

Understanding Informed Opposition to Environmental Policies & Projects: The need for more than information provision

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Opposition as an Obstacle to Policy Goals

- Significant attention has been paid to understanding opposition in order to identify ways of overcoming this.
- Opponents have been viewed as being un- or mis-informed.
- Therefore, it is often assumed that if opponents had more information they would be supportive.
- If people understood the science relating to climate change they would not oppose policies/projects which aim to mitigate climate change.

But opponents are not necessarily uninformed and they do not necessarily dispute claims relating to climate change.

Case Study: Opposition to a Proposed Wind Farm

- Planning application for a wind farm (consisting of 16 turbines and ancillary works) in a rural location in central Scotland
- Proposed by a major commercial developer
- Proposed site otherwise used primarily for grazing sheep
- Situated between two small towns (largest population 1700)



Objectors do not Necessarily Contest Climate Change

“Wind turbines are a hopelessly ineffectual technology which will never save the planet from climate change [...] Rather than concentrate on the less disfiguring sources such as loft insulation, waves, tides, the sun and even wind turbines off-shore, we seem to be chasing the most objectionable and damaging technology that is available.”

“I don’t dispute climate change [...] But wind farms are not the answer. We should be researching how we can change the way that people live and work. [...] Modern technology has the means to produce more energy efficient cars – but they won’t do it until the last drop of petrol has gone.”

Objectors are not Necessarily Opposed to Renewable Energy

“Although I am a great supporter of renewable energy, I feel wind turbines are not the way forward in a progressive country. The questions, as these projects are hugely expensive, should be “What will the cost of our electricity be in the next 5 years due to these wind farms?” and therefore instead of wind power how can we produce energy cleanly, efficiently and cheaper?”

“I don’t think anybody would quarrel with the idea of renewable energy, you’d be daft if you did, the question is what’s environmentally acceptable”

“whilst I fully agree with the principles of renewable energy, I do not feel that sufficient information is available, or sufficient time has been given to allow me to fully understand the implementation of the proposals and to make an informed judgement.”

Environmental Arguments Used by Objectors

“There are SSSI sites up there, if you start digging up peat then you’re not reducing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere you’re actually increasing it.”

“[the site] is essentially a wet acid environment. It is covered by blanket peat which will be irreversibly damaged by the construction of miles of track and digging huge turbine foundations [...] Each foundation will take 93 tonnes of cement and over 50% of each foundation is liable to leeching into the surrounding land during its lifetime [...] It is ludicrous that anybody should contemplate introducing so much alkali into this acid area where the landowner’s former shepherd was even banned from burying dead sheep!”

“As someone who is aware of environmental issues and strives to do her bit to ‘save the planet’ I am saddened that many are taken in by the ‘green image’ portrayed by the wind farm industry [...] the public money being put into the wind industry [should be] redirected towards energy efficient building incentives”

Summary of Case Study

- Objectors cannot be characterised as “climate sceptics”
- Objectors are not necessarily opposed to renewable energy
- Both objectors and supporters are centrally motivated by (often very similar) environmental concerns
- Opposition cannot be characterised as uninformed, or misinformed – it appears to be informed opposition

Implications for Public Engagement

- Individuals have a variety of motivations for opposing environmental policies and projects.
- Awareness of the importance for action on climate change does not necessarily result in support for related policies/projects.
- It is important to engage more fully with the views and experiences of opponents.
- But, firstly we need to understand what their views and opinions are and how these have been informed.
- Support is more likely to emerge from two-way dialogue than one way information provision or awareness raising.

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