

## It's not too late to save CEH

The internal decision by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) to reduce its Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) has been viewed with utter dismay by many ecologists. Such expertise, once lost, is well nigh impossible to reassemble, and there is an urgent and growing national need to address issues such as biodiversity, climate change and sustainability.

NERC took its decision to address CEH shortfalls of less than 5% of the CEH budget. The proposed new structure would save £2.1 million in real terms per annum, a saving of less than 10% of budget, but the number of CEH sites would be halved to 4 with a staff cut of 33%. The cost of achieving this saving is £45m, which would cover the CEH's anticipated budget shortfall for over a decade.

The issue is, however, far broader than the future of one discipline. In the Commons' Select Committee for Science & Technology recent 'Question Time', the Minister for Science said with regard to the CEH proposals that there is "a very strong tradition in this country which says that those kinds of scientific

decisions should be made by scientists and not by ministers."

But while under normal circumstances, tactical funding decisions should be made by scientists, surely, when broader strategic issues come into play, guidance, and if needs be resource management, is required from policy makers. Worryingly, the Minister went on with regard to Research Council Institutes: "there is an inclination to do basic or blue skies research in this sort of field as in other fields of science within universities because, by doing it within universities, you can access different disciplines."

Leaving aside that that different university departments vigorously compete with each other for ratings and funding, so impeding efficient collaboration, Research Council Institutes have always assembled a mix of expertise to address mission-orientated goals. Further, the Minister clearly states that his preference for universities over RC Institutes applies to 'other fields of science'. Do the proposed CEH closures signal a return of a Prior Options night of the long knives?

It is still (just) not too late to save the CEH sites and a third of its staff, but urgent action by the OST is required. Of course if the OST were to step in, it might rightly ask how the long-term shortfall in CEH funding could be met. Here there are several possibilities but I suggest just one. The cost of saving the CEH is a miniscule fraction of the tax revenue the Government receives from the oil whose continued use will drastically affect UK ecosystems. The Prime Minister says that climate change is the biggest threat we face, and the Government is meant to have a joined-up cross-departmental policy to address climate issues. This issue alone (and there are others) should mean that more will be required of CEH (and other UK ecologists) in the future, not less.

The OST should reconsider its decision to leave the matter to NERC. As for scientists beyond ecology, it may well be in your interest to keep an eye on this particular ball.

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