



Natural England's Strategic Direction

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Natural England has achieved a great deal in a short time. Since the organisation was formed in 2006 we have seen the creation of the South Downs National Park and laid the foundations for the extension of the Yorkshire Dales and Lake District National Parks. We have developed a plan for an all-England coastal trail and begun to implement it. We have been integral to the design and designation of a network of Marine Protected Areas. We have improved the condition of England's Sites of Special Scientific Interest while designating over 40 new ones. We have helped to re-establish or increase populations of threatened species like Bitterns, Large Blue Butterflies, Wartbiter Crickets, Short-haired Bumblebees and Stinking Hawksbeard. We have delivered a step-change in the environmental enhancement of agricultural landscapes through Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and reduced diffuse pollution from agriculture through Catchment Sensitive Farming. We can be proud of our formidable track record of delivery and efficiency. But there is still much to do.

This Strategic Direction sets out our updated vision of how Natural England will help to bring about a natural environment, on land and at sea, which is healthy, properly functioning and resilient, and recognised as the foundation for sustainable economic growth, prospering communities and personal wellbeing.

Our context – and what we are changing

Where we come from

Our statutory purpose has its roots in the post-war vision for the protection of places of natural beauty and importance for wildlife. This thinking inspired the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 which, amongst other things, created our National Parks and Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Successive governments have built on this foundation. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 improved the legal protection for important habitats and endangered species. The Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 introduced a statutory right of access to open land and further improved the protection of our most important wildlife sites. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 created Natural England and brought together, for the first time in one body, the protection of wildlife and landscapes with helping people to enjoy and understand their natural environment. Most recently, the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 brought protection for our rich marine life and habitats and extended the concept of public access to the natural environment to the entire English coastline.

Where we are now – and the drivers for change

Although there are ‘good news’ stories, too many indicators of the health of the natural environment continue to signal decline. We continue to lose even familiar species from special sites and the wider countryside. At the same time, the challenge of conserving and enhancing the natural environment has been complicated by a range of new pressures: climate change, for example, is altering the range of many species, while intensive agriculture has reduced biodiversity in parts of the country and, together with development, fragmented habitats. Consequently, we need to adapt our current approaches: we must move from viewing individual sites in isolation to delivering at a larger scale and developing functioning ecological networks with sites that are “bigger, better and more joined up”.

The contribution that the natural environment makes to our economy is profound, but is poorly understood. It is too often defined only as the sum of the income forgone by land managers for environmental protection, or as the wider contributions of nature and access to tourism. We know we need to do more here, working with people, communities and business, both to better define the wider contribution of the natural environment to growth and prosperity, and to show that growth and environmental improvement can go hand in hand. We must work with government and our partners, particularly farmers, land managers and fishermen, to ensure that we have national and local land and sea use strategies that show how a healthy natural environment can support both economic development and food production.

The government has made a range of commitments to England's natural environment, both through legislation and through substantial investments over many years - most recently through the Rural Development Programme for England. We recognise, however, that the scale of the challenges faced requires us to find innovative new market approaches and partnerships to support the natural environment. This means that we must be ready to take risks when exploring new approaches and in balancing our objectives with those of others.

Finally, although many people in England gain huge value from their engagement with the natural environment, we need to do more to build connection with the population as a whole, and to develop higher levels of public goodwill and understanding than the natural environment currently enjoys. We must find and promote wider opportunities for people to engage with the natural environment, both through physical access and through education and virtual experiences. Ultimately any approach to conservation will only be successful when it starts from a real public consensus on the value of the natural environment – for both its intrinsic value and its value to people and the economy.

All of these drivers for change emphasize the need for an 'ecosystem approach'. What this means is understanding a place through the eyes of all those with a stake in it, acknowledging all the contributions the environment makes to our lives and providing a framework that brings together all interests in a place to make choices which everyone can understand, support and benefit from.

Our response

Natural England, on behalf of the government, will continue to protect landscapes, biodiversity and geodiversity, delivering our statutory remit as established by Parliament. This will mean honouring our duties to afford statutory protection to special places and the wildlife that inhabits them. It will also mean taking a longer term look at what we are trying to achieve and adopting a measured approach to achieving it, and accepting that in some years, for some elements of our remit, we will be doing preparatory work rather than actively delivering large-scale investment. Through this approach we will continue to press forward across the breadth of our statutory remit, while tackling different areas at different pace.

We recognise that we need to change the way we work to respond to the challenges set out above, and to the feedback and advice we continue to receive from our broad range of stakeholders. This includes the advice we got from government and our stakeholders in our 2013 Triennial Review, and the customer and partner views we get from annual surveys and regular business feedback processes. We recognise the need to continually improve both our performance and the service we offer to others, and to deliver better the founding purpose of Natural England: to bring together people and nature.

There are three themes which underpin our change:

1 Innovation

We already have a range of mechanisms and tools (incentives, regulation, and advice) that have been demonstrated to deliver the effective conservation of particular species or places. The scale of the challenges we face, however, require that we look more widely for ways to secure the improvement that our natural environment needs.

We have started to identify where we can use different approaches. At the national level we want to build on the lead provided by the government and others in areas such as the development of new markets for 'natural capital' and in biodiversity offsetting, bringing this sense of innovation to the national programmes we deliver and to the key services we provide - for example in the further development of class licensing for our wildlife licensing customers. At the local level we will encourage our teams to explore new approaches and support them in developing ideas that are applicable in their areas.

2 Partnership

Natural England has always believed in and worked in partnerships, but we know we can do this better. Our new approach to working with others will be guided by three principles: we do not always need to lead, we will look for partnerships beyond our traditional stakeholders, and we recognise that partnership means that not all parties can always secure all their goals. We will look to our partnerships to help us find the 'best owned' rather than the perfect solution.

We will do our best to work with all sectors, from those who own and manage the land, to local businesses, volunteers, conservation NGOs, local government and local people; and we will redraw, where appropriate, the boundaries between what we do and what our partners do, and work always for shared agendas and consensus. Above all we will be locally responsive, working with local places and people. We will find new ways of working with partners in the Defra network, especially the Environment Agency, so that we secure the best overall environmental outcomes from the public sector's investment in the natural environment, and we ensure that our customers enjoy as joined-up and seamless a service from the government as possible.

3 Local delivery

The natural environment is fundamentally rooted in place, and local places are where our partners and customers first make contact with us. Understanding and sharing people's 'sense of place' is implicit in how we work, and we are proud of the local expertise and knowledge of our staff. We will organise ourselves to make this expertise and knowledge available to local communities, and give our teams as much discretion as possible to identify solutions fit for local circumstances. We will determine our priorities and the best way of delivering them through an understanding of environmental need, based in real places and landscapes.



Poppies, Newstead Village, Nottinghamshire © Bruce Cutts/Natural England

What we will continue to do

These changes will build on the foundations of our success to date, and our continuing commitments to science and evidence, to national standards, to customers, and to efficient business processes. In particular:

1. We will continue to be evidence-based and will ensure that our evidence is based on clear standards and methodologies, and is increasingly available to everyone. We want those we advise to have confidence in the quality and transparency of our evidence and of the organisational expertise which develops and applies that evidence to inform all our national and local advice on the natural environment.
2. All of our work will continue to be delivered to a set of nationally agreed standards, so that wherever a partner or customer comes into contact with Natural England, we will look and feel like one organisation.
3. We expect all our people to be responsive and pragmatic, and we will continue to improve our understanding of the businesses and communities we work with.
4. We will work with partners in the Defra network and beyond to ensure that our business processes are effective and efficient, and deliver value for money and for customers.

Our work

To meet the needs and opportunities of the natural environment, we need to challenge ourselves to ensure that our overall approach to conservation, which we are now calling our 'conservation model', is delivering the whole range of integrated environmental benefits that our purpose requires.

In the future, our approach needs to:

- Work at a landscape/larger scale to restore ecosystem function and develop ecological networks, with 'bigger, better, more and joined' habitat patches that will be as resilient as possible to climate change and other pressures;
- Improve our understanding of the way that habitats and species contribute to landscape quality;
- Promote and support more access to and engagement with the environment;
- Enable people and communities to identify and act for the places and priorities that matter to them, and increase wider understanding of the natural environment and the benefits it brings.

These steps will help us to build a more robust, resilient natural environment both on land and at sea. This will take time, and will require resources and tools that are presently outside the reach of the traditional natural environment sector. It also demands a change in mind set: away from a sometimes over-precautionary approach towards one that is prepared to take risks and sustain some losses in order to secure greater gains.

This evolving model will inform our approach across the four key areas of our business which are defined by legislation and by our statutory purpose:

1 Protect and build understanding of our landscapes and geodiversity

England's geology and geomorphology create our landscapes, which in turn frame our unique diversity of habitats and species. It is through these landscapes that most people engage and connect with the natural environment.

We have protected many of the most significant geological and geomorphological sites in England, but others remain vulnerable - and the importance of underlying geodiversity and the dynamic geomorphological processes that continue to shape our landscapes often goes unrecognised.

England's landscapes are dynamic. Over the last 60 years, the government has protected our most iconic landscapes, designating them as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and having some success in understanding and managing the process of change there. But the wider landscape, outside protected areas, is often taken for granted, and change there is less well monitored. Our job is to increase understanding of landscape and provide opportunities for people's engagement with all our changing landscapes.

To achieve this, we will:

Long-term aims

- Establish a new relationship between people and the English landscape, and improve the evidence base on how landscapes are changing.
- Secure long-term agreement on the important role and value of the current protected landscapes in the wider English landscape.
- Build broader recognition of the value and contribution of geodiversity to the natural environment.

Medium-term ambitions

- Establish the National Character Area profiles as the primary local evidence base for landscape and wider environmental work, owned and understood by local communities and stakeholders
- Agree a sustainable approach to monitoring landscape change at a national level to better inform decision-making about further change.
- Prioritise our designation programme for protected landscape boundary changes, so that we invest in the most valuable and appropriate areas.
- Increase the number of nationally important geological and geomorphological sites notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and declared as National Nature Reserves.

2 Reverse the decline in terrestrial biodiversity

While we have protected many important sites, restored the population of some vulnerable species and are working to deliver the government's ambitious targets for the restoration of important habitats, much remains to be done. In particular, we have a long way to go to restore biodiversity beyond protected sites in the wider countryside. Our ambition must be to create resilient ecosystems across the country, both within and beyond protected sites.

To achieve this we will:

Long-term aims

- Support a diverse and healthy natural environment that delivers benefits for local communities and local economies.
- Identify longer term solutions that secure the essential services delivered by the natural environment, including flood protection, productive soils, carbon storage and access to green space.
- Deliver the 'Lawton vision' in 'Making Space for Nature' by making the protected sites and landscapes network the cornerstone of a more resilient natural environment
- Make our National Nature Reserves exemplars of best practice under the new conservation model, and, at the same time, places that attract and inspire people from all walks of life.

Medium-term ambitions

- Increase the proportion of our best wildlife sites that are in favourable condition
- Refresh our processes for the management and monitoring of protected sites, to make these processes more efficient and sustainable.
- Invest in new partnerships to increase the resilience of current protected sites, and the natural capital that they provide, ensuring that their value is understood by and relevant to the people who own, manage and benefit from them.
- Complete the integration of species conservation into site and habitat management.



European kingfisher © Paul Lacey/Natural England

3 Restore marine biodiversity

Our seas are a fundamental national resource, and require careful management to sustain their health and productivity. The government has asked us to provide the evidence base and conservation advice to support marine biodiversity through a new network of ecologically coherent marine protected areas.

To achieve this we will:

Long-term aims

- Support the government in the designation of a Marine Protected Area Network through the provision of advice and expertise, and ensure the network is well managed.
- Support clear, evidence-based and integrated marine plans, which guide activity across our seas and provide the basis for marine protection, including in seas beyond the protected network.

Medium-term ambitions

- Through the provision of evidence-based advice, support the government in the designation and management of a network of Marine Protected Areas.
- Set clear and practical long-term aims to help sea users and regulators integrate their activities with agreed marine conservation objectives
- Improve the evidence base through data collection and analysis to guide and inform effective and practical marine conservation.
- Build new partnerships with industry, across government, and with conservation organisations to improve collaboration and joined up delivery to business, sea users and coastal communities.

4 Promote and encourage access to and understanding of the natural environment

We have a strong inheritance in the provision for access to the natural environment across England. There are hundreds of miles of National Trails, over a million hectares of open access to mountains, moors, heaths, downs and registered commons, extensive networks of local footpaths, and an ambitious programme to deliver a path around the entire English coastline. But we know that these facilities are not always as widely used as they might be and, at a time when local and national maintenance funding is reducing, we have a key challenge to maintain and improve the quality of access infrastructure for all the users of it.

To achieve this, we will:

Long-term aims

- Ensure that local visions and needs drive investment in access facilities and infrastructure.
- Achieve greater use of access infrastructure by all users and all parts of society.
- Support a step-change in the national understanding of the value of the natural environment for individuals, society and the economy.

Medium-term actions:

- Deliver a new management model for National Trails and work with others to make the most of these national assets for both users and local economies
- Continue our work to deliver the England Coast Path and demonstrate the social and economic benefits it brings.
- Build the evidence base on how people use the natural environment and the benefits they gain from this.
- Increase public accessibility to our own and the wider public estate.



Norfolk Coast Path National Trail © Tim Lidstone-Scott/Natural England

Our levers: planning advice, regulation, delivering incentives

We have a range of tools to support the delivery of the core environmental outcomes which are explicit in our purpose. Foremost among these are our role as statutory advisor to the planning system, our work as a regulator in the natural environment, and our delivery of incentives through agri-environment schemes. The approaches, priorities and principles described below will inform the way that we deliver these services.

In our role as a statutory advisor to the planning system both on land and at sea we support sustainable development, and avoid unnecessary conflict between the built or planned environment and nature. We have made great strides in making our advice services more accessible and easier to use, becoming more efficient and removing delay and uncertainty for developers and planning authorities. We will continue to focus our efforts on where we can make the biggest difference in advising on the environmental impact of development, and we will maintain and strengthen strong connections through our local teams.

We are a regulator in the natural environment, principally through our role as the licensing authority for wildlife management and as the consenting authority for operations on protected sites. Regulation provides an important backstop to prevent damage and deterioration to the environment, but we need to regulate in a way that is proportionate and transparent. We will continue to find ways to refine regulatory processes and to simplify and streamline our advice

and guidance, while creating a robust regime that promotes compliance. We will never hide behind legislation but will interpret it pragmatically and practically, and in a way that makes sense to the businesses and people who will be affected.

We deliver the agri-environment schemes that support good land management practice by farmers and other landowners, and which enable improvement in the condition of many of our protected sites and of the wider countryside. Following reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, these schemes are more closely targeted to ensure that they secure the maximum environmental benefit. We will seek more involvement of customers and partners in these schemes to create local partnerships that deliver at a landscape scale, and which promote better ownership of environmental outcomes by farmers. We will work to secure the greatest possible return from this investment in farming and other land-based industries, aligning our advice with that provided across the Defra Network and working in partnership with voluntary initiatives. We will increasingly use 'earned recognition' where that can help minimise regulatory intervention.

What this means for our organisation and our staff

We will retain the professionalism of purpose and business process which has characterised Natural England since we were founded, and forms the 'organisational contract' which is the foundation of the way all our people work. We will continue to be expert, collaborative, confident and proportionate in our approach. In particular:

- We will focus on place not process;
- We will share our evidence and knowledge;
- We will deliver in partnership, and respect the interests and priorities of others;
- We will always work for the best not the perfect solution;
- We will deliver excellent customer service.

We want this to be the first generation that leaves England's natural environment in a better state than it was in when they inherited it.

Cover photo: Osmotherley, North Yorkshire
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NATURAL
ENGLAND

Natural England is here to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity it brings.

Catalogue Code: NE580 ISBN: 978-1-78367-142-7

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