

The green movement's hidden blind-spot

.....and the answer is blowin' in the wind

If you go to protests against fracking, airport developments or new roads, the green movement will be there, very often leading them. But go to a demonstration against wind turbines and it is absent.

In fact, the green movement has been one of the cheerleaders for wind farms. In many ways, that is to be expected. The movement sees wind farms as a key component of renewable energy which it regards as important in tackling climate change.

However, in its headlong enthusiasm to back wind farms, it has ignored, dismissed or, at best, sidelined, the persistent complaints about their noise impacts. It has also found itself making some very strange alliances. Garret Keizer wrote in his book *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want* (published 2010):

It has become increasingly clear that the noise effects of wind turbines have routinely been denied by ignorant or unscrupulous developers. In league with them are any number of disingenuous politicians hoping to avoid the hard work and political fall-out of a sustainable energy policy by certifying their pale-green credentials with a few visually imposing monuments. The irony is that the tone, methods, and motivation of their denials are uncannily similar to the denial of global warming itself."

Particularly during the final years of the last Labour Government, when there were significant subsidies for wind farms, a good number of green campaigners moved to work for wind farm companies or their trade associations even though these companies were employing the same sort of dodgy practices that they campaigned against when used by firms building roads or runways.

The Government's noise guidelines were so weak as to be a developers' charter yet the green movement didn't challenge them. Indeed, many within the movement seemed to deny noise was a problem or, if it was, the communities experiencing it ought to put up with it for the greater good. Now where have we heard that before? Put up with the motorway 100 yards from your home, or the new flight path overhead, or a fracking site down the road all for the greater good.

The noise from wind turbines cannot be wished away. It exists. It disturbs communities and it does so across the world. Indeed, a Swedish study by the respected noise experts Pederson and Persson Waye showed that people tend to become disturbed by wind turbine noise at lower levels than other noises. The UK Noise Association in our publication *Location, Location, Location* (2006) concluded this could be explained by 'a cocktail of effects – the noise,

low-frequency, rotating blades, the shadows and the strobing – leading to ill-health out of proportion to the noise which turbines make’.

This is not an argument against wind turbines. It does suggest, though, that they should not be built in the vicinity of residential properties. The Academy of Medicine in Paris says that no wind turbine should be cited closer than one mile from the nearest dwelling. Other studies recommend a greater distance. Much depends on the terrain.

It could be, though, that these distances are insufficient. There is work coming out of Finland and Portugal on infrasound which suggests the effects of wind farms may be felt much further away. Low-frequency noise – and infrasound in particular – travels further than conventional sounds and penetrates walls in a way that other sounds do not. Much of this work, though, is in its early stages.

The current Government has said it will not permit further on-shore wind farms in England. It is concentrating on off-shore wind farms. The noise from piling as the wind turbines are constructed will affect sea-life but their noise impact once operational is more uncertain. Thomsen et al wrote in their book *Effects of Offshore Wind Farm Noise on Marine Animals and Fish* that ‘we can’t rule out at this point that....operational noise of wind turbines will interfere with biologically relevant signals of the species in question. But the bigger mammals such as whales, which are most likely to be affected in this way, would not normally come as close to the shore as the sites of the wind farms’.

This blog is not making an argument against renewable energy, nor against the sensible use of wind turbines. It is a plea to the green movement to open its eyes to the noise impacts of wind turbines and not to pretend it doesn’t see them.

As Bob Dylan said in the song:

*And pretend that he just doesn't see?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind*

Posted by Cut Noise