NATURAL
ENGLAND

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Rt. Hon. Hilary Benn MP
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22 March 2010

Dear Hilary,

'Making Space for Nature' – a review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network

When we met in January, I agreed to write to you this month to provide an update on the review you have commissioned of England's wildlife sites and ecological network. In doing so, I shall describe the approach being taken by the panel, provide an overview of the developing structure of the report and consider areas of emerging consensus. The panel has decided to call the review 'Making Space for Nature'.

Way of working

I am pleased to report that the 14-strong panel you appointed is working well together and I am confident that we have the collective expertise to carry out the review successfully. The panel has so far met four times, and is scheduled to meet monthly until the report is complete. We will also have a field visit at the end of March.

We issued a call for evidence in February that led to more than 40 submissions from a wide range of organisations and interests (a list of organisations submitting evidence is provided at Annex A). These responses are currently being analysed, and are likely to lead to more detailed follow-up with certain stakeholders.

Overview of report

The panel believes that the report should be underpinned by a clear and compelling vision for an enriched natural environment, which is valued and understood by society.

We have agreed that the scope of the review will be terrestrial, freshwater and coastal environments (i.e. not marine, which we consider is being adequately approached through the response to the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009). We will look forward to 2050 and will attempt to take account of climate change of +2°C. The working draft structure of the report is attached as Annex B.

The evidence that we have collated so far suggests that the current collection of wildlife sites in England does not function as a coherent and resilient network for many components of our natural environment. This should not come as a surprise to many, because the sites were generally not designated as a network, but this means that action is needed if our wildlife sites are to underpin a healthy natural environment, to the benefit of wildlife and people. In terms of priority actions required, the panel is currently considering a wide set of options and developing solutions under four general themes:

- improving our current sites (including better protection and management of wider designations such as AONBs and National Parks);
- enhancing connections between, or joining up, sites;
- designating and creating new sites; and
- reducing the pressures on sites and enhancing the wider environment.

In developing solutions, consideration will be given to the features of a resilient network, how we can better deploy relevant levers and mechanisms (such as agri-environment schemes, water framework directive measures and biodiversity offsets); and enabling measures (including public engagement, valuing biodiversity and ecosystem services, and developing the evidence base).

Areas of consensus

Although it is too early in the life of the review to make any firm recommendations, there are already some areas of consensus that have emerged within the panel, that are likely to be reflected in our final recommendations. In particular:

- It is essential that we work at a large landscape-scale that takes account of the context of and connections between sites. The evidence is compelling that too many of our wildlife sites are small and becoming increasingly isolated as the wildlife value of surrounding land declines. This trend needs to be reversed.
- We need to re-think the way we set conservation objectives for our wildlife sites. There is already some evidence that managing sites to support underpinning ecological processes and in ways that enhance structural complexity would deliver biodiversity benefits today, and the case for this becomes particularly strong when we take climate change into account.
- We need to look beyond SSSIs in terms of what we consider to be wildlife sites within a coherent and resilient ecological network, taking account of landscape designations, local wildlife sites and green spaces.
- Active involvement of land managers, in particular farmers, will remain essential.

I hope this gives you encouragement that the review is progressing satisfactorily. I would of course be delighted to meet you to provide further information in person.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Sir John Lawton FRS
Chair, Making Space for Nature Review

ANNEX A

Making Space for Nature

List of organisations responding to call for evidence

Amphibian & Reptile Conservation
Bat Conservation Trust
Bournemouth & West Hampshire Water plc
British Trust for Ornithology
Buglife
Butterfly Conservation
Countryside Council for Wales
Centre for Ecology and Hydrology
Church of England
Country Land and Business Association (CLA)
Confederation of Forest Industries
Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England
Crown Estate
Deer Initiative
English Heritage
ENTRUST
Environment Agency
Environment Bank Ltd
Exmoor National Park Authority
FERA
Forestry Commission
Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust
GeoConservation UK
Grasslands Trust
Herefordshire Nature Trust
Hymettus Ltd
Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management
Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust
Ministry of Defence
Moorland Association
National Farmers Union
National Trust
Norfolk Wildlife Trust
One NorthEast
Plantlife
Pond Conservation
Royal Agricultural Society of England
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Thames Water
Vincent Wildlife Trust
Wildlife & Countryside Link
Woodland Trust
Yorkshire Water

ANNEX B

Working Draft Report Structure

Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

This section will introduce the aims, objectives and scope of the review. The review will look forward to the middle of this century (2050) and will only consider terrestrial, freshwater and coastal environments (guidance for establishing a network of marine protected areas is being developed separately in response to the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009). It will describe the review's relationship to other assessments, in particular the National Ecosystem Assessment and Foresight work.

2. Why is having a coherent and resilient ecological network important?

This section will set out the vision of what we are aiming for and why. It will:
- explain why biodiversity matters;
- give a clear vision of a healthy natural environment, emphasising that this is a forward-looking vision and is not about trying to go back to the past. This would also include a vision of how people will, in the future, relate to the natural environment;
- describe the characteristics of a coherent and resilient ecological network and what we would expect it to deliver (in terms of biodiversity and ecosystem services);
- draw upon early results from the National Ecosystem Assessment;
- provide an overview of what we have learned from efforts to maintain or establish ecological networks around the world.

3. The nature and status of our current wildlife sites and ecological network

This section will describe England's existing wildlife sites and ecological network and analyse the biodiversity and ecosystem service outcomes it currently delivers. Differences with the coherent and resilient network described in section 2 will be highlighted. It will include the following sub-sections:

3.1 England's wildlife sites
This section will describe the nature and purpose of biodiversity-focussed and related designations. It will consider how representative and effective the current site network is in terms of habitats and species. It will also describe other wildlife sites and important habitats, including National Parks, Local Wildlife Sites and urban green space.

3.2 Quality of the environment outside England's wildlife sites
This section will describe the quality of the wider rural and urban environment outside of England's wildlife sites.

3.3 What are the strengths of the current site network?
This section will consider what is protected by the network; the status of biodiversity (e.g. habitat quality) within and outside protected sites; and the roles of the network in delivering ecosystem services. We will seek to use available data from the National Ecosystem Assessment.

3.4   What are the weaknesses of the current network?
This section will consider connectivity, isolation, fragmentation, gaps in coverage of the network, off-site impacts on quality, the functioning of meta-populations, and accessibility.

4.   Challenges, pressures and opportunities

This section will consider predicted impacts of climate change, land use change and intensification (including drawing upon the Foresight work) and food security. We will describe the challenges posed by both the types of changes and the predicted rapid rate of change. We will also describe the opportunities and discuss the need for wider behavioural changes across society.

5.   Adequacy of Levers

Here we will describe the levers and mechanisms currently available to achieve conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services and ask whether they are adequate. This section will consider both environmental levers and those normally associated with other drivers and sectors. In the latter case the review will consider whether these, if deployed differently, might better benefit England's natural environment while still achieving their primary purpose.

6.   Solutions

This section will consider the approaches we need to get us from where we are now to a coherent and resilient ecological network. Solutions are expected to fall into four categories:

(i)   Improving our current sites.
(ii)   Enhancing connections between, or joining up, sites.
(iii)   Designating and creating new sites.
(iv)   Reducing the pressures on sites and enhancing the wider environment.

7.   Recommendations

This section will make prioritised and, as far as possible, costed recommendations to achieve a coherent and resilient network. This would include research recommendations. As far as possible, we will attempt to quantify the change that is needed.

8.   References

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