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What Silence Knows – Planning, Public Participation and Environmental Values

ANNA DAVIES

Department of Geography
King's College, London
The Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK
E-mail: anna.ray.davies@kcl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

While fraught with ambiguities, support for greater public participation in environmental policy making is experiencing a renaissance amongst sections of government and academia, particularly within the field of land-use planning. There is concern within this cohort that the planning system silences public voices through its current mechanisms for community involvement. Proponents of participation often presuppose that more public participation will produce both 'better' decisions and environmental benefits, but to date research has focused on the front-end, or 'processes', of participation rather than the 'products' that result. While procedural aspects of public participation are important it is imperative that critical consideration is also given to what emerges from the participation that is being exalted. This paper addresses this concern by focusing on the products of a public participation exercise conducted in Luton, South-east England in order to consider what it is that 'silence knows'.

KEYWORDS

Environmental values; public participation; land-use planning; Luton

1. INTRODUCTION

> What matters in … societies is what 'goes without saying', which is determined by tradition; and tradition is always 'silent', not least about itself (Eagleton, 1991: 157).

The process of land-use planning (planning hereafter) is swathed in value judgements. Judgements about what sort of developments should be permitted

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or refused, about who should be involved in decision making and when, and about what sorts of evidence are legitimate in the making of those decisions (Thomas, 1994; Bernstein, 1989; Udy, 1996). However, following Eagleton, the planning 'tradition' is curiously silent about the evaluation of these values in its development plans (Hillier, 1999). In the same way there is a 'tradition' of non-participation by publics in the shaping of those plans. From this position 'what goes without saying' can be interpreted as an unproblematic consensus, not only about the aims and purposes of planning, but also about the value judgements that result. Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that developments in the UK are highly contentious. Protests against developments, while sometimes initiated by organised groups, have frequently encompassed deeply felt expressions of environmental violation that transcend both individual economic gain and the established constituencies of environmental lobby groups (Wall, 1999; McKay, 1996; Bryant, 1996; Concord Films Ltd., 1998). These demonstrations have primarily occurred outside the institutionally provided channels of negotiation and after a planning decision has been taken. This would fit with the fact that while formal participation in planning processes by interest groups, both environmental (e.g. Council for the Protection of Rural England, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and non-environmental (such as the House Builders Federation or Country Landowners Association) is widespread, the participation of local constituents, or 'non-organised publics' remains low (DoE; 1995; Davies, 1998). From this position, while planning may provide 'an important point of intersection for formal, semi-formal and informal environmental agendas' (Myerson and Rydin, 1994: 438) amongst already engaged sectors in society, it is by no means clear that non-organised publics either visualise or utilise it in this way.

The popular culture of participatory abstinence, be it voluntary or not, is contrary to the ethos of public involvement found in sustainable development planning documents (see HMG, 1994; DETR, 1999; DETR, 1998a; 1998b; Owens, 1994; Healey and Shaw, 1994) and in the political rhetoric regarding the 'modernisation' of local government (see DETR, 1998c; 1998d). As stated in the current UK Strategy for Sustainable Development,

> [t]he Government's modernisation of the planning system will help to achieve a system which is fair, open and operated by democratically accountable bodies; a planning system which is an active force for change, rather than simply reacting to events ... Public involvement is essential for a truly sustainable community' (DETR, 1999: 66–67).

It is not only a government mantra, academics (Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999), non-governmental groups and advisory bodies (RCEP, 1998; The Countryside Agency, 2000) also articulate an aspirational commitment to broad, inclusive and deliberative participation (Owens, 2000).

The current demands for more public participation in planning are not unique. The Skeffington Report published over 30 years ago (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1969) proposed the formalisation of public participation channels in planning to enhance the democratic function of the planning process. The partial implementation of the report's proposals has evolved into the current opportunities for participation (see Table 1). While the demands for greater public involvement are, then, familiar the current participa-

- **Survey and Review of Local Plan**
  (every 5 years)
- **Initial Consultation**
  (non-statutory)
- **Pre-deposit publicity and consultation**
  (six week period)
- **Establishing conformity with Structure Plan**
- **Deposit**
  (publicity and inspection for six weeks: objections in writing)

  ⇒ • **If no objections lodged Plan adopted**

- **If objections lodged Public Local Inquiry held**
  (Statutory requirement unless no objectors want to appear)
- **Inspector's report**
  (suggested recommendations)
- **Statement of decisions and reasons**
  (By local authority in response to inspector)
- **Modifications and reasons**
- **Local authority expresses intention to adopt**
- **Deposit**
  (six week period)
- **Objections**
  (if yes: second PLI)

  ⇒ • **Adoption**
- **Challenge in Courts on points of law**

TABLE 1. The Local Plan Procedure
Adapted from Cullingworth and Nadin, 1994
Possibilities for public participation shaded

tion debate is framed by a new analytical and socio-political context. This new context is defined by three dominant and interrelated characteristics: firstly an environmental narrative aligned to social justice and equity to foster more 'deliberative and inclusionary practices' (Burgess et al., 1998; Harvey, 1996); secondly an apparent breakdown in public trust of expertise and political practices (Owens, 2000; J. O'Neill, 1997); and thirdly a recognition of inter-scalar relations between global, national and local spheres of environmental governance (Cowell, 2000; Kempton et al., 1995). This final characteristic is particularly pertinent in that the overarching ethos of sustainable development has percolated through scales of policy and decision making in the UK as an 'emerging cultural politics of the local' (Crouch and Matless, 1996: 237), with Government statements placing the emphasis for participation squarely on the shoulders of local authorities (DETR, 1998a).

This is not to portray a unified, coherent discourse of participation; there are many areas of normative and methodological disagreement, particularly concerning the processes of deliberation and inclusivity. Problems include how to achieve both inclusiveness and deliberation, whether those processes will produce consensus or conflict and critically whether there can be any direct correlation between a more participative democracy and environmental protection (Hayward, 1995; Goodin, 1992; Doherty and de Gues, 1996). A lack of inclusivity, by perhaps excluding a racist or sexist perspective, will not necessarily lead to an impoverished decision, but that does not mean that such opinions are not 'held' by people, and these views cannot be confronted if they remain unspoken. Equally there are no guarantees that procedural democracy will produce substantive environmental benefits if there are competing views of what the environment should be like and what it is valuable for (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Hillier, 1999). Following from this there remains considerable intransigence amongst research communities concerning the elucidation of views, values and opinions in the environmental arena. Environmental values can be scientifically measured, economically calculated, ethically reasoned, psychologically derived, politically influenced and culturally conditioned – and whether these different approaches to analysis can, or even should, be combined is still a moot point (Foster, 1997; Blake, 1999). The position adopted here is that any selected method of analysis shapes and defines a 'reality' through its research questions, attendant assumptions, disciplinary histories and individual research agendas. Essentially the new rhetoric of participation envisages a broader spectrum of views, visions and values in decision-making, which are not only heard, but which also exert some authority and influence over decisions. As Owens (1994: 1145) rightly states such 'genuine engagement of, and with, the public remains a profound challenge'. The current focus on the mechanisms for participation only moves partially towards meeting that challenge. It is equally important to consider what those processes produce and how they could, or should, be incorporated into policy and decisions.

Employing a much vaunted, but increasingly maligned public participation mechanism – the focus group – this paper examines empirically how non-participating publics talk about their environment; the purpose being to see what involving the public might bring to the form and content of development plans. This is achieved by drawing on data collected as part of a wider study of environmental values in the planning process (Davies, 1999a; 1998). The paper begins with a brief account of the research context and methodological issues associated with researching environmental values. The main body of the paper is broken down into two sub-sections, the first explores the products of a public participation exercise, while the second considers the environmental values embedded within a development plan. The views of planning officers on the content of forward plans and the role of public participation in plan production are also considered at this stage. The final discussion identifies key challenges for engaging the public in forward planning processes: the nature of environmental values; the treatment of diverse and potentially conflictual positions; and the scale and scope of participation.

2. RESEARCHING PUBLIC ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

> '[t]he notion of value, in short, eludes our definitional grasp with a duplicity characteristic of the really important concepts in human experience' (Foster, 1997: 2–3).

The study of environmental values is, as noted by Foster, beset with intransigent problems of containment and definition. As multi-dimensional constructs, environmental values can be approached through a legion of methodological (i.e. qualitative or quantitative), epistemological (i.e. realist or social-constructivist) and disciplinary (i.e. economics, ecology, or psychology) frameworks, which can appear incommensurable. Environmental values can be studied at very different scales – from a focus on bio-cellular reaction, through individual understanding, to a societal or even global level of analysis. It is a combination of epistemological diversity and disciplinary difference, combined with alternative scales of enquiry that creates contrasting 'products', from molecular fractals, models, equations and levels of statistical significance to words, texts and images. From this broad perspective values can be both the object of study (the signified), and the signifier for other conditions such as human/environment relations or economic worth (Hillier, 1999; Blake, 1999; Harrison, 1993). Each approach defines its own 'context', or sphere of analysis, that creates a particular vantage point. As a result it is possible to make different linkages and conclusions when apparently studying the same question. While arguments can be made that some approaches are more appropriate to certain issues and in particular contexts these are not followed up here (see Foster, 1997; Burgess et

al., 1998; Clarke, 1995); rather, the aim is to make more transparent the approach that was adopted in this research project and set some boundaries around the claims that can be made from it.

The personal and disciplinary history on which this research draws can be firmly located within the realm of social science, more specifically a qualitative socio-political perspective, with a view of knowledge as being discursively formed as a result of interaction between people through face-to-face contact, education, institutions and other points of communication. This position does not deny the benefits that may accrue from alternative positions, and would seek to create more dialogue between researchers who work on environmental values from different perspectives, but with the aim of providing practical insights for policy making (Minteer and Manning, 2000). Environmental values are seen to be constructed through the interaction of individuals and structures in a socio-institutional context in places – they have a 'geography'. The particular context creates specific networks of knowledge, fragile interest coalitions and shifting affiliations (Davies, 1999b).

Within this broad framework a range of approaches could have been adopted to encourage the articulation of values, following the view of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (1998: 137) who state that there is '[n]o single correct format for articulating values: the mechanisms … should be appropriate to the circumstances of the particular decision'. However the attachment of planning to 'places' through development plans seemed to suggest that a case-based study was appropriate, and the use of focus groups provided an opportunity to test a method identified as potentially deliberative. Although at some level all places are unique, the borough of Luton (Figure 1) was selected because it faces issues common to many places in the UK such as congestion and pressure on open spaces, as well as the need for both economic regeneration and environmental improvement. In addition the local authority were already trying to establish their constituents' views and values through a quantitative 'quality of life survey' (Priority Search, 1995) and were receptive to more qualitative research (Davies, 1998).

Luton has a population of more than 171,000 and is one of the most densely populated urban areas within the South-east of England (LBC, 1997). It has been a destination for a series of in-migrations during the twentieth century, and the residents of Luton have multiple social, economic and religious needs. Nearly one third of households in the area have no car; the Borough has the largest proportion of unemployment of all districts in Bedfordshire and one of the highest rates in the South-east region (LBC, 1997: 9). The density of the population means that Luton can no longer meet the housing demands of its own population and problems of overcrowding and homelessness are considered serious. Historically a manufacturing base, the town, like other areas, has experienced a significant shift to the service sector in the last 20 years. Up until 2000 Vauxhall Motor was the largest single private sector employer in Luton; now, its imminent closure will bring with it new challenges for employment in

FIGURE 1. Luton and its surrounding counties

the area. Luton has lost considerable areas of open space to development in recent decades and further pressure threatens those which remain. In addition the Local Plan (LBC, 1997: 11-12) notes that the town lacks many of the social and leisure facilities usually associated with a town of its size.

With this information in mind, a multi-method process was constructed where careful readings of planning texts complemented semi-structured interviews with planners, and focus groups were conducted with sections of Luton's

population. The qualitative techniques adopted did not seek to provide statistical representativeness but rather to collate a range of possible views and exchanges between people in a societal context. Potential participants were approached either through gatekeepers, such as community development officers, or by visiting community centres and societies directly. Group members were volunteers drawn from pre-existing non-environmental organisations or societies including Parents' Associations, Women's Institutes, sporting and social clubs (see Table 2). The pre-existing networks of interest were seen as a facilitating mechanism to foster discussion and interaction around the potentially unfamiliar issue of environmental values, and a concerted effort was made to include groups who were under-represented in decision-making systems (see Holbrook, 1996). There were difficulties in recruiting people from traditionally targeted groups (such as particular age-brackets or socio-economic categories) because members of organisations, such as Parents' Associations, do not conveniently fit into one specific category alone, but are members of many 'communities' simultaneously (Young, 1990; Kenny, 1996). The aim was to provide a supportive atmosphere in which all participants were encouraged to recall events and offer their thoughts and experiences, as has been done in other environmental policy studies (Myers and Macnaghten, 1999; Burgess et al., 1996). Themes relating to place, locality, lifestyle, identity and memory were employed initially, although the groups were encouraged to define their own boundaries during discussions.

Group	**Members**	**Age**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**
Students				
Luton Sixth Form College	7	16–19	mixed	mixed
Playgroup Mothers				
Farley Hill Playgroup	6	30–50	female	white
Ethnic Women's Group				
Luton Ethnic Minorities Support Network	6	30–65	female	mixed
NVQ Trainees				
Luton Day Centre	6	30–50	male	mixed
Men's Professional Society				
Luton Professional Club	9	40–70	male	white
Table Tennis Club				
Farley Hill Community Centre	6	55+	mixed	white

TABLE 2. Focus Group Characteristics

The possibilities of, and also importantly the problems with, focus group techniques have been discussed at length elsewhere, most productively in a special edition of the journal *Area* edited by Goss (1996) and by Barbour and Kitzinger (1999). It should be emphasised that the technique was not adopted uncritically in this research project. Many practical and theoretically interesting questions surrounding the process of focus groups were encountered during the research, particularly the extent to which they can really be seen as 'deliberative' given the ethics and politics of both group dynamics and moderation. What was particularly significant was how the moderator-group relationships were constructed distinctly by different groups. There are also broader epistemological issues concerning the level of stability (or instability) of the views expressed during the sessions. Every methodological framework has both limitations and opportunities that are frequently intertwined. A critical debate about the processes of focus groups and other deliberative practices needs to be maintained, but importantly this has to occur alongside a consideration of what these techniques actually produce. It is the latter of these two facets of enquiry that forms the main focus here.

3. PUBLIC VOICES

It is already well established, in both government and academia, that public involvement in the formation of plans is *ad hoc*, fragmentary and occasional rather than regular (DoE, 1994; DoE, 1995; Bishop and Bonner, 1995; Young, 1995). This pattern of participation is replicated within the Borough of Luton and openly acknowledged by council officers. The extracts from focus groups used in this section are those which are particularly illustrative of how people talked about their surrounding environments. They refer to pervasive themes that indicate their 'environmental values' although it will be seen that their expressions are as much social as distinctly environmental (Hillier, 1999; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998). Relationships with local environments were very often related to participants' stage in the life cycle, familial commitments and immediate socio-economic circumstances. They are contextualised. This contextualisation is important, but within the confines of a paper it is difficult to represent the range of environmental values encountered whilst also attending to the context in which they are set. Table 3 categorises more examples of environmental values articulated by group members, but they have been de-contextualised and as a result fail to reflect the context in which they were made. The table is therefore included here only as a point of reference.

The existence of contextualisation as a means to express environmental values is clearly exemplified by the first extract from a 50+ table tennis club group. This group of retired men and women were self-defined as 'white,

- **History:** It’s part of our local past; It’s our heritage; It shows our local character; It shows our history our character; it’s distinctive, about our place; It’s part of my memories, part of me.
- **Escape:** For the peace and quiet; to get away from it all; for relaxation, no stress; it’s about the good life; it gives you freedom, space to breathe; a break, forget your worries; to escape pollution; makes you feel independence; the solitude and open space.
- **Wholeness:** Being in nature; it has a more human scale; you feel a community with nature; the environment is everything; humans are animals after all; belonging to something bigger; there’s more of a connection with land and with nature; nature provides a centre...a constant; Society is nature.
- **Use:** It provides us with food to eat and materials for life basically; it’s useful to us; we need to live; we wouldn’t get very far without it; the environment can make money; we can play games on parks; it makes money from tourists.
- **Education:** It gives you a life experience; the environment provides education; it’s about learning; experience increase knowledge; it’s about learning for life; contact can teach you understanding;, tolerance; it’s about learning to care; responsibility and respect.
- **Aesthetics:** It is beautiful; there are scenic views; the views are great; there’s a wild beauty; natural beauty; pretty places.
- **Unknown:** There is danger; you need to respect the environment; sometimes there is fear; it can be unpredictable; you feel on the edge of danger; it’s dangerous to be messing with nature; playing with nature; we don’t know what we’re are doing, there will be unknown consequences;
- **Well-being:** It is healthy being out and about; it makes you feel happy; there is a peace of mind; I think it’s more safe; you feel more secure; it is a calming feeling; there is better air; less stress; contact with nature provides happiness; you have a sense of well-being; it seems to provide meaning in life.
- **Human Responsibility:** There needs to be respect for nature; we have a duty to protect nature; it is our responsibility; duty towards our children; there are unknown consequences to our actions; it is about uncontrollable chain reactions; there is a human domination of nature.
- **Irreplaceability:** Nature is unique; it is irreplaceable; we are clever but we can’t copy nature.
- **Sense of Place:** It is our place; it gives us grounding in our lives; it is about right here, right now, us and nature; it is about interactions, belonging; it is what gives us something in common; this environment is our place in the world.
- **Naturalness:** Life can seem artificial without it; it helps us see ourselves as natural, in our rightful place; it is about communication with nature; the environment is part of me; it is a natural education.
- **Intrinsic Value:** It is valuable for just being there; for just existing; beyond us, different sort of value. It is a gut reaction.
- **Independent Nature:** We are different from nature; it doesn’t need us, but we are destroying it; nature has its own life

TABLE 3. Decontextualised statements of environmental value

working class, old Lutonians', having lived and worked in the area for most of their lives. The group had strong internal bonds and a long association with the community centre on the Farley Hill council estate on the southern edge of Luton, where they gathered for social events and where the group discussions took place.

The strongest theme in this group's discussions was a sense of lost open space allied to a feeling of separation from developmental decision making. There are two significant issues that emerge from the extract below. The first relates to the clear 'us-them' discourse, perhaps in itself unsurprising in a political climate identified as operating with a 'democratic deficit' (see Blake, 1999; Owens, 2000). The second brings to light the difficulties associated with articulating the value of places that are deeply felt, but hard to quantify.

50+ Table Tennis Club

John I used to live near the Park, up here in Farley and when the children were young we were always in there. I don't know ...

Linda It's like getting a bit of countryside in the town. But up here they've taken every little corner up haven't they … you've got an example of that by the way they've taken this car park here.

Carol By where I live, Faversham Road, behind there, [they were] supposed to be green areas, and they built on it, we always thought they couldn't do that. We need those places more than ever now, for space, quiet and freedom for the kiddies.

John It's difficult to say, why it's so important. It's sort of in there, inside you. We're not a very expressive lot, our generation, sort of, not really supposed to talk about it, you know, how you feel ... but you just know it.

The discussion here is firmly grounded with John and Carol referring to physically experienced places in Farley. This contextualisation appears to provide participants with a legitimising springboard, it is about 'their place' and therefore 'their knowledge' is relevant and valid. Yet, expressing such feelings about place connections was a difficult task for all those involved, not just the older members. In this group it seems indicative of a widespread popular culture of silence about emotive environmental issues in the face of apparently unquestionable scientific or utilitarian values that dominate political decisions (Cowell, 2000; Goodwin, 1999; Hillier, 1999). While the previous extract was very contextual and firmly located in familiar places the conversation subsequently engaged with more abstract issues. The conversation might appear muddled and perfunctory in comparison to sophisticated arguments of philosophers, but critically the issues with which the participants are grappling are deeply complex and fundamental to society-nature relationships and their transformation through planning decisions.

Carol I think nature will, will get her own back

John Man thinks he's so clever, but in the end I think he'll knock himself off, we need to protect the environment, even what there is of it round here.

Moderator You said it was important to protect the environment. Why is that?

John Well, it's because we need it to live don't we …

Lotty That's right, we have to eat something. We need animals for food …

Carol The trees and plants for fibres and things like that, but that's different from the reasons I like the green places around here, like Farley. We are all part of it aren't we. We need the wildlife and the plants need sun …it's all part of the grand plan isn't it, that is wider than just us. Clever though we think we are, we are living on something bigger than ourselves and we need to keep her [the environment] happy don't we, really.

Leaving to one side the interesting feminisation of nature and masculinisation of humanity, Carol raises a fundamental question about whether humans and their actions can be categorised as natural or whether there is some distinctly different quality of humanity, which both denaturalises human impacts on the environment and elevates human existence. These are not technical discussions, but questions of morality (Owens, 2000; Bulkeley, 1999) that 'anthropogenic environmental changes result from human behaviour that is not right' (Thompson and Rayner, 1998: 151).

Establishing the roles and responsibilities for people in forming relationships with their surrounding environments similarly preoccupied another group, drawn from Luton's Sixth Form College, that included both male and female students from some of the major ethnic groupings in the town. Not all the members had lived in Luton or even Britain all their lives, but all had been residents for at least two years. In contrast to the table tennis club who were firmly rooted in Luton, the students were keen to move away and experience other places. The students said they felt confident in their discussion of 'environmental' issues because of their formal 'environmental education', although they still struggled with the articulation of moral dilemmas inherent in human-nature relationships.

Jackie begins by isolating humanity from the rest of the non-human environment by emphasising the differences that exist between human and non-human nature, thereby posing a classical dilemma at the heart of many environmental philosophical discussions. When probed by the moderator the group engaged with the problems of this position, that is whether this separation means that humans, through their transcendence have a free rein to act as they wish, or

whether this difference brings with it considerable responsibility for protecting the rest of the environment. In the end it was the second position that was emphasised by the sixth formers, who felt that as humans exercise a determinative power over other creatures they should also recognise that this brings with it concomitant responsibilities.

Students

Jackie We're not part of nature, we've got nothing to do with nature. I don't think you can really class us as part of an ecosystem in this world.

Moderator What about the view that humans are biological beings, they are born, live and die, like animals?

Ben But we have a bigger effect on the ecosystems.

Jackie Yeah, exactly we're different, not the same.

Moderator What makes us so different from the other parts of nature?

Tom We can think and we can talk...

Julie But we can do something to improve the situation.

Ben We can do something about it. We're supposed to be more intelligent.

Jackie I think we should be like, protectors of the world.

Aisha Yeah, like I can really see that happening...

Jackie That's our job...

The separationist view articulated by Jackie that '[w]e're not part of nature, we've got nothing to do with nature' has arguably been dominant in western civilisation since the Enlightenment and the 'ontological separation of nature and space' (Fitzsimmons, 1989: 113), which in turn can be traced back to the Cartesian distinction between mind and body. Goodin (1992) conceptualises this separation through identification of degrees of 'naturalness' in relation to the extent of human influence on 'natural' (or non-human) processes. However as social constructivists would point out there are many different 'natures' and these are essentially contestable (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998).

Like the table tennis club, the students recognised what they called 'the obvious' or material benefits of maintaining the environment, such as space for playing games, growing crops and providing habitats for wildlife. Yet they predominantly talked about the environment as a place that was emotionally fulfilling, where they could be independent and explore if not constrained by fear of crime. The places they talked about were their local green spaces, which provided them with often intangible, but nonetheless considerable psychologi-

cal and social benefits, rather than distant or utopian environments. This does not mean that distant places were not valued by people in the group discussion, but they felt a sense of legitimate authority when talking about their local spaces.

Students

Aisha I feel happiest on the top of Barton Hills, it's just so free. Honestly it's so free.

Moderator Would you feel happy on your own there?

Jackie On the hills and fields I would, but not in the urban parks, like round here.

Ben Yeah, I go up there on my own.

Jackie There's just too much crime, too violent in those sort of parks.

Julie You wouldn't go in there if it was dark.

Tom Even during the day it's pretty bad, you know

These multi-faceted values of open space for both material and non-material reasons have been documented in other studies, most notably by Burgess and associates (1988a; 1988b). In themselves the values discussed in the different groups are not unique or even particularly surprising. They are very normal, everyday, very 'human' and extremely 'real' to those articulating them. It would be surprising if public participation were to uncover 'new' values as a scientist might discover a 'new' species. But what the discussions do show is how the values are embedded in the lives of the people discussing them.

As noted by O. O'Neill (1997) and supported by the results of this exercise, there are few people who disagree that the environment is valuable, although there may be disagreement about exactly why it is so. Although overt disagreement was not commonly visible within the discussions, participants did talk about how difficult it would be to try and choose between these felt values in a development scenario. It is not true to say that publics are naive when it comes to setting priorities; they do however seem to have little faith that their views on what those priorities should be will have much impact. This was illustrated by the ethnic women's support group who talked about how it was difficult to compare say the positive enrichment gained by a child experiencing wildlife in the local park to the social impact of building houses or facilities on those same areas.

The ethnic women's group came together through Luton Council's Ethnic Community Support Network. They were aged between 30 and 65 and included women from mainly Asian and Afro-Caribbean sections of the community. The women had different occupational backgrounds: some of them were profes-

sional people, while others worked in more manual tasks or were full time carers. This group were very interested in greater participation and felt empowered by being part of a support network in Luton. Their primary concerns were focused on making women feel able to voice their concerns and they talked a lot about political representation as well as health and family issues.

Female Ethnic Group

Azra The car fumes are the worst around High Town here, this road. I mean you can deal with chimney smoke, but my kids are just at that exhaust level …

Eva Again it's education and health, it's not just environment, well it is, but you know what I mean its all of them … We need to know what we are doing to ourselves and the earth, how we are damaging it for us and the children.

Pria Yes, have you seen down by Old Bedford Road, it's really terrible, so dirty and smelly. It's so important to make it better, not only to look nice, but bring nature into the town.

Azra But you know sometimes it's a no-win situation, I think, because yeah, you know you are getting rid of so much greenery in Britain, but then if you don't do this, then things can be so much worse in other respects. But again there's also so much waste of land and derelict places in town too that could be developed, but it's not done. Why? Money…?

The socio-environmental linkages are particularly visible in this discussion. As Eva says 'it's education and health, it's not just environment' and Pria reiterates the point made by Linda in the 50+ group about bringing an overall improvement to quality of life. Such statements do not fit neatly into philosophical categories. They allude, if superficially, to both intrinsic and instrumental values and they are articulated within particular political frameworks. There were many parallels between the ethnic group and mothers involved in another discussion group whose common bond was that they had children attending a playgroup. The women were aged between 25 and 45, some employed in retail services, others full time mothers and most of the women lived in council or ex-council homes on the Farley Hill estate.

While in planning it has traditionally been the case that economic imperatives and scientific evaluations have been weighted more than other dimensions of the debate (Hillier, 1999), the women in this discussion group spent a lot of time talking about the non-monetary value of their surroundings. In so doing the playgroup mothers add to the manifold interpretations and situated understandings of what nature can be and environments can mean (Castree, 1995).

Playgroup Mothers

Liz Yeah, but you know when the weather's nice you go to the park don't you, not to the shops because it makes you feel happy ... There is more to life than buying stuff. Sometimes it's nice to just be somewhere, doing nothing, relaxing. Its valuable isn't it, for being there? Not in terms of money, or anything, it's a different sort of thing altogether.

Emma It doesn't cost anything to go the Lee Manor Park or Bluebell Wood. If you've got four kids and no money, what are you going to do. It gives the kids space to run around and play, meet other kids you know.

Liz As long as you don't let them out of your sights, though eh?

Emma But better than the Arndale Centre. Gives the kids a different look on life, especially if you don't have any money. You can still be happy.

Although the rhetorical support for positive nature-human relationships was pervasive in discussions there was also an entrenched pessimism about achieving them. An all-male group of trainees involved in gaining National Vocational Qualifications as part of a scheme to increase skills amongst the long-term unemployed group were particularly vociferous in this regard. Their faith in political institutions was fragile, if it existed at all. The group appreciated the benefits, as did the playgroup mothers, of the open, public access to parks and green spaces for free relaxation and tranquillity. They identified that their ability to use and enjoy open spaces without economic cost was of immense psychological benefit to them, particularly because of the perceived common ownership of open spaces regardless of economic standing.

Male NVQ Trainees

Mark The best thing about it [the local park] is the peace and quiet, it's a 'good' thing, there's not loads of it, but it's good stuff.

Steve It's being able to relax and be happy I suppose, I don't know, everyone's different and want different things I suppose.

Saun But you need money to do that don't you. To choose what you want to do …

Steve Exactly, you don't need money to enjoy the simple things of open space do you. It shouldn't be just about money, it's more than money. People are prepared to pay for some things, but some things shouldn't be for sale, you know.

Saun Like it's part of our heritage and that. It's important because it gives you a feeling of belonging to something bigger than your family and things. I don't know really.

Of course it is simplistic to suggest that contact with non-human environments is always pleasant, quiet, tranquil and stress-relieving. Experiences depend on many other contingent variables. Discussions about similar places by different respondents will reveal divergent interpretations. For some, green spaces and the countryside in particular, are seen as areas of safety, away from urban fears providing escape, calmness and slow pace of life. For others tranquillity is unsettling and the unpopulated areas of parks and woods dreaded for fear of crime (Burgess, 1996). In the same way it would be naive to assume people always think about 'the common interest' in environmental planning discussions. The final group considered in this paper were particularly vocal in their discussion of self-interest in decisions over land. They were members of a social (all male) professional organisation and ranged in age from 40 to over 65. Although some were retired, most were working professionals who lived in suburban areas of Luton. What is interesting is that this group was the most sceptical of establishing public participation across broader sections of society both in terms of actually getting people to participate and also with respect to attaining beneficial outcomes. Their discussions provided a useful check on romanticising both public participation and notions of community.

Male Professional Society

John …well the only plan that the government have is to take over the biggest park that we've got, which is Butterfield Green, to make it part of the university and a light industrial estate …

Derek A light industrial estate of which there are quite a few around Luton with vacant positions

John What I am talking about is the stupidity of planning.

Fred It comes back to human nature again doesn't it. Because the immediate question one asks when you hear of these developments is 'does it affect me?' No. Then I'm not interested. I mean none of us, perhaps Vernon will shoot me down, none of us are really community spirited, community oriented. It's all self interest isn't it?

People talked through issues, shifted opinions, disagreed and formed consensus at different stages in discussions. The statements were not necessarily consistent, and reflected the multivariate pressures that modern life places on decision making, noting particularly tensions between housing, roads and open spaces within towns such as Luton. These issues have been highlighted elsewhere as indications of ambivalence or contradiction (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998); they can however also be conceptualised as realistic reactions to increasing complexity and interdependence between social, economic and environmental choices (Owens, 2000). Political and cultural contexts clearly contribute to the framing

of these people's environmentalisms. How people make sense of their feeling and reactions to their wider environments is by relating them to other social controversies that they encounter through informational exchange. While dynamism in this context presents difficulties for planning decisions, it is not only a feature of public values, but also pervades the shifting positions of Government and the wider planning policy community. The question is, how can the range of different views be considered to make a just and equitable decision?

While these focus groups are not statistically representative, there were strong similarities between the groups in the way people talked about their relationship with the environment contextually. The discussions of abstract concepts of intangible environmental values, of value 'for just being there' were informed by their experiences 'in places', just as were their expressions of value about education, money, health, and human-to-human relationships. The environment for them is sensed through daily activities, walking in parks, interacting with the commonplace natures of their surrounding areas, but also accessed through global media. It is not just a localised environment; it is a lived environment (Hillier, 1999).

This contextualisation might be assumed to lie at the heart of 'local' planning set within a strategic framework of national guidance and structure plans, yet the analysis of Luton's Development Plan (LBC, 1997) indicates that this may not always be the case.

4. PLANS AND PLANNERS

The content of the Luton Borough Plan (the Plan) is set within the formal rules and regulations of the wider planning system defined by the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act (as amended by the 1991 Planning and Compensation Act) to 'provide a firm basis for rational and consistent decisions to be taken on planning applications and appeals, and to provide … a measure of certainty about what form of development will, or will not, be permitted on any land within the town.'(LBC, 1997: 1). The Plan is situated in a national, regional and county context and is impacted by national Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPGs), Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (DETR, 2000, PPG 11) and the Bedfordshire County Structure Plan (Bedfordshire County Council, 1995) which together provide the strategic context for planning. One of the key themes running through the Government planning policy advice at all scales of administration is quoted in the Plan as 'the need for local planning authorities to develop policies which are consistent with the concept of 'sustainable development'' (LBC, 1997: 7, also see DETR, 1998a; 1998b; Owens, 1994). This sets up the first of many tensions within the plan, for definitions of sustainable development are still hotly debated and far from 'certain' (Dobson, 1996; Lafferty, 1996; Basiago, 1995).

The Plan addresses a wide range of issues, including housing, shopping, leisure and community facilities, that could all be considered to have 'environmental' dimensions, as well as a distinct 'environmental' section. The continuing commitment to a disembedded conceptualisation of 'the environment' in the Plan is one of the major differences in the way people talk about their local area and the way planning procedures control developments of it. In other ways there are similarities in the broad intent of the Plan and people's expressions of value. There are broad, vague statements of support for protecting and enhancing areas within its remit such that '[c]oncern for the environment of the town and the resulting quality of life for its residents are of paramount importance to the Borough Council' (LBC, 1997: 12) and that 'Luton's natural and physical environment will be protected, and all development proposals will be expected to enhance Luton's environment and townscape for present and future generations' (LBC, 1997: 55). However, there is little elaboration about how these positive changes will actually be carried out and whether there could possibly be a consensus about what constituted 'enhancement' by all the people in Luton.

The Plan adopts a clear hierarchy of scale in recognising environmental worth by using national and regional designations of its land as self-evident and unquestionable measures of environmental value (Owens, 1994). The designations provide a solid framework, clearly demarcated and bounded for protection (at least in theory). Outside those designations the language becomes less specific, such that 'key features of the landscape, including trees, hedgerows and ponds, will *normally* be protected and developments which *needlessly* affect them will not be permitted' (LBC, 1997: 56: emphasis added). The pervasive use of the words 'normally' and 'needlessly' effectively defers specific decisions over particular cases to a later stage in the planning process. Yet in both cases – whether land is designated valuable by a professional body (i.e. The Countryside Agency) or scientific advisor (i.e. English Nature) or not – the language decontextualises, emptying places of meaning and ignoring key questions about how judgements are made and legitimised (Cowell, 2000).

There have been a number of studies that address the use of environmental narratives in the planning system (Newby, 1990; Healey and Shaw, 1994; Myerson and Rydin, 1994). These analyses established a set of temporally structured categories for the treatment of 'the environment' in plans. They all suggest that although the language used to describe environmental issues has shifted through time, influenced by prevailing political orthodoxy, there has been a consistent thread of utilitarian or instrumental anthropocentrism running through development plans. This holds true in Luton's Plan, where areas of open space are tagged for 'recreation' and archaeological sites are described as a 'finite and non-renewable resource which provide information about the past' (LBC, 1997: 59). Allied to that, and despite the statutory channels for wider participation, the tone of the plan follows what Dryzek (1997) has outlined as 'administrative rationalism', where the role of 'experts' becomes paramount in

setting policy positions through a designatory system. Luton's Plan is not unique in that it has been developed by professional planners trained in the regulatory processes of planning. The accepted norms of what should be contained within a plan and how that content should be expressed have evolved over time and through legislation. Nevertheless, the resulting statements present a vague picture both of places and of possible outcomes of potential developments, rather than the certainty aspired to in the Plan's opening pages. The environmental values incorporated in Luton's plan are presented as uncontested, static and comprehensive, appearing as universally applicable designations. As a result, what the Plan actually does is open up a new field of contestation in the development control arm of planning procedures, thus shifting the emphasis in decision making to another heuristic space and marginalising any public participation that occurs earlier on in the process.

Although not acting autonomously in plan production, planners remain closest to the processes and procedures involved. The following extracts from interviews with planning staff provided useful insights into how they see values being articulated or not in plans and decisions. What emerges from discussions with both district and county planners is a feeling of institutional inertia, where procedures can seem impervious to change even though they may be recognised as imperfect. There is a clear vision of the decision making process that seeks easily quantifiable measures of worth such as the scientific classification 'rarity', noted by John, a County Planner below. Yet these classifications still rest on the expert judgement that 'rare' equals 'valuable' (Harrison, 1993). John is unclear how this system, as currently structured, might begin to accommodate more public and intangible values, despite his frustration with the current system:

> '… the bits of land people value are those bits of rough ground, open space, which aren't afforded any protection at present. In a planning inquiry they won't be given any weight because they don't have anything particularly rare or special in them. I don't know what we can do about that in the present system. It just seems particularly difficult to get from where we are now to where we might want to be.' (John, Bedfordshire County Planner)

Sarah, a planner from Luton, expressed a similar feeling of restriction by processes that do not admit intangible values. In contrast to the Bedfordshire planner however she illustrates how the confines of the existing system can be circumvented:

> 'We do use sense of place a lot … how you justify that in a planning system where you are in conflict, it starts getting hard and you have to start looking for all sorts of other reasons for keeping that environment. We have managed to justify one area of open space on nature conservation grounds, we were lucky and there was the added bonus of amenity we could employ to add weight to our argument. You have to deal with each situation on a case-by-case basis.' (Sarah, Luton Planner).

Sarah's position is to manipulate, rather than challenge, a seemingly unresponsive system. She suggests that using a flexible, 'case-by-case' approach the dimensions of value incorporated into decisions can, on occasion, be expanded to include the sorts of non-material values that publics so frequently refer to. Although Sarah still sees plans prioritising those values which can be quantified she is supportive of their vague rhetoric that leaves unresolved and unsubstantiated references to intangible values. This is in part because Sarah fears that reducing the flexibility of the system might lead to greater demands for quantification and scientific bases of value, ruling out the possibility of creative protection such as that which she described above. Nonetheless, the current system still requires that public social and cultural values have the added weight of the scientific nature conservation judgement to ensure protection. This is re-emphasised below with reference to Luton's Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) programme and its ill-defined relationship to formal planning processes.

> 'What we're doing under the LA 21 process is picking out what is important for people in their neighbourhoods. Social and cultural values, so that sort of thing is coming aboard, but I'm not quite sure whether we will have any ability in the planning system to cope with that. We are very restricted by what we can do by government … yes councils can say they want to protect locally important sites, but if the site comes up for development, they don't actually give you the ability to protect it, it has to be nationally or regionally significant'. (Sarah, Luton Planner)

It is then unclear how more deliberative participation approaches, such as those undertaken through LA 21 mechanisms, will mesh with the top-down designatory system. In a situation where there are more voices being heard, but no agreed way of organising, or prioritising, those voices there is just as likely to be conflict as consensus. Conflict in itself is not necessarily a bad thing for an active and evolving democracy (see Flyvberg, 1997), but the practicalities of dealing with it need to be considered up-front rather than de facto.

5. DISCUSSION

What this short study of the products of participation suggests is that publics do not adhere to the logically consistent reasoning of philosophers, but intuitively construct and reconstruct their environmental value positions in the light of personal experiences, relationships and events. For publics a combination of tangible and intangible values work together to produce a composite value of their environment that is greater than the sum of its individual parts (Goodin, 1992). In contrast, the Plan focuses primarily on quantifiable benefits of environments defined by expert-led designatory systems. These designatory systems are not explained, nor the values within them justified such that '[v]alues

have not disappeared, but have been driven into the critical unconscious, continuing to exercise force, but without being available for scrutiny' (Squires, 1992: 5). Where there is the occasional reference to wider notions of environmental value, the language and commitment to protection of those values tends to be vague. As a result the Plan has a de-sensitised vocabulary that does not reflect the diversity and complexity of the public imagination, or their sense of location. Recent Government demands to make 'development plans shorter and clearer' (DETR, 1999: 67) suggest that support for more nuanced and contextualised statements in plan production might not be forthcoming.

In the light of calls for increased public participation the discontinuities between the way publics feel about expressing their values – their insecurities about articulating felt or emotional responses – and how the type of values they speak of are currently treated in plans is significant. Plans certainly do not currently function as communicative or resonant documents for the public, nor does the vagueness and lack of specificity in plans provide publics with any confidence that their positions will be strongly considered in decision making about developments. The preoccupation with introducing new processes of participation needs to be balanced by deeper consideration of its purpose, the end goals of that participation and how remaining systems will be able to incorporate (or not) participation products into their systems of decision making. Balancing the autonomy of local communities with broader political agendas has been largely ignored to date, with little attempt to reconcile the claims of global (scientific) and local knowledge and values.

The process of public participation raises difficult questions about asserting the 'integrity of intrinsic, cultural and social values' (Hillier, 1999: 195). This will need an ideological shift amongst the wider planning policy community and general structures of governance, to 'rediscover the value of judgement and the judgement of value' (Owens, 2000: 576). If levels of participation are elevated there will be a 'cacophony of voices' (Byrne, 1998) that will be difficult to mediate, not least because of the fluidity and contextual nature of environmental values (RCEP, 1998; Blake, 1999). Conflict just as much as consensus could result through the 'contradictory politics of place ... inhabited by both the conservative and the transformative, the radical and the reactionary' (Crouch and Matless, 1996: 237).

In summary merely 'hearing' voices in development plan processes is insufficient to achieve what might be called 'strong' participative democracy based on a civic model (Owens, 2000). This is particularly so if decisions about value judgements are made elsewhere in the system (i.e. during development control). Introducing new processes will not alone resolve the problems inherent in difficult decisions about land use, nor will it represent a 'participatory democracy' when only used in certain policy fields and in delimited areas. The barriers to participation have wider bases including a public disenchantment with formal politics and expertise. Participation needs to be considered in a

broader geographical and policy context and its canonisation as the Holy Grail for both democracy and the environment perhaps tempered with caution. There needs to be more empirical investigation of why past systems have failed and what the implications of a new, successful system might mean. A greater institutional transparency about the end goals of public participation would facilitate deeper consideration of the challenges that more active involvement by publics will pose to formal systems of environmental governance.

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