

An Anthropological Perspective on the Siting Process for a GDF in England: Values and Worldviews amongst Stakeholders in West Cumbria

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Summary

This paper discusses the early stages of a consultation programme for the siting of a GDF proposed by the United Kingdom's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. As a social anthropologist engaged in fieldwork at and around Sellafield, I approach the issue from a local perspective, namely from West Cumbria, the so-called Energy Coast of North West England. West Cumbria is an area closely associated with the UK's nuclear history and aspirations and might put itself forward as a host for a geological disposal facility. It is home to Sellafield, the nuclear site that, for three quarters of a century, has sparked the imagination as a place of human engagement with explosive and fissile materials. Building on previous research on perceptions of 'the nuclear' in West Cumbria, I explore issues of a social and affective nature that are likely to come to the fore in the area during the GDF consultations.

Introduction

In March 2018, I attended one of several GDF Stakeholder Workshops organised by BEIS, the United Kingdom's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, in Lancaster. These stakeholder workshops were meant to gather feedback on two documents that BEIS had drawn up to prepare for a consultation pertaining to England, Wales, and Northern Ireland on the siting of a GDF, after previous attempts to site a GDF had not resulted in any decisions. These documents are a National Policy Statement (NPS), defined as 'a statement that provides guidance to the Planning Inspectorate and Secretary of State on assessing and making a decision on development consent applications for a particular type of infrastructure', and a document called 'Working with Communities', explaining the way in which the UK government envisages to engage with communities interested in hosting a GDF.¹ A major player in the process of siting is RWM, Radioactive Waste Management, a UK government subsidiary tasked with the delivery of a GDF. Participants at the GDF Stakeholder Workshops included representatives from local authorities, academics, nuclear industry representatives, and critics of the nuclear.

¹ See for 'Working with Communities'

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/676391/WWC_consultation.pdf and for the NPS

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/676402/Final_NPS_Consultation_Document.pdf both last accessed 8 September 2018

The stakeholder workshop I attended was only the beginning of a proposed consultation that will unfold over the coming years. The attendees at the series of workshops have been asked to comment, also in writing, on the two draft documents, which BEIS may subsequently adapt. The siting consultation itself has not yet been launched, and it is not clear as yet how the process of the consultation will unfold in any detail. What is clear is that the UK government will proceed through a process of voluntarism, inviting communities to come forward to express interest in hosting a GDF and then supporting these communities in finding out more about all that this would entail before they would decide to engage themselves fully. It is not the geology that will be in the lead—that is, no areas are to be excluded or preferred from the outset on the basis of geological suitability.

The proposed GDF consultation is particularly of interest to me in two, locally specific, ways: firstly, I am currently carrying out anthropological fieldwork at and around the nuclear licensed site of Sellafield in West Cumbria, an area that is intensely familiar with the nuclear industry and may well come forward to volunteer for a GDF (in fact, the County of Cumbria, of which West Cumbria is a part, has already been on the brink of volunteering during a previous consultation in 2013); and secondly, I moved to West Cumbria a year ago (from Manchester) so as to be immersed in my area of fieldwork. This means that I also have a vested interest as a resident of the area. I plan to follow the process of siting a GDF over the coming years as a social anthropologist interested in social values driving the nuclear industry as a powerful player in specific contexts of world making. What I want to do here is discuss issues of a social and affective nature that are likely to come to the fore in Cumbria during the GDF consultations.

A Note on Method: Ethnography

My discussion here, then, draws on a dual positionality—I position myself both as an anthropologist and as a local stakeholder. In fact it is quite common that a research and a personal interest come together in an anthropological project. Anthropologists use the method of ethnography, a term with ancient Greek roots: *ethnos* (people, group of people) and *graphein* (to inscribe, to write); literally, a description and analysis, which requires direct engagement with individuals and the collectivities they identify with in a particular place. So I am involved in an ethnography of the nuclear industry in West Cumbria, where different groups of people with different interests come together to work and live. I dwell in the area looking to meet different people, and I am particularly interested in the values these people hold in leading their lives, and in the conceptual categories they use in making sense of the world, and how these values and categories shape the nuclear industry and vice versa.

People tend to take values and categories that guide their lives for granted. Through the method of ethnography, the anthropologist seeks to find out what these underlying assumptions are with a view to understanding why people proceed the way they do. So in order to gain an ethnographic understanding, I need to spend a considerable period of time in the area, and this is why I now live in West Cumbria. The proposed GDF consultation process will be of great interest to me over the coming years as it is bound to provide insights into West Cumbrian nuclear sensibilities.

After relating some more information on the workshop I attended (an ethnographic experience in itself), I will turn to West Cumbria, for historical and local context and to explain the area's role in a previous attempt to site a GDF in the UK.

Planning for a GDF consultation

At the GDF Stakeholder Workshop that I attended in Lancaster (the workshop organised closest to West Cumbria), participants were informed that the UK government hopes to locate a site for a GDF led by the principle of voluntarism. This means that the draft proposal initially invites anyone to come forward,

including individuals, landowners, businesses, public bodies, and community groups. What is important to note from the outset is that, even though the principle of voluntarism implies that, for now, the UK government does not wish to impose a GDF on a region, and even though the approach comes across as quite open and community-orientated, the UK government does know what it seeks to achieve: it seeks to site a GDF in a geologically suitable, or suitable enough, place which is acceptable to a host population. In other words, the government is not embarking on this process as a disinterested party testing the grounds for a nuclear waste policy—rather, it knows what it wants, it has decided that a GDF is the way to go (a principle not everyone agrees with), and through a consultation it seeks to invite interested potential host communities to come forward. This implies that there is inevitably a measure of rhetoric in the UK government’s presentation of the approach and what communities may gain through it. For me in my role as a social anthropologist, it is of interest to pay close attention to such social dynamics of persuasion. In any large infrastructure proposal, choices will have been made that may be presented as straightforwardly technical or technological—but the technical and technological always already imply financial, social, and moral considerations. At the stakeholder workshop, participants made comments to this effect, which was rather awkward to BEIS representatives because they apparently assumed that their basic tenets would be taken for granted. For example, when the group was invited to react to the Working with Communities document in the morning, and to the NPS in the afternoon, several participants kept stressing that ‘the social’ (elaborated in Working with Communities) and ‘the geological’ (elaborated in the NPS) could and should not be separated.

To their credit, RWM has commissioned research into what they call the ‘societal aspects’ of siting a GDF. In the resulting report, awareness is shown of the uncertainties involved. ‘Radioactive waste disposal systems are complex, extending over long temporal scales. They encompass technical, social and institutional elements with a degree of associated uncertainty which has significant implications. These characteristics can define the systems as post-normal science - which are science related issues for which effects are uncertain, values are in dispute, stakes are high and decisions are urgent’ (Status Report 2016: 31). Through the same commissioned report, RWM has been made aware of problematic distinctions that tend to be made between expert and lay knowledge and of the important insights that lay knowledge can bring. Expert knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is intrinsically social (ibid: 48-49). In other words, all knowledge is socially constructed. It will be fascinating to see to what extent these insights will be adhered to once the consultation process is set in motion, and to what extent local knowledges and experiences will be allowed and enabled to feed into the consultation process.

West Cumbria: the Energy Coast of Cumbria

During the workshop in Lancaster, BEIS and RWM studiously avoided talking about possible candidates for a GDF. Participants at the workshop, however, expressed expectations for Copeland to come forward as a logical candidate, given that most of the UK’s nuclear waste is already located there. The Borough of Copeland in West Cumbria is home to the Sellafield nuclear site, which has a rich and controversial history. Its nuclear involvement began as a site for the production of plutonium for a British atomic bomb. It produced nuclear power from 1956, when the first commercially operated power plant was opened, Calder Hall, until 2003, and it has been actively reprocessing spent fuel both for domestic and for foreign customers. This latter activity is set to end in 2020, and from then on Sellafield will be fully focused on decommissioning. The company in charge, Sellafield Limited (SL), has been, since 2005, a subsidiary of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, which is a government body. The NDA spends almost £2 billion per year on Sellafield’s decommissioning, which is expected to take more than a hundred years. Over that period of time, manpower at Sellafield (currently about 10,000 SL employees and an equivalent number of

contractors) will diminish, and jobs are expected to require different skill sets. SL is a major employer in West Cumbria, so its impending, albeit slow, disappearance means that strategies are currently developed, through collaboration of SL with local stakeholders, to mitigate this loss. At the same time, many people in the area express high hopes for new nuclear build, and a GDF also often comes up in conversation as a potential source of employment.

In 2013, the UK government made an earlier attempt to find a site for a GDF through the process of voluntarism, and in fact, West Cumbria's boroughs of Copeland and Allerdale came forward expressing an interest in hosting the site. After much deliberation this process was stopped because the Cumbria County Council decided not to go ahead (see for an extensive account Blowers 2017). What is of interest to us here is that the two boroughs in West Cumbria wished to go ahead exploring the possibility of hosting a GDF, whilst the County of Cumbria, the higher tier in the government structure, decided otherwise.² This tension between West Cumbria and Cumbria as a whole is significant. What happened five years ago may be argued to be exemplary of a divide that is felt within the county of Cumbria. Cumbria is the second largest county in England with quite a diverse constituency and quite diverse interests. Perhaps the starkest geographic and cultural divide is palpable between Cumbria's Unesco World Heritage site of the Lake District, a major tourist destination, and the so-called Energy Coast, which is the nickname for West Cumbria, traditionally associated with industry, which has ranged over time from shipping to mining to metal and chemical works to the nuclear. The Energy Coast is wedged in between the Lake District and the Irish Sea, cumbersome to reach by rail or by road, remote and lacking the immediate and intimately picturesque appeal of the villages and landscapes on the eastern side of the Lakes. Some people liken Cumbria to a Polo mint or a donut, with the Lakes constituting the hole in the middle.

West Cumbria: views from the outside-in, and from the inside-out

The social and moral tension between the Energy Coast and the Lakes is sketched in an essay written by Malcolm Chapman some 25 years ago, with contemporary resonance. In an amusing, quite evocative manner, Chapman recounts how he visited Ennerdale, the valley that runs westward from the Lakes into Copeland (Chapman 1997: 201). He describes a coming together in Ennerdale of 'walkers' and 'locals' who are quite differently dressed. Although they find themselves in the same place, Ennerdale, Chapman suggests that the walkers find themselves in Lakeland, whereas the locals are in West Cumbria. What he seems to hint at here, is a difference in circumstances (there are class issues at work in his example) and a difference in outlook or worldview. Chapman's essay plays on what he calls 'moral geography' – how the social imagination invests qualities in different places, and sees or disregards these places according to rules which are only loosely related to objective reality (as it might be recorded by geologist, cartographer or demographer). ... the semiotic system in question ... has a profound and real effect upon what people know, see and experience' (ibid: 215). Chapman writes from experience, having lived on the border between the Lakes and Copeland for three years, and he suggests that outsiders perceive West Cumbria as a place where one does not venture for one's leisure—a place where the nuclear industry keeps people in a stranglehold.

² In the Sellafield Workers' Campaign organized by trade unions at Sellafield, the decision not to go ahead with a West Cumbrian GDF in 2013 was deplored as follows: 'The Sellafield Workers Campaign are exceptionally disappointed that Cumbria County Council recently voted against a study into a geological disposal facility for radioactive waste. The role that such a facility could play in the UK's nuclear renaissance cannot be underestimated. Alongside the strategic importance of the site for the whole nuclear industry and new build programme, the Sellafield Workers Campaign were also acutely aware of the fact that the site would have provided quality sustained employment opportunities for West Cumbria for around 140 years averaging out at 555 jobs each year over the life cycle of the facility'.

This is an outsider view that he takes issue with. He wants ‘to make the point that one important indigenous view – that of many people who live near, and work in, Sellafield – is more or less censored in national debate’, namely, the ‘indigenous’ view that Sellafield has become a comfortable part of the local political and social economy rather than being felt as an oppressing presence (ibid: 216). When he tries to put forward his own lived perspective of local dynamics, what happens, he writes, is that ‘his presentation has tended to be taken as an invitation to discuss how and why the local people get things so wrong’ (ibid: 217). Chapman, then, attempts to put forward a local worldview, and suggests that outsiders to the region keep clinging to their fixed ideas about Copeland as a troubled place that needs help, which leads to a lack of shared understanding. Chapman’s approach from the inside-out is the kind of nuanced analysis of local circumstances and outsider assumptions that I hope to achieve in my ethnography of the nuclear industry in its West Cumbrian context, 25 years later.

What will be particularly interesting in the local discussions about a GDF will be the tension to which Chapman refers between the interests of Lakeland, dependent on tourism and outsider images of majestic nature and rural bliss, and West Cumbria, with its industrial history and ethos. The contrasts between Lakeland and the Energy Coast, however, are not, or no longer, as stark as Chapman makes them out to be. Walkers and locals meet in shared endeavours, for example on land where trees get planted or river banks reinforced, as I have noticed as a volunteer for the National Trust. Another thing that has become very clear to me is that West Cumbria is by no means homogeneous in its loyalty to the nuclear industry. Those who do not work for Sellafield or its supply chain may begrudge those who do their high salaries or may complain about the excessive traffic with which Sellafield activity is associated, clogging a local infrastructure that is poor to begin with. West Cumbria is a patchwork of different moral and social realities, each showing different articulations with the nuclear industry.

These socioeconomic contrasts within West Cumbria are briefly commented upon in a monograph that discusses various case studies of places associated with the nuclear industry. Andrew Blowers (2017) suggests that regions hosting nuclear facilities may be considered ‘peripheral communities’, places that are located on the periphery, relatively powerless and with weak economies, and willing to take on the hazards of the nuclear because they are familiar with nuclear facilities to begin with. Drawing on a sociological study of West Cumbria carried out in the early 1990s by Wynne et al. (2007) and on discussions he conducted himself with political representatives, anti-nuclear activists, and some nuclear experts in West Cumbria, Blowers associates peripheral communities with resignation and with resilience, the former related to a burden of stigma, the latter to a pragmatic attitude of getting on with things. My impression from the inside-out, however, seems to suggest that stigma may not, or no longer, be the appropriate term here. Several people have expressed a feeling of excitement to me about the nuclear history as it has become sedimented at Sellafield and about the challenge of turning things around. Some have remarked on a change of attitude amongst outsiders, expressing a curiosity about the place rather than the disapproval from the past.

But what I have found most intriguing is a confident, rather defiant attitude I have noticed, quite at odds with the notion of ‘stigma’. Regular contact between the nuclear industry and local stakeholders is assured through the West Cumbrian Sites Stakeholder Group (WCSSG), one of a number of similar formal groups spread out over the UK and established by the NDA. The WCSSG is the active forum in West Cumbria charged with the task of holding the nuclear industry to account. It brings together public bodies, government representatives, activist groups, and individuals, but is quite entangled with Sellafield as several of the people most active in the WCSSG are (retired) Sellafield employees with a lot of nuclear expertise, and business acumen. WCSSG meetings are open to the public and of great interest to my inquiry into the region and its relationships with the nuclear. During the round of GDF Stakeholder Workshops, the WCSSG hosted a visit by BEIS representatives to talk about the two GDF consultation documents. Since then, the WCSSG has drawn up a reaction to the documents, calling for West Cumbria to be acknowledged as unique: West Cumbria, the WCSSG argues, has been host to

the nuclear industry and its waste for many years and should be accorded special status *and* special compensation, *also* if the GDF does not end up in Cumbria.

A local note of defiance is apparent also when it comes to the material ramifications of a GDF. Various local stakeholders, including the unions at SL, have expressed reservations because they feel more clarity is needed on which radioactive materials are supposed to be included in a GDF: particularly, some are of the opinion that plutonium and uranium, chemical elements that are separated out in reprocessing, remain valuable and could be used to great advantage, so should be retrievable. This is a point of view that relates to hopes and expectations for future research, turning the siting of a GDF into an issue that cannot be separated from other, uncertain, developments into the possibilities and controversies of nuclear installations and infrastructures. It is precisely for such reasons that the proposed GDF consultation process is bound to provide insights into nuclear sensibilities on the Energy Coast. I plan to follow this process closely over the coming years as part of my on-going ethnography of Sellafield in its West Cumbrian context.

References

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