

Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland in conversation with Mike Barnacle

Karol Swanson, A Trustee of the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (APRS) chats to Mike Barnacle, Kinross-shire Councillor and Member of APRS Advisory Council



Q When did you join APRS and why?

"I joined APRS over 18 years ago. Landscape protection is important to me. One of the early things I did when I moved to Scotland was to find out if there was a sister organisation to CPRE up north. I am originally from England, and know about the pressures on the countryside there. I know that Scotland is not under the same pressure, but nevertheless, it has a beautiful landscape. It's easy to spoil it if you are not vigilant. Plus, I think there is a role for organisations who are membership based and not just subject to electoral whim. I think it is important when organisations are lobbying the powers-that-be, that they make them aware of the strength and size of their membership. They often get criticised for having only one agenda. Membership is important in that regard."

Q When did you first become aware of landscape and its need for protection?

"One of the reasons I am so driven about landscape protection probably originates in my family upbringing. My family have a farm on the edge of the Peak District but my father moved to the industrial Midlands when he got married, the only member of the family who moved to the town. But I had in my genes, as it were, the love of the land and the landscape. We had some waste ground that was a former mining area opposite where I lived and it had gradually been retaken by nature. It became a playground for children and a place you could go where you couldn't see any other industry. All you could see and hear was the sound of the countryside. I used to cycle seven miles from where I lived to a common on the edge of town just to see the countryside."

"When I was a teenager, I was a member of a youth club and we went for a weekend in Snowdonia where I got hooked on mountaineering and thus landscape became very important to me. In fact, one of my favourite poems is 'Landscape and I' by Norman McCaig. I often recite this at mountaineering club dinners."

Q What do you feel are the biggest areas of concern in landscape protection?

"A few things spring to mind. One is of recent concern and the others are more historical. Houses in the countryside are an issue, for example, in Kinross-shire, which is the area I am proud to represent. We've had some very fine steading conversions but we've also had some very bad examples of development on 'so-called' steading sites. A few years ago there was a freeing up of the houses in the countryside policy which led to development almost on an ad hoc basis. We tightened that up again because there was widespread concern that it was too flexible. There is a balance to be struck between the type of housing that you want in the countryside and the protection of the landscape. Perth and Kinross Council are reviewing our Local Plan at the moment and houses in the countryside policies will be looked at again. It centres on what constitutes the definition of brownfield land and building groups as well. The other area of concern is windfarms, both large and small, my main concern being the

large ones. I would say that the Scottish Government (SG) has been remiss in the advice that they've given local authorities on this question, tending to leave it to them to establish the best locations. It's not really an issue for the odd small turbine but it is the cumulative effect of numbers suddenly appearing on the landscape. The SG has a 20m neighbour notification law but I think this is totally insufficient. This is something that APRS should be lobbying the government on. Fracking may be another future problem. There are some licensed sites in West Kinross which will impact on the landscape but I am yet to be convinced that there are no downsides to fracking".

Q How do you see local protection issues fitting into the bigger picture of looking after the whole country?

"We've already discussed a number of rural issues. What a local authority does can be mirrored nationally and there needs to be some synergy between local authorities as to their policy approach because otherwise you can get a completely different picture developing. The SG is very keen to speed up the planning process – it's all about jobs and development, but I'm on record as saying that it is the quality of the decision that matters, not the speed of it. One thing that planners can do is to make sure that applications are filled in properly before they are validated. There also needs to be some cross-border working. For example, we recently lost a landscape designation in the Cleish area which borders Fife. For some reason, Perth & Kinross planners seem to think that the landscape suddenly changes as you walk across the boundary."

Q How do councillors balance the need for sustainable development with the demand for homes and jobs?

"This is difficult because whenever an application comes forward that involves employment creation, it is usually met with a level of support. Claims for job creation can be spurious sometimes but councillors do not like to be seen as anti-development, growth or employment. They need to be sure that development is appropriate to the area and that if you want to support something because of the jobs and homes, then you need to see that it fits into the environment and landscape – more important in the countryside than in the towns. You absolutely need a certain level of employment land in every area, otherwise, the only growth you have is in commuter housing. You do have a duty to attract jobs into your area. I'm not against that. I'd like to see small economic development sites in villages too."

We are indebted to APRS for this article, which was first published in its Summer 2015 'Rural Scotland' newsletter.

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