

A Voice from the Community  
Speech to Robin Wood Conference, Llandudno February 16<sup>th</sup> 2007  
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Hello. My name is Iwan Brioc. I'm a Community Activist. I like the sound of that. I've never been called that before. I'm actually a theatre director. But the theatre which I direct involves communities and a recent project I did, which some of you visited yesterday, called Caerdroia, involved working with the community that live in the Gwydyr Forest. I'm not here to represent that community group by any means. They can do that well enough themselves, so the titled 'Voice from the community' might be a little misleading. What I am here to do is to argue the case that communities should be centre stage in forest management considerations. Having been here over the last few days I see that there is an aspiration to do this, what I'm not sure about is whether there is an understanding of the cultural shift necessary in some institutions to make this happen.

Although I have the great pleasure of directing and training artists in other European Countries my only experience of forest projects is here in Wales and I hope what I have to say resonates with at least some issues and feelings in the partner countries. For a better chance of this happening I'm likely to try and paint with some broad brush strokes and introduce some concepts that might not be so familiar to you around how communities and the feeling of community is generated and how forest and woodlands have an important part to play in this.

Several speakers have talked about the challenges and opportunities that face forestry. Personally, I think challenge as a word is a little bit weak. Crisis is a more realistic word, as anyone who works with the environment should be aware. And it's about time that policy makers stopped diluting the severity of the problems we face with management speak. Having said that, I am about to use a well worn management cliché called the 'China Crisis.'

In Chinese languages, concepts are not expressed in written form with letters and words but with ideogrammes that are sometimes combined to create new meanings. Now 'Crisis' in Chinese is represented by two ideogrammes. The first is 'danger' and the second is 'opportunity.' We must be acutely aware of what those dangers are if we are to take advantage of the opportunities.

One danger that has been screaming out at me whilst doing this project is the poor relationship between forest communities and those charged with managing those forests. When I started the project the Forestry Commission were talked about with such vehemence that when people referred to the "*The Bloody FC*" I thought they were being polite and the FC stood for something quite different. I'm not here to bash the FC. I'm also aware how difficult it is to work with the different expectations, values and priorities forestry and community have but more work needs to be done to reconcile those differences. In doing this I suggest the FC is hampered by the history of which it is so proud. It's like a super tanker emerging from the mists of colonialism but, and here's another management cliché you might be familiar, there's always the 'trimtab.' The huge rudders on these super tankers have within them a smaller rudder which turns before the big rudder turns. That's because it takes a large amount of energy to shift the big rudder and the turn can be started earlier with the

trimtab with a smaller investment of energy. I venture to suggest that projects like Cydcoed, which fund community led forest and woodland management projects and which partly funded Caerdroia, are the trimtab of the FC.

I strongly urge the captains of this ship to follow through with steering the big rudder in the direction Cydcoed has ventured and jointly manage all forests and woodland with the communities that live in and around them. The greatest danger is that they flinch at the can of worms Cydcoed has opened. The sudden outpouring of community frustration in dealing with the FC is inevitable after having put a lid for 100 years on people's feelings in response to fencing across informal pathways; blowing up people's homes rather than pay rates on them; clear felling vast tracts and changing peoples living environment without consultation...and communities have long memories.

You see...and this is a fundamental point – People are the function of their environment and expectation. This is so important I'll say it again...People are a function of their environment and expectation. I heard that first from a fantastic community artist called Bill Strickland. Bill's a potter who started out showing kids in Detroit how pottery was a metaphor for their lives and how they could shape their own lives. He's a kind of modern day urban Robin Hood because he steals from the very rich, or rather charms from them money to build training centres of excellence. His first – the Manchester Craftsman's Guild, had no expense spared – a fountain at the entrance and priceless art in the lobby and halls. Despite continued gun violence beyond its gates, there has not been one case of vandalism within the centre in 20 years. Only a steady stream of highly skilled and employed young people who a year before couldn't read or write.

Take this conference for example this environment - me here on stage, you sitting there. The environment imposes an expected behaviour from you and of course on me too. Right now we are a function of this environment and expectation and this almost never changes. There is an exception which I'll come to in a moment. The point is when a community feels it has no control over the environment in which it lives and there's an expectation that they should like it or lump it, you can imagine what feelings might arise. If you can't, imagine having to spend another three days there listening to people like me telling you what to think. Imagine sitting there for twelve to fifteen years. But by then I imagine any idea you have about having a say in how things are in your environment will have been forgotten. And you know what...that's what we do to our children. Is it any surprise then that sometimes it appears the only time communities seem engaged in deciding on their environment is when major change is threatened. There's that old adage 'How do you get people to vote in local elections? Charge them for parking outside their own homes.' But I suggest a community engaged in protest might have its uses initially, but this is not a sustainable community. There are other ways of engaging community in dialogue. But before that can happen, and I think this is something even community development overlooks again and again...A community has to feel like a community. The irony is that people feel a sense of community when they are not functioning according to environment and expectation.

So let's try a little experiment. Please reach out with your right hand and massage the ear lobe of the person sitting on your right....Now reciprocate, and massage the

earlobe of the person sitting on your left. I bet you didn't expect to be doing that in this environment. What we just did is to invite a liminal state. Perhaps the rules and roles dictated by environment are flouted. Being together in this liminal state produces something the anthropologist Victor Turner called *Communitas*. I see my role as theatre director/community activist is to produce *communitas* – just like the primary role of a forester is to produce timber. *Communitas* is the psychological glue that creates communities and without it there is no community to consult...just a group of individuals angry about something. When communities – that's people + *communitas* are consulted you get creativity, imagination, enthusiasm, commitment, passion and most important perhaps...fun.

Now the interesting thing is that the forest is an universal symbol, in all cultures, of liminality. Basically because if you go back long enough, that is where we're from. Unless you are a creationist, in which case it's not. Just think of all the folk tales to do with forests. Hansel and Gretel...Robin Hood. Which reminds me, I have some bad news for the Italian translator, who's from Nottingham. Robin Hood is actually Welsh, it's official. An American Historical novelist has just written a book about it and as we all know, we can all trust that American evidence of Welshmen of Mass Redistribution is accurate and reliable. So the forest is a storehouse of *Communitas*, demonstrated by the immense cultural value forests have.

Let's try another experiment. Please close your eyes for a moment and take a deep breath. Now imagine yourselves in your favourite forest or woodland. Imagine a gentle breeze rustling through the leaves. On the breeze is a scent, you smell that scent...Coming back. Can you please put your hand up if you saw 'timber'. Now put your hand up if you saw trees. It's often the case, isn't it, that we can't see the wood for the trees; also sometimes we can't see the trees for the 'wood.'

This conference has come from a very utilitarian perspective of forests...the hard products. What I'm talking about here is the soft products, the cultural value which includes wellbeing, leisure and heritage. Communities are tuned in the cultural value of their forests...for now. Another danger in this crisis is that this cultural capital is lost. The best description of this danger I've read is from Nigel Pennick –

*“Modernism recognizes no real spiritual or even physical differences of note between places. Implicit in this view is the tenet that any differences that do exist can be overcome by the power of technology. The effect of this is the innate tendency of modernism to reduce the land to a random series of ‘nowheres,’ brought into being by the denial of place.”*

All forest products are enriched immeasurably by the soft products – their cultural context, and the only way to release this added value is not just to consult with communities but put them at the centre of how forests are managed.

I'm reminded of that wonderful book, which might have influenced some of you to become interested in forestry – *“The Man Who Planted Trees”* by Jean Giono. That book has a subtitle – *“The Man who planted hope and reaped happiness.”* I suggest to you that if you want to engage with communities this is preferable to – *“The man who planted conifers and reaped timber.”*

The economic rewards of our forest are not incompatible with their cultural value, they are enhanced by their cultural value. But it's communities who know how to balance those priorities. Institutions have a role to play, as we have seen, in co-ordinating information sharing between initiatives, and of course giving the support necessary to plant that hope in fertile soil.

I want to finish by giving you a glimpse of how significant these soft products can be by showing you a short video of some responses by audiences to the first of the Labyrinth performance we made at Caerdroia two years ago. Thank you.