

## What is the Park for?

The purpose of The Royal Parks, restated in its latest annual report, is to "manage the royal parks effectively... balancing the responsibility to conserve these unique environments with... policies to encourage access... enjoyment, education, entertainment and healthy recreation". This is an excellent statement of what The Royal Parks should be doing: balancing conservation against human use of the parks.

But when we come to what the report has to say about The Royal Parks' objectives and performance targets for the current three years, this balance is completely lost. Only one of the six objectives concerns protecting the natural park environment, and that is qualified by the statement "for the enjoyment of families, children and visitors", not an end in itself. There is another objective to "conserve the historic built environment", but the rest are to "understand and respond to the needs of our audiences", "deliver clear education, health, sport and participation offers", "deliver greater value for money for the taxpayer through increased income generation" and "demonstrate organisational excellence".

None of the 15 performance targets relates to the conservation side of the balance. Instead, they are such things as "gain Green Flag status" (an award for good park management), "maintain or enhance customer satisfaction", "improve partner and stakeholder management", "reduce accumulated maintenance" (there is a backlog of £59 million), "increase profitability of commercial activities", and "improve staff satisfaction levels".

It is tempting to dismiss all of this because of the management-speak (what is a "participation offer"?), but there are important points here. The objectives and

targets reveal the priorities of The Royal Parks, which are all about increasing human use of the parks and reducing the cost to the taxpayer. This reflects the priorities of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), to which The Royal Parks reports (I wonder whether DCMS sees Richmond Park as culture, media or sport – I suspect sport).

They say in business that "what is not measured is not managed". This is particularly true if bonuses are tied to achieving targets, as I suspect is the case with the bonus of the Chief Executive of The Royal Parks. I doubt that these objectives and targets will affect how Richmond Park is managed day-to-day, but they will almost certainly affect how head office spends its time, which projects get funded and which new initiatives are implemented. If The Royal Parks continues to promote human use of the parks and greater commercialisation to reduce the cost to the taxpayer, the "unique environments" of the parks mentioned in its purpose will suffer. Nothing in The Royal Parks' objectives and targets recognises this.

With the emphasis now so much toward human use and away from protecting the natural environment, there is more need than ever for the Friends to correct the balance.



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