

Arun District Council Ford Eco-Town Select Committee

Biodiversity

Statement by Emma Tristram – 3 June 2008

Executive Summary

I have written the attached paper, on the possible effects of the proposed Ford Eco-Town on the biodiversity of the area, for submission to the Arun District Council Select Committee on the Ford Eco-Town proposal. I am Secretary of Walberton Action Group and am speaking for that group and for Arundel Town Council and Ford and Clymping Parish Councils.

The main points of the paper are:

1. The Eco-Town area contains some important habitats – meadows, water, arable fields, hedgerows, woodland and ‘untidy corners’ – and some species that are in decline nationally such as corn buntings. This is supported by a statement from Dr Nick Sturt of the Sussex Botanical Recording Society.
2. The effect of the Eco-Town on woodlands and fields in Binsted and Tortington would be serious, both because of pressure for an Arundel bypass and because of the general pressures from the proximity of a new town. This is supported by a statement from Dr Dawn Scott, Principal Lecturer in Ecology at Brighton University.
3. The little-known Binsted Rife Valley, with its excellent and abundant bird life, would be damaged as a habitat by having the Eco-Town at its southern end.
4. Water management: the FAVG presentation proposed ‘managed retreat’, which allows more extensive areas to flood so that flood waters are spread out and new habitats are created. This would not be compatible with a new town, especially if the west bank of the Arun – a flood plain – is used for housing.

Conclusion: Many important habitats would be damaged or destroyed. Promises of new habitats from ‘managed retreat’ are unlikely to be fulfilled. An Eco-Town at Ford would have a seriously damaging effect on the biodiversity of the area.

Ford Eco-Town and Biodiversity

This paper does not attempt to depict the detailed biodiversity of the entire area but assembles some contributions by experts and others which give a picture of the damage which the Eco-Town proposal would cause.

One reason for its unsuitability is that the biodiversity needs of the whole area have not been taken into account. Tony Whitbread, the Chief Executive of the Sussex Wildlife

Trust, said on his blog in April that carbon neutrality is a laudable goal but an Eco-Town should have 'a much more rounded environmental vision'. It should 'start with a proper understanding of the environmental assets (the wildlife, landscape and heritage) of the place and then deliver a proper plan for how these are to be conserved, managed and expanded as part of a wide package that enhances the area.' This has not been done.

1. The effects of the Eco-Town on local habitats within the Eco-Town area.

The following notes A-D on the Ford Eco-Town area are by Dr Nick Sturt of the Sussex Botanical Record Society. He has edited several past volumes of the yearly journal 'Sussex Botany'. It is clear from his notes that the area does contain important and scarce habitats and some species that are in decline in Sussex and nationally.

'A. Meadows and Aquatic Habitats.

The pastureland contains some relics of unimproved grassland with old meadow species such as Pepper saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*). It is estimated that in Britain 95% of neutral grassland has been lost in the last 60 years, with only 4,000ha remaining nationally. This habitat is particularly rare in W Sussex. The land is intersected by rifes and ditches which support valuable communities; these aquatic habitats are still largely in good condition thanks to a sustainable approach to farming. The invertebrates urgently need study, as do the amphibia. The grazing marshes between Ford and the Arun also provide rich habitats for wildlife; here they are influenced by brackish water and support a number of rare higher plant species, notably Divided Sedge (*Carex divisa*), very scarce in Sussex as a whole. All these areas are very important for birds: (a) species of wetlands such as Reed Bunting and Lapwing; and (b) wintering wildfowl and waders.

B. Arable Habitats.

The arable fields contain a good range of arable weeds, including several which are in serious decline, such as Field Woundwort (*Stachys arvensis*), Cut-leaved Deadnettle (*Lamium hybridum*), and Spreading Hedge-parsley (*Torilis arvensis*). The Skylark and Corn Bunting are holding on here; there is concern about both species; the Corn Bunting is in serious decline nationally.

C. Other habitats.

Hedgerows and small areas of scrub are vital to a number of breeding birds such as the Yellowhammer. North of the railway line native trees have been planted which will in due course produce 'natural' woodland, a habitat very scarce on the coastal plain. It is not clear whether this area will be retained in the proposals. Whilst it would become a welcome contribution to local biodiversity, it would not counterbalance the loss of the more precious local habitats to be destroyed by housing and roads; and it certainly could not make up for the loss and degradation of the Binstead/Tortington woods with their rich assemblage of ancient woodland species. Then there is what might be called 'wasteland' – small corners not currently used for industry or agriculture: here too there

is often considerable biodiversity in the form of annual and other 'weeds' and the invertebrates and birds which use them. Just as a scrupulously tidy garden provides few feeding or nesting opportunities for birds, so a landscape without its untidy corners is less bio-diverse.

D. Impressions.

When I think of the land proposed for this new town – in the only intermission between seas of housing between Seaford and Pagham – I think of damp fields by rife with Meadow Buttercup, Lady's Smock, sedges and Sweet-grass; Reed Buntings and Reed Warblers noisy in the vegetation. Flocks of Linnets and other small birds in the fields, and Skylarks high above; Kestrels and Sparrowhawks, Herons... and are there Water Voles?

Other species definitely present in the Eco-Town area are harvest mice and barn owls, according to John Knight, WSCC coastal ranger. He points out that a substantial area of hedgerows with mature trees would be lost, either immediately or as a result of adjacent construction impact.

2. The effects of the Eco-Town on Binsted and Tortington.

Paragraph C of the above notes refers to 'the loss and degradation of the Binsted/Tortington woods with their rich assemblage of ancient woodland species'. The whole woodland area to the west of Arundel is now a Site of Nature Conservation Importance. A major reason why the Eco-Town would cause this 'loss and degradation' is that it would lead to pressure for an Arundel Bypass, and any off-line Arundel Bypass would have a severely damaging impact on these woods.

The proximity of an Eco-Town would in itself also cause degradation of the woods and of the rest of Binsted and Tortington. Luke Wishart, whose family owns and farms most of Binsted, pointed out in his letter to the Minister about the Eco-Town that there would be 'pressures from increased public access, vandalism, desire for inappropriate sports, litter, more cats and dogs, and street lighting visible to the south.'

3. Small mammals: evidence from Dr Dawn Scott.

On Binsted's small mammal population, Dr Dawn Scott, Principal Lecturer in Ecology at Brighton University, states:

'Binsted Woods supports one of the only six sites in the country which are part of the National Dormouse Monitoring Scheme, supporting breeding populations of this national and EU protected species. Any impact on these woods in terms of increase in human activity, loss of habitat due to development, or loss of connectivity could have a detrimental impact on this protected species. A new town in the area will increase the pressure on these delicate habitats, and threats such as the development of the A27 would threaten the long-term survival of this species.'

‘Having recently surveyed the agricultural fields and hedges close to Binsted for small mammals, I found evidence of a wide range of small mammal species including rare species such as the harvest mouse, water shrew, pygmy shrew and the yellow-necked mouse. This suggests that the diversity of habitats and the presence of rough grassland and ancient hedgerows supports high biodiversity in this area.’

She adds: ‘If the development at Ford were on brownfield and already degraded land then there could be a potential benefit. However, it is planned for over 80 per cent of the development to be on Greenfield sites, which is going to have a negative impact on wildlife that uses these areas, and therefore the local biodiversity. As a professional ecologist who lives in the local area, I would strongly encourage all those involved in decision-making to carefully consider the impact of the new development on the local and regional biodiversity. Surely if the proposed town is truly ‘eco’, it should be sited where it can have a positive impact on biodiversity, i.e. as a result of improving degraded habitat, rather than the loss of habitat which is currently supporting a diversity of species.’

4. The effect on the Binsted Rife valley.

Luke Wishart’s letter to the Minister also pointed out that the Binsted Rife valley, immediately to the north of the Eco-Town site, is ‘a very good area for birds, as it is a wet valley with no public access’. He attached a letter from Rex Knight of the British Trust for Ornithology, reporting on the 2003-4 bird survey figures, which found 58 species of bird in the valley. This important bird habitat would be rendered inhospitable for many of these sensitive species by having an Eco-Town built at its southern end. Many of these are ground-nesting birds such as skylark, lapwing, grey partridge, corn bunting, and meadow pipit. As well as the cats and dogs mentioned above, there would be an increase in urban foxes which would be a severe risk to these birds.

5. The water management question.

The developers’ presentation mentioned ‘managed retreat’ as a possible use of the west bank of the river Arun. ‘Managed retreat’ is a new idea for dealing with floodwaters – that coastal defenses and land drainage schemes are expensive, destructive and anyway do not succeed in preventing flooding, and the best approach in future would be to allow more areas to flood, so that there is a bigger catchment area for flood waters and new wetland habitats are created.

An example of ‘managed retreat’ is the Cuckmere Valley in East Sussex, where there is a plan to remove embankments and an artificial straight channel and let the whole estuary flood. If this goes ahead and is a success, something similar might be considered for Arundel. This would mean removal or lowering of the high earth banks along the River Arun, and allowing water to flood the estuary, including part of the Eco-Town area. This could be very beneficial for flood defence and wildlife, but is not compatible with a new town filling up the west side of the flood plain.

The planned hydro-electric plant, to utilise the tidal flow of the Arun, and the sewage treatment works for the new town, would have to take up at least part of the west bank area. In fact, the probable use for this area would be 'local housing', as shown on the labeled wall map which is part of the FAVG presentation. New housing on a floodplain means that drainage schemes and flood barriers have to be maintained, at great expense, rather than removed in a 'managed retreat'. Even then they sometimes fail, as happened on the river Ouse at Lewes in October 2000.

Housing on the west bank of the Arun (in the floodplain that is now protected by a high earth bank) would not be compatible with 'managed retreat' and the creation of new wetland habitats. It seems that mention of 'managed retreat' is another bit of 'greenwash' for the scheme.

Conclusion

Many important habitats would be damaged or destroyed by the building of a new town at Ford. Promises of new habitats from 'managed retreat' are unlikely to be fulfilled, and an Eco-Town at Ford would have a seriously damaging effect on the area's biodiversity.