

A balanced equation

Simon Hodgson interviews Greenpeace's Doug Parr, and discovers a thoughtful, even-handed contributor to the environmental debate, with a liking for mulberries

I first meet Doug Parr under a mulberry tree. It's a glorious Saturday afternoon and we are both enjoying a farm walk at our local organic vegetable grower (www.tolhurstorganic.co.uk for anyone in the Thames Valley). As we reach down the branches for our kids (and the odd mulberry for ourselves) I discover that he is a rational, well-informed chap when it comes to environmental matters. And also that he happens to be Chief Scientist for Greenpeace.

So the next meeting is with digital recorder in hand and a list of questions in my notebook. The first of which is to understand how he came by such a unique job.

Parr's first job after his Oxford DPhil was working for Friends of the Earth as campaigner on climate change and ozone depletion. "I'd started to feel the pinch a bit with a young family," he says, "and the [Greenpeace] head of science came up as a ten-month cover, so I thought 'I'll try for that'. So I did, and I got it. That was a ten-month contract and 15 years later, I'm still there."

In those years he's been through a range of jobs, running specialist and technical teams. And a range of titles, finally settling on his current one thanks to the then Executive Director – "Peter Melchett thought I should start calling myself the Chief Scientist; sounds good," he smiles. He even had a year as campaigns director, to cover a maternity leave, which he was "quite glad to finish, so I could get back to stuff that I was good at".

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Parr as a campaigner. He seems almost too considered and balanced for the role. And that is his contribution. "I feel like we will get as much scrutiny in our facts, figures and statements as a government department, so we need to be really careful in what we say and to make sure our statements are backed up by rigour. I won't say nothing gets out that might be mistaken, but I have a very good working relationship with the campaign teams about what we can say and can't say, and how we

present it. That's the red pen mode," he explains.

But the links between science and campaigning go much deeper than just checking facts in a press release. Parr highlights how fundamental scientific thinking is to understanding uncertainty – a major feature of the environmental landscape. "A standard risk assessment tends to downplay uncertainty," he suggests. "It's not a deliberate attempt to do so, but by adopting a matrix approach to identifying hazards and probabilities we [produce] a number that says how risky [something] is. But the systemic uncertainties cannot be

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properly represented through the known unknowns. It's the unknown unknowns that are so pervasive, as recognised by Donald Rumsfeld. It's the things you don't know you don't know that are so dangerous."

He goes on to illustrate his point by reference to GM. "The absence of a theory of the gene was a systemic uncertainty [which] never found expression in risk assessments. When I first started working on it in the mid-90s there were dogmatic statements of certainty which we have subsequently found to be completely untrue." He cites in particular the role of small interfering RNAs in cell regulation. "There was a whole class of things going on inside the cell about

which we knew nothing, and yet we were firing genetic material in there and saying we knew absolutely what's going on."

Parr believes that these uncertainties can be seen very clearly in the progress, or lack of it, in the wider GM field. "Genetic engineering remains a pretty haphazard process. There is no theory that can explain why certain forms of gene expression happen and certain forms don't. It's still bunging a gene into an organism and hoping for the best. That lack of understanding explains in the GM case why essentially the products available now aren't really any different from those that were available 10 years ago. In the mid 90s I was seeing reputable people, authoritative in their field, saying that by now we would be on phase three of the genetic revolution and we would be eating broccoli that stops us getting cancer. It's never happened, and that's nothing to do with the protest movements. Even in America where the protest movements didn't really derail the GM proposition they still haven't got anything that's more advanced than insect resistance and herbicide tolerance." So how, he questions, can the safety of such a poorly understood technology be properly scientifically evaluated?



If GM was the battle of the 90s, I ask him what he sees to be the coming issues, particularly from his perspective as Chief Scientist. "I get quite fraught about our inability to effectively deal with low-carbon heat. Heat is something like 47 per cent of the [final delivered] energy we use in the UK, so we've got to do something about heat. It's like the elephant in the room when we're talking about 80 per cent reductions in carbon dioxide. If you look at the average house, electricity is now 19 per cent of final energy use and heat is just about everything else. That's the sort of thing I get really exercised about. Everyone else says 'let's focus on power'. My technocratic mind is saying '2050? 80 per cent? How are we going to get there?' I'm looking for answers when the answers aren't yet there."

Even further away, Parr believes we are going to have to take a global perspective on land use. "One way or another we're going to be confronted by the issue of land. How much land have we got, what are we going to use it for?" he asks. "What are we expecting of our land? How much do we want our land to provide climate services, biodiversity services, clean air, clean water, energy, fibre, food, fuel? Is it all compatible?"

Parr goes on to highlight the international nature of the question, pointing out how consumer pressures in the developed West lead to decisions on



Doug Parr

land use on the other side of the planet. "This is not something we can solve on a national basis," he explains, and there's no governance structure, or even the necessary information to tackle the problem. "The Gallagher Review said – quite rightly – that biofuels should be directed to idle and marginal land. Do we know how much idle and marginal land we've got? Not really. Google Earth can see a kids' swimming pool in my back garden but we don't know to the nearest million hectares how much idle and marginal land we've got."

These are big questions, and a seemingly endless agenda. In the past few years, Parr has also taken on policy responsibility too, coordinating Greenpeace's interactions with

government. He is between party political conferences, catching up back in the office. It's a demanding role, and Parr lives in Oxford with his family, having moved back there out of London some years ago. It's a long commute (by bike and train, naturally) so free time is limited and reserved for family matters. After 15 years, I wonder whether he's ever thought of doing anything else. "Sometimes when I get really tired, I think 'I've just had enough'. But if it's not kicking ass for Greenpeace, I don't know what else I'd do." And then he realises how aggressive that sounds. "Verbally," he adds, smiling. ■

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