The National Trust's approach to conservation

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Since our foundation in 1895 'for the purpose of promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest' (*National Trust Act* 1907, Section 4.1) the National Trust has embraced the evolving discipline of conservation, whether defined by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings or the

Burra Charter. Although we have since developed numerous policies and guidance on managing the conservation of the many aspects of our diverse range of properties, an Organisational Strategy (National Trust 2007) that prioritises the improvement of Conservation and Environmental performance, alongside Engaging Supporters, Investing in our People, and Financing our Future, stimulated conservation practitioners to formulate a set of guiding principles to enable managers who may not be conservation professionals to take good conservation decisions.

We have taken account of, and collaborated in the development of conservation principles by other organisations dealing with different parts of the historic environment, such as the National Trust for Scotland as well as English Heritage. However, the breadth of the work of the National Trust for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, across both cultural and natural heritage, in rural, coastal and urban environments, required the development of our own conservation principles, although they share the same spirit of conservation. Our principles reflect not only continuing practice, but also changes in the way conservation is now understood and implemented, especially the increasingly accepted view that it is impossible to stop the clock entirely. Thus we now define conservation as 'the careful management of change. It is about revealing and sharing the significance of places and ensuring that their special qualities are protected, enhanced, enjoyed and understood by present and future generations.' (National Trust, Conservation Directorate, September 2003)

There is no primacy in any of the six principles, but there is a narrative in terms of the conservation cycle that proceeds from understanding to action to record, reflecting the English Heritage conservation principles.

Principle 1: Significance

'*We will ensure that all decisions are informed by an appropriate level of understanding of the significance and "Spirit of Place" of each of our properties, and why we and others value them.*'

In the 21st century we have woven the revelation of meaning into our approach to conservation in addition to the preservation of physical material. This reflects the increasing emphasis of Conservation Management Planning in maintaining the significance of what is to be conserved (Heritage Lottery Fund 2005). Determining significance through research and consultation provides the evidence for how we identify and prioritise conservation work, and we have developed processes such as the Conservation Performance Indicator and the Triple Bottom Line Tool that enable progress in conserving our properties to be quantified alongside financial and social benefits (Lithgow *et al* 2008). Significance also takes account of the context in which our properties and their elements evolved or for which they were created, raising the importance of views and settings. We also now acknowledge that significance may change as society changes.

Principle 2: Integration

'*We will take an integrated approach to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, reconciling the full spectrum of interests involved.*'

Our organisation involves many professions in which the practitioners are enjoined to respect each other's priorities, to enable managers to make decisions that take account of the range of interests that may be involved. This approach can result in innovative solutions that would not occur to each discipline working in isolation. Such collaboration involves not only different conservation specialisms, but also different functions, for instance the integration of business and productivity with good environmental practices and diverse habitats through organic farming.

However, this principle also has a wider perspective. Today, just over a hundred years since our 1907 Act, we lay equal emphasis on the verb 'to promote', which allows us to campaign on issues that fall outside our geographical boundaries but affect the preservation of our own properties. Such issues include climate change, for example the management of water catchments (National Trust 2008).

Principle 3: Change

'*We will anticipate and work with change that affects our conservation interests, embracing, accommodating or adapting where appropriate, and mitigating, preventing or opposing where there is a potential adverse impact.*'

In common with other conservation bodies, we acknowledge that we cannot stop all the processes of change, as reflected in our definition of the term 'conservation', so we now emphasise maintaining significance for the future through conservation management.

We welcome processes of change that are benign and benefit our properties by enhancing their presentation, interpretation and state of conservation. Others, while damaging significance,

Managing change. Rising sea levels and more frequent storms are taking an increasing toll on the harbour walls of Mullion Cove, Cornwall (left). Working with consultants and the community, the Trust has developed a long-term strategy to manage the gradual change from the cove's current appearance to its return to its original form (right). ©The National Trust

may be avoidable, through better planning. Unavoidable change that results in irreversible damage can be mitigated through conservation processes such as recording, reconstruction, or even relocation.

It is probably fair to say, however, that most non-specialists still perceive conservation to be static, akin to 'fossilisation'. While the understanding of conservation as a dynamic process is spreading among our property staff, work is still needed to convey this understanding to our visitors and supporters.

Principle 4: Access and engagement

'*We will conserve natural and cultural heritage to enable engagement for the benefit of society, gaining the support of the widest range of people by promoting understanding, enjoyment and participation in our work.*'

Access is now considered to be not only the way in which we provide public benefit, but also the means of improving the conservation of our properties, by engaging the support that enables conservation work to be carried out. This is a step away from the Sandford Principle (Sandford 1974) that prevailed in the late 20th century, which presumed a conflict between conservation and access by emphasising the primacy of conservation in situations where that conflict arose. Instead, we aspire to remove the potential for conflict by achieving conservation through those to whom we provide access. Negotiating the reconciliation of real and apparent conflicts in providing sustainable access requires clear standards, which we now tailor to each property through processes such as the Conservation for Access Toolkit (Lithgow *et al* 2008).

Principle 5: Skills and partnership

'*We will develop our skills and experience in partnership with others to promote and improve the conservation of natural and cultural heritage now and for the future.*'

The vast range of skills needed to care for our diverse range of properties is practised by increasingly low numbers of people. A shortage will inhibit our ability to practise the 'little and often' care of our properties, such as preventive conservation and regular building maintenance This approach retains more significance and is more cost-effective than allowing longer cycles of decay that require greater intervention and thus more expensive repair.

We recognise skills are acquired and developed most effectively through partnership, not only between our staff and volunteers, but also with other organisations including educational institutions, and heritage and professional bodies, who provide training and experience, and a common understanding of the professional standards and conservation ethics. The entire heritage sector should benefit as individuals move between different employers and types of employment through their careers.

Principle 6: Accountability

'*We will be transparent and accountable by recording our decisions and sharing knowledge to enable the best conservation decisions to be taken both today and by future generations.*'

Record-keeping is not merely an adjunct to conservation work but a significant part of our legacy to the future. As well as explaining the reasoning behind our decisions, to assist the decisions of those responsible for our properties in the future, these records may be the only physical relic of properties lost through unavoidable processes of change. Our record and archive should therefore be seen as being as significant an asset as the properties themselves.

Conclusion

Having undergone consultation throughout the organisation, our conservation principles now form part of the induction of staff new to the Trust. By providing a checklist that enables non-conservation managers to know whether they are taking good conservation decisions the principles inform the Trust's ability to measure and therefore understand how we need to develop our performance in all our areas of business, whether financial, social or conservation, to ensure our organisation is sustainable in the long term.

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