

Windfarm Wars – the BBC documentary May/June 2011

Windfarm Wars, the four part documentary following the progress of the Den Brook Wind Farm through planning, is a 'must see' for anyone involved in wind power or renewable energy. For those in England and Wales the last instalment of this four part documentary is on 3 June 2011 and the series is available for a short time on the BBC iplayer. Links are available at the end of the report

This note looks to see what we can learn from the series and how community led wind power should think about planning issues.

What we can we learn, and what was most striking to me, was that all the people involved genuinely held their beliefs. The use of phrases like NIMBY does not really get us very far, not least because people's motives are complex and are usually genuine. In the case of Den Brook there were concerns regarding noise, impact on businesses (e.g. tourism) and the 'industrialisation' of the countryside. This concept of the value of 'place', regardless of how long people have lived in an area, is one which is often not appreciated enough.

However there is a problem today. To those living in the vicinity of a proposed wind farm there is the tendency to assume the worst is going to happen. Why is this? In many ways it is a deep seated psychological position. The fear of individual loss is a much stronger driving force than the potential for gain. Of course this is a generalisation but for many it is true. This is why those that are against change (and it does not really matter what type of change) are much more vocal than those that may support change.

The internet is a great source of information, but not all the information is right or complete. It is still easy to find information regarding the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccination highlighting the health risks, without highlighting the risks of NOT having the jab. This information led to a drop in vaccination rates and sadly the resurfacing of serious diseases which were under control. Parents understandably do not want to 'inflict' a jab on their children (a fear of loss) if they are uncertain of the benefit (the future gain). This disinformation is still out there and how does the public know what is right, and who to trust? Equally there is a mistrust of authority of all types so a Government stating that something is safe is often not believed.

The opponents of the wind farm at Den Brook seem to be independently minded and thoughtful. Many had a strong sense of place and belonging. This type of person is able to find and access information on the internet and to contact and work with others, as is amply shown in the documentary.

There is a problem though and we are ALL guilty of it; we tend to find and believe information which supports how we frame the issue, and this tends to reinforce our prejudices. If we then correspond and meet people that believe the same thing we can reinforce each other's prejudices.

I think many people prefer to be (on what they would describe) as the independent side of a view in comparison with the 'establishment's position'. This goes back to the lack of trust in authority and the feeling that we want to be independent, and do what is right for 'us' locally. In the extreme case anything that the state produces or indorses which conflicts with our view of the world must be 'wrong'.

What does this all mean for wind farm development? For the wind developer they must accept that there are examples where wind farms have caused noise problems and that some individuals have suffered. It is not good enough to say 'trust me I know what I am doing' if there are examples of problems in some cases. They will have to work harder to show why they will not make the mistakes of others. Conversely the campaigner against wind turbines should not assume that isolated examples of wind noise problems mean that *their* wind farm will have noise problems. This level of honesty and balance is required on all issues whether it is the potential for injury to bats or shadow flicker.

In my experience websites which are part of a campaign against wind development often blend fully legitimate concerns with factually incorrect information. This may potentially make their campaign more effective, but it serves to dilute the principal concerns and reservations. **It is important as an individual to challenge information, and not assume that just because it fits with your 'frame of reference' it must be right – but how many of us really do that or want to listen?**

The Den Brook Wind Farm proposals clearly shows the danger of withholding data obtained during the planning of the wind farm. When you take the discussion above into account the worst thing a developer can do is withhold data as this reinforces all the concerns regarding mistrust in authority and the industry and pushes people away from the common ground towards the extremes.

There are some lessons for Wiltshire Community Wind Energy when working with others:

1. It is important to **engage people** in the planning of wind power, and to be as honest and open as possible.
2. It is essential to understand and **bring people's concerns into the process**, even if you perceive them to be unjustified. Showing how the wind farm can be designed and operated to minimise **specific** detrimental impacts is essential. Tailor the response to the individual as much as possible. If they are fearful over the impact on their tourism business or house prices try to provide independent information. If it identifies both risks and opportunities it is likely to be perceived as more credible than a 'selling' report.
3. **Stating 'facts' is rarely a good way to reassure people** – simply because there are other 'facts' out there which will contradict what we as a group would say. It is probably better to try and understand the specific concern and explain how that concern has been addressed in the particular case. This will be a time consuming activity, but it is the way as an individual I would like to be treated.
4. **Treat every project and community uniquely.** Nobody likes to be seen as a 'consultee' going through the corporate 'mincing machine'.
5. The **local community should generally receive some local benefit** for 'farming the wind'. This will only be financially viable for the larger wind farms. However this can immediately be seen as a 'bribe'. There is no easy answer to this issue – I guess allowing the community to decide their priorities helps to minimise this risk.

6. When consulting or engaging with people it is essential to **start where people are – not where you would like them to be.** It is a common mistake of the green movement to assume that what drives ‘us’ is important to everyone. Explaining that renewable energy may ultimately help protect their local environment and way of life is a start. Those that are independently minded may also see the value of energy security and helping to avoid expensive and potentially unstable foreign imports of energy and this may not be an issue they have considered before.

7. It is important **not to delude ourselves.** Wind farms will not be liked by everyone, and telling an individual that poll after national poll shows that people support wind energy does not really help. It is important to face the fact that all land use planning decisions have both positive and negative impacts on individuals. One person’s new job is another’s sprawling industrial estate – a youth’s new skate park is another’s noise nuisance. The case is the same with wind farms. However it is essential that we question whether an individual may be affected disproportionately by proposals. This is an issue of fairness. However this issue does cut both ways - as an individual we should consider the wider benefits as well as our concerns.

8. **Be positive!** It is tempting to spend most of your time campaigning against change you do not like – and the green movement does a lot of that. If we believe that a wind power project is in the right place and designed the right way we should say so!

The ‘Windfarm Wars’ programme provides a rare glimpse into what drives people on all sides on the debate. I think what is important is to challenge our assumptions about others and appreciate why they act as they do. With better understanding on all sides there is the opportunity to work better together.

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(Links on next page)

Links:

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(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00zzwv6/episodes/player>)

There have been a number of reviews of the series such as:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8525649/Windfarm-Wars-episode-2-BBC-Two-review.html>

And the producer of the series gives his views on the programme on the blog at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tv/2011/05/windfarm-wars.shtml>