

Western Morning News

DANISH LOVE STORY BLOWN OFF COURSE

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What does the experience of windfarms in other countries tell us about what to expect here in the Westcountry? Neil Young looks at how the Danish dream of 'green' wind power started to turn cloudy

It was the love story that ended not so much in tears as bitter-sweet confusion. Denmark fell head over heels with wind power around 20 years ago and now can go no further.

Back in the 1980s, this small country renowned for its progressive outlook, looked set to become a beacon across the world for "green" energy. With growing fears about global warming, the Danes were urged to embrace a future that would harness the power of nature.

There were state subsidies galore as incentives to private companies and small co-operatives to erect turbines. So much so that by the year 2000 the landscape of Denmark was covered with more than 6,000 turbines of different sizes delivering about 13 per cent of the country's electricity needs.

And then there were even more government subsidies as the availability of appropriate land for more turbines came close to exhaustion. This time the money was being offered to windfarm owners to dismantle older, smaller turbines and replace them with larger machines.

Still, on the surface at least, the mood was of optimism. In 1999, Danish turbine manufacturers had cornered about 50 per cent of the world market. And in May 2001, one newspaper summed up a conference on energy supply with the headline: "Wind power gilds Denmark". Now, around 20,000-25,000 Danes work directly in the wind industry.

But there has been no fairytale ending to the story. The superficial impressions of boundless success masked a public disquiet about the financing and environmental impact of turbines. Many now feel that large areas of the landscape have been destroyed.

In a country of 5.3 million people there were more than 600 representations to the Environmental Complaints Board about wind turbines between 1998 and 2000. And the headlines which had once depicted a story of unparalleled success were painting a less rosy

picture: "Electricity users led by the nose"; "Local politicians benefit from wind projects" and also "Turbine swindle".

Danish environmental journalist Pauli Anderson says the situation had never been as clear and bright as presented. He told the WMN: "The opinion used to exist in Denmark that wind energy was the country's golden egg. But I think there has always been resistance to turbines, especially from the people living closest to them who complain about the noise and the effect on the environment."

The changing mood was reflected by a steady shift in government policy. The government now has started to pull the plug on subsidies, including plans for three offshore windfarms. "Their thinking is that if these things are so good then they should pay for themselves," said Mr Anderson.

It would be a mistake, though, to portray the Danish dream as turning sour. But Denmark's success has brought its own unforeseen problems, not least the fact that it now at times produces too much power. So at the height of wind energy generation in winter it has to sell or give away electricity - which cannot as yet be stored - to Sweden and Norway. And how environmentally friendly is that?

Denmark's response has been to cut back on its wind energy production which currently stands at an installation capacity of 2,500 megawatts. There are also plans to scale back the use of conventional power stations which operate in tandem with windfarms.

For some critics, this is evidence that "green" wind energy is an illusion. Prof Niels Abilgaard, from the Institute of Energy Technology, has suggested a simpler and far cheaper solution to achieve green energy targets. Turbines may have saved the burning of some coal, but he estimated that in 2000 that the same environmental effect could be achieved for a 20th of the cost by donating radiator valves to countries such as Poland east of River Elbe.

Not so, says Jorgen Abilgaard (no relation), director of Econ, which act as consultants on wind and renewable energy for the Danish government. Nevertheless, he paints a mixed picture of the Danish wind power experience and the lessons that Britain might learn from it.

"It can work if it's done very carefully and done right, but you have to be aware of really sensitive areas of the environment or

landscape. In the north west of the area of Jutland (in Denmark) it's terrible. We have destroyed that landscape."

Avoiding similar scenarios would be particularly difficult in such a densely populated place as the UK, he said. He also criticised Denmark's huge subsidies.

"A lot of the subsidies in the mid-90s were quite large and there were a lot of turbines going up between 1993-98 because the prices for producing wind power were good. There were a lot of farmers who jumped in, and that was not wise from an environmental perspective," he said.

But public protest had been relatively small and there had not been a deluge of complaints about noise and the health effects from living next to turbines. Why so different from what is now starting to happen in Britain?

One factor has been the ownership of the turbines. In Britain, the primary forces behind wind power are big companies. In Denmark, subsidies were made available to small local groups of anything from 20 to 100 people, to own and operate wind turbines and decide on its location.

But the trend now both in Denmark and across Europe is towards offshore windfarms away from the population. Wind power has not been the panacea the Danes envisaged.

As Mr Abilgaard explained: "It is not a long-term solution to any of the problems of climate change, but it can be of some help in the medium term."

Meanwhile, their landscape has been changed beyond recognition, and even in this country where they sometimes have more electricity than they can use, they face a dilemma. Very few new turbines are being erected, the search is on for alternatives - and the Danes are wondering whether their green dream hasn't blown off course.

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