such empirical studies are essential to a genuine understanding of deliberative democracy and its implications.

### **Introducing the Stanage Forum**

The Peak District is a national park in the north of England in the UK. The Peak District National Park Authority (PDNPA) has been devolved the power to manage the Peak District National Park. The PDNPA have opened up all their meetings to more direct participation from the public, and implemented several public participation initiatives. One such initiative is the Stanage Forum, the purpose of which was to produce an effective Management Plan, by involving stakeholders, for the North Lees Estate. This is an area in the Peak District National Park, six miles from the centre of Sheffield, a city located in South Yorkshire in the north of England. Stanage Edge is a cliff feature that is

central to the North Lees Estate, hence the name of the Forum, and attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year to appreciate its natural beauty, to climb, to walk, to cycle, to hang-glide, boulder, run, horse ride, and camp. The area is also internationally important for wildlife, as it provides a range of habitats and supports as dense a breeding population of rare wetland birds as anywhere else in the U.K. In addition the estate hosts a working farm and has several rural communities within it and nearby. As the estate is situated between two large cities, Sheffield and Manchester, there is also significant commuter traffic, as no motorway links these cities. This range of uses and features has meant that a tension between recreational use, cultural, economic and environmental concerns exists in the Estate. Nevertheless, the Stanage Forum aimed to build consensus upon a Management Plan.

Participants in the Stanage Forum were predominantly representatives from the local community and voluntary associations and were self-selecting. Nevertheless, prior to the commencement of the Forum, 'relevant actors' were identified and these associations were categorised into three broad groups of 'stakeholder': recreationalists, environmentalists, and locals (residents and business). In general the recreationalists' main concern was access and they sought the promotion of opportunities for the enjoyment of the special qualities of the area by the public, although in different ways and to different degrees. Therefore, the dominant goals for this stakeholder group were cost free and easy access by car and public transport, 

unrestricted access to the whole estate, opportunities for recreational pursuits and convenience for local facilities. At the start of the Forum many of the recreationalists refused to accept that their access had any detrimental affect of the local ecology at all. The environmentalists' priorities were the conservation and enhancement of the local ecology. To achieve this it was thought necessary to restrict and control

Although there are many commonalities of interests between the stakeholder groups, there are also clear tensions. Unrestricted access is incompatible with the preservation of the environment. Easy access by car is incompatible with farming, maintenance of the beauty of the estate, lack of pollution of the area, and the area being a nice place to live. Use for all recreational pursuits is incompatible with peacefulness,



access to the estate. The locals were seeking to foster the economic and social well being of the local communities. This was by far the most divided stakeholder group. Much of the local economy is generated by the tourism of the area so many locals were loathed to restrict access. They also wanted to ensure convenient commuter links to the cities of Sheffield and Manchester. Locals also wanted to preserve the area as a nice place to live and limiting tourism was seen as important to achieve this.

wilderness and environmental considerations of the area.

### **The Stanage Forum's Decisions and Environmental Rationality**

Despite the fact that the Stanage Forum could have approximated the norms of deliberative democracy more closely, it is still an example of deliberative democracy in practice, as decision-making was based on free and open discussion aimed at consensus. >>>

Consequently, if environmental theorists are right in suggesting that such a decision-making structure will generate environmentally rational preferences and decisions, then an analysis of the Stanage Forum's Management Plan will be a good test of this theory.

Consensus was not reached in the Forum, but there was deliberative compromise on the overall aims. The key aims of the Management Plan was to guarantee access to the estate for visitors including those with special needs, local residents, local business, commuters and people passing through; while ensuring that this access was compatible with the protection and enhancement of the ecology and the landscape. Therefore, proposals that did not ensure access would be incompatible with this aim and it is then immediately evident that the overall focus of the decisions did not reflect a particularly strong environmental rationality. Although the conservation of the ecology was a key priority, it was secondary to access to the area. The overall aim is to balance both of these, but in all circumstances that is unrealistic due to the inherent tensions between these aims, and the stakeholders associated with them. Consequently, the evidence here indicates that deliberative democracy will not inevitably lead to sustainability. One of the main reasons for this is deliberative democracy is unlikely to result in a consensus, so compromise and aggregation are required to make final decisions. Even if the compromise occurs under deliberatively democratic conditions, and the preferences that are aggregated are post-deliberative ones, experience from the Stanage Forum indicates that democratic deliberation

will aid people in focusing on and accepting the common goods like sustainability, but this will still conflict with other common goods, such as access. Sustainability is then destined to be compromised with other goods, meaning that the most environmentally sustainable suggestions fail to be included in the final decisions.

In the Stanage Forum the most environmentally rational proposals did not receive majority support and in some instances environmental considerations were completely overridden. Measures that were proposed and discussed that had a strong environmental rationality, but did not make it into the Management Plan, included road closures and tolls, parking limits, speed limits, footpaths used to channel visitors away from sensitive areas and the active discouragement of hang-gliders from using a sensitive site during the breeding season. A key reason why these proposals were not adopted was that they restricted access to the estate too significantly. It seems that environmentally rational reasons will not necessarily be the most convincing in all circumstances. Another argument that was offered against the more radical environmental proposals, listed above, and that ultimately proved decisive, were that many of these measures would have a negative impact on the view, natural landscape and wilderness experience of the Estate. Although this argument was 'public' and proved persuasive, it was put forward by the recreationalists. It could therefore have been an argument that was instrumentally motivated to ensure access was not compromised to achieve sustainability. Therefore although deliberative democracy



encourages participants to offer public reasons, these can still be offered to justify instrumental ends, especially where there is an established majority in the forum as there was with recreationalists in the Stanage Forum. The experience of the Stanage Forum therefore supports, to a degree, that following instances of democratic deliberation between stakeholders, where participants enter the forum with strong opinions on an issue, public reasons can be produced to defend pre-deliberative self-interested preferences

*... the majority of measures included in the Management Plan, were a compromise between access and sustainability in favour of access and therefore tried to ensure access, but reduce its impact on the environment. Therefore there have been many objectives in the proposal to increase and integrate public transport, and to reduce the impact of access, but once again not to curtail access.*

rather than a 'generalisable interest' arising. Or at the very least that participants associate with the interpretation of the common good that most closely mirrors their initial interests. Consequently, the majority of measures included in the Management Plan, were a compromise between access and sustainability in favour of access and therefore tried to ensure access, but reduce its impact on the environment. Therefore there have been many objectives in the proposal to increase and integrate public transport, and to reduce the impact of access, but once again not to curtail access.

There is still evidence, from the Stanage Forum, of a link between deliberative

democracy and environmental rationality. Although these decisions favour access over environmental sustainability many of these measures were still significant because they went directly against the original interests and preferences of many of the recreationalists, as set out in the first Forum. However, most of the recreationalists voted for these proposals following deliberation, which indicates that preference change, to take into account environmental issues, did occur due to the deliberative process. Therefore, although the participants in the Stanage Forum have not discarded their own interests in favour of environmental interests, they have at least realised, to a greater extent, how their interests and actions affect the environment and how their interests are connected to the environmental wellbeing of the area. There were some more radical proposals included in the Management Plan which favoured environmental concerns above access, which further indicates this to be the case. For example the use of off road four-wheel drive and motor bike was banned, and access of hang-gliders and para-gliders was restricted to locations that did not affect anticipated bird breeding sites. These decisions highlight a growing ecological rationality, as the hang-gliders had been loathed to restrict their access at all when the Forum began. The Management Plan also included the development of designated areas for nature conservation, where access would be permanently restricted. Localised temporary access restrictions and voluntary restriction on access to certain less visited areas during the bird breeding season were also included. These measures were significant,



because they demonstrate the change in preferences of the recreationalists, who were prepared to restrict their own access, at least to an extent in favour of environmental considerations following the debate in the Forums. Moreover, it shows that following the Forum debates they have acknowledged responsibility for environment damage and taken on the duty of environmental protection, which they were reluctant to do at the start of the process.

### Conclusion

Despite this increasing awareness of environmental issues that deliberative democracy in the Stanage Forum produced, it seems apparent that in a deliberative democracy environmental values cannot be guaranteed to prevail. It is clear that although sustaining the ecology of the estate was seen as a common good, access to the estate was also seen as a common good, which indicates that there will often be more than one common good in any situation. A compromise between access and sustainability, more in favour of access, was the ultimate result. Although there is evidence to suggest that the Stanage Forum's participants' preferences have changed due to debate in the deliberative arena and that they have become more environmentally aware, this change is also limited as most participants were not willing to overly restrict their access.

However, much of this analysis depends on one's conception of sustainability, and it is not an objective concept or a fixed goal. Therefore the most important contribution that deliberative democracy could make to environmentalism, and the synthesis between these two theories, is enabling public debate on the varying and competing interpretations of sustainability in a given context. The

Stanage Forum has, in varying degrees, approximated the norms of deliberative democracy, and enabled those with a stake in the North Lees Estate to do exactly this. The resulting vision of sustainability is one that aims to protect, preserve and enhance the local environment, but is also purely anthropocentric in that sustainability here also involves ensuring people get to enjoy this environment too. Although much more empirical evidence is needed to establish this, the Stanage Forum case does indicate that there is no necessary connection between deliberative democracy and environmental rationality and sustainable decisions, because the process cannot guarantee any outcome, even when environmental issues are on the agenda. People will not always find environmental arguments the most convincing. Environmental theorists are therefore asking deliberative democracy to do more than it can deliver, if they expect deliberative democracy and environmental sustainability to be synthesised in every context. Environmental theorists are therefore right to see deliberative democracy as the most justifiable decision-making mechanism, but not because it can guarantee sustainable outcomes.

### Note:

\* **Dr Stephen Elstub** is a Senior Lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland. He is the convenor of the UK Political Studies Association Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Specialist Group ([www.uws.ac.uk/PDD](http://www.uws.ac.uk/PDD)). He is also an active member of the European Consortium for Political Research Standing Group on Democratic Innovations ([www.democraticinnovations.net/](http://www.democraticinnovations.net/)). He accepted an invitation to join the Royal Society of Arts in 2008 and has been a Fellow since.

