

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Biodiversity Targets Advisory Group

Title: Biodiversity Targets Advisory Group (BTAG) Minutes

Meeting Date: 18th February 2021

Attendees: Rosie Hails --(Chair), Mel Austen, Charlies Godfray, Ian Hodge, Penny Johnes, James Wood, Nick Isaac (CEH), Rob Cooke (CEH), Defra group officials.

1. Terrestrial Targets Update

- 1.1. Main activities are focussed on bringing in a wider range of experts across the Defra group to assess target feasibility. Questionnaires and workshops are planned to consider species and protected site issues.
- 1.2. Wider Habitats work is considering which habitats could be included within a proposed target.
- 1.3. Work is ongoing with UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH) on the species analysis, although this has been affected by Lockdown and some areas are progressing faster than others.
- 1.4. BTAG flagged that it would be useful to include representatives from the academic community to provide useful input in relation to freshwater ecosystems and water quality.

2. Marine Update

- 2.1. An update was provided about the 6 work packages that Marine are developing in conjunction with Natural England (NE) and Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC).
- 2.2. The need for join up across all targets to consider co-benefits, linking Terrestrial systems with coast and water was discussed. In particular to ensure that there is no net dis-benefit to other targets, which could be explored through a systems interaction analysis.

3. Biodiversity Targets including Freshwater, Wetlands and Coastal

- 3.1. Defra presented on the representation of freshwater, wetlands and coastal habitats in the terrestrial targets, capturing feedback from water specialists in Natural England about the biodiversity targets. Defra highlighted the importance of join up across terrestrial and water systems as the targets continue to be developed and the need to have the right expertise to feed into that process.
- 3.2. BTAG were supportive of the findings and how it crystallised thinking. There were questions of clarification about what is meant by 'coastal' and also how protected areas and sites are referred to.
- 3.3. There was a discussion about freshwater species, both in terms of monitoring and the use of eDNA, and about freshwater flora as an indicator of ecological status. The status of freshwater flora can be an early warning of subtle changes in freshwaters.

- 3.4. BTAG discussed good practice in relation to indicators, to make sure we ask why they are used and what they tell us about delivering an outcome. This was highlighted as an area to come back to at another meeting.
- 4. Wider Habitats** Natural England presented on the development of an action-based target for wider habitat restoration, identifying key challenges, and opportunities through the Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) pilot.
- 4.2. BTAG welcomed a target on wider habitats which is seen as very valuable. BTAG were also pleased to see an emphasis on data flows and NCEA. Other points picked up were:
- Local vs National scale driver: Lots of changes we are trying to detect are subtle – if management declines at what point does habitat drop out. These subtle changes are better picked up at local levels and involving nature partnerships and Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS).
 - Perverse incentives and weighting the target: BTAG recommended that the target should steer away from a net increase across all habitats anywhere in the country to something more weighted. This could be done by developing a habitat index that's both defensible and ambitious. Place is also important and ecosystem services. The weighting should give extra benefit for doing things that are long term.
 - Ecological recovery times – not everything is equal with some systems taking longer to respond than others with longer lag times.
 - Expert judgement and how this would work for the wider habitats target.