

IN ROLE ... IN REEDS

Impassioned arguments, coalitions, massive financial losses, threats and even sabotage were features of events held recently at Duchy College, Stoke Climsland. They were elicited by the role-playing game at the heart of workshops on resolving conflicts of interest in the natural environment. Led by Dr Raphaël Mathevet of the French national research organisation CNRS based in Montpellier, the workshops mixed students from Duchy's Rural Environment Management and River Basin Management courses with natural environment professionals from English Nature, RSPB, West Country Rivers Trust and Cornwall County Council.

The conflict of interests occurred over reed bed, a habitat of high biodiversity and conservation interest that is used by commercial reed harvesters, cattle grazers and duck hunters amongst others. The participants were allotted roles (e.g. reed harvesters, conservation NGO) and after a short introduction to the key features of the conflicts facing real reed beds, they were asked to make management decisions (e.g. on water depth) to achieve their disparate aims. They quickly realised that the activities of other stakeholders had major effects on their own aims and got down to negotiations (right).



The negotiated outcomes were then formally agreed at a meeting of all parties chaired by the “Mayor” – the picture (left) shows an unusually harmonious meeting! Management decisions agreed at the meeting were entered into an agent-based simulation of a reed bed derived from real examples in the Camargue (right).



The effects on the habitat and each stakeholder's aims were then handed back – often to the despair of the participants (left). This sequence was repeated to simulate several years of management, giving the opportunity to demonstrate how rapidly different tactics and alliances emerged and how skilfully they were deployed. The day ended with a de-briefing session combining an illustrated overview of the game (based on pictures like these and data visualization) with a more formal explanation of conflict resolution and negotiation processes.

So how did the Duchy group perform? Everyone, including the facilitators, was surprised by how deeply they became committed to their roles. And to good effect; their results were comparable to those achieved by professional wetland managers at similar exercises held elsewhere in Europe. Whilst reassuring, such comparisons rather miss the point. To judge from the participants' comments, it was an excellent, stimulating, challenging, taxing and enjoyable day. It was also sobering to discover just how important negotiation and conciliation skills were to achieving aims, as illustrated by the comment: *if you can't get actions for the environment implemented, it really doesn't matter how good your biological knowledge is, nothing will get done.*

These events were facilitated by Peter McGregor through an ESF-funded project increasing skills in the natural environment sector. More details at www.siaz.co.uk

