

Bishop Nick in Mission on Dartmoor

Dartmoor National Park Authority kindly hosted an open conversation on 10th February on the future of the Moor and its communities as part of the Bishop of Plymouth's visit to Moreton Deanery.

About two dozen participants from different agencies, communities and churches met to discuss some of the challenges facing Dartmoor at this time and to look at opportunities for coming generations. We also explored the role of the church in this rapidly changing context.

DNP is home to 34,000 residents having seen a small population increase of 11% over the past 10 years. Tourism brings over 2.5 million visitors to the area and over £120m spending each year, with Agriculture engaged in a further £6.5m annually. The task of the DNPA and its yearly £3.6m budget is to promote the Park as a space that is Sustainable, Enjoyable and Prosperous, so its purpose is environmental, social and economic. With new housing developments to the west and south running up to the DNP boundaries, the future cannot simply be a continuity of the past.

Some of the large issues faced at this time include the consequences of Brexit and the impacts of Climate Change, such as declining biodiversity and the impacts of modern life on Nature and the natural landscape.

Farming is seen as the traditional backbone to the rural community but this is under pressure – especially with fewer younger people moving into agriculture. The future of the managed environment is uncertain and Dartmoor is affected by low wages but high house prices. Inward migration by a wealthier population (including the rise in second homes) is displacing more historic communities and their activities.

People who work on the Moor may live away from it and commute, thus depleting moorland villages of their skills and spending power. There are fewer schools, fewer 'doers' and growing isolation for older residents. The price of the average house is £320,000 and rented accommodation is extremely limited. Access to financial services can be difficult with the closure of banks and post offices, and closing pubs and schools add to the feeling of loss.

Communities and local infrastructure are pressed. For instance, over 40% of the population around Moretonhampstead is older than 55, with a 15% drop in the numbers of younger people in recent years. It has the second lowest birth rate in Devon and a low take up of community care – the closure of Bovey Tracey hospital is an example of declining rural services.

Participants expressed fears of Dartmoor becoming a Museum or a 'theme park'. One comment was that *"Dartmoor people let others run the Moor"* –reflecting a sense of frustrating powerlessness and lack of engagement.

However, there are some signs of hope:

- growing micro-businesses, cooperatives and social enterprises
- new environmental projects
- a desire to profile the benefits of upland community life
- the use of the Moor for respite, rest and re-creation
- volunteers replanting woodlands
- innovations in social housing
- rediscovering contact with nature and outdoor education with children
- the persistence of the local church and a much-needed review of its assets in terms of buildings, land and people to better serve the community
- a hope to look at the DNP in the longer-term with all the possibilities it has of bringing people together creatively (e.g. arts initiatives)

In summary, our discussion recognised that there is constant change around the Moor and its communities - and this brings about challenges, tensions and opportunities. There are inequalities to be addressed, an apparent loss of more traditional moorland customs, the pressures brought about by new developments around the Moor, and attitudes of 'NIMBYism' restricting positive growth.

In all of this the church is able to provide an emphasis on social purpose, a space for belonging, and an organisation able to advocate on behalf of the most vulnerable. The future will depend on creating new partnerships – between agencies and communities – and looking for innovative ways of sustaining the Moor, its people and its places for future generations.

Overall, there is a need to be more imaginative and creative with what already is and to vitally re-interpret Dartmoor's guile and resilience beyond the immediacy of today.

*Martyn Goss
Director, Church & Society
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