

1. What is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty?

- 1.1. An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is one of the nation's finest landscapes. It is of high scenic quality that has statutory protection in order to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of its landscape. Designation is under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The intent is to secure their permanent protection against any change or development that would damage their special qualities.
- 1.2. The Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 brought in new measures to help protect AONBs further and, through a Ministerial Statement that year, the Government confirmed that the landscape qualities of National Parks and AONBs are equivalent. The protection given to both types of area by the land use planning system should therefore be equivalent. There are currently 46 AONBs in the UK. In all, AONB designation covers approximately 18 per cent of the land area of the UK.
- 1.3. Designation of the Cranborne Chase AONB was in 1981 and extends over 981 square kilometres (Map 1). The AONB is the sixth largest and is one of thirteen AONBs in the South West (Map 2). The majority of the AONB lies within the South West though 6.8% of the AONB (the Hampshire section) falls within the South East. In the South West, together with the two National Parks (Exmoor and Dartmoor), the family of protected areas cover some 38% of the countryside.



Primary Purpose of Designation

- 1.4. The primary purpose of AONB designation is 'conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area'¹.
- 1.5. In 1991, the Countryside Commission stated 'In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of economic and social development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.'
- 1.6. Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.'²

1 Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000: Section 82.
2 Countryside Commission Policy Statement on Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty 1991.



What is Natural Beauty?

- 1.7. The primary purpose of AONB designation is rooted in ‘natural beauty’. The term was enshrined in the 1949 Act when a romantic idea of scenic value prevailed. Over the years, qualification and amendment to the legislation has made it clear that natural beauty includes considerations such as wildlife, geological features and cultural heritage³. There is a useful definition in government guidance to AONB partnerships. “Natural Beauty” is not just the look of the landscape, but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries⁴. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 clarified that land is not prevented from being treated as of natural beauty by the fact that it is used for agriculture, or woodlands, or as a park, or that its physiographical features are partly the product of human intervention in the landscape⁵.
- 1.8. This AONB is a cultural, living landscape by virtue of both the species and habitats within it but also due to its special qualities that human activity maintains. The natural beauty of the AONB is a blend of both the rich natural, historic and cultural heritage. The AONB Partnership believes that the presence of the expansive, open downlands, the many historic and literary associations, high levels of tranquillity, and the vast dark night skies comprise important elements of the natural beauty of the AONB. Those who manage the land are central to the future of this landscape. It is inevitable that this cultural landscape will continue to evolve but this needs to be in ways that conserve and enhance its special qualities.

International Context

IUCN Protected Landscape

- 1.9. The AONB landscape is also of international importance. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) recognise it as a Category V Protected Landscape by (Appendix 1). In 2013, the IUCN UK Committee reaffirmed the Category V status of all AONBs, confirming the significant contribution they make to conserve the UK’s biodiversity.

European Landscape Convention

- 1.10. The European Landscape Convention (ELC) is a Treaty devoted exclusively to the protection, management and planning of all landscapes in Europe (Appendix 2). Crucially, the Convention encourages the integration of landscape matters into all relevant areas of national and local policy, including cultural, economic and social policies. The ELC defines landscape as “An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.” (Council of Europe 2000).
- 1.11. There is a particular emphasis on the need for co-operation in undertaking programmes of landscape work that cross administrative and national boundaries. This AONB is in a prime position to showcase the UK’s commitment to the Convention.

3 A draft statement on natural beauty, The University of Sheffield, January 2006.

4 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A guide for AONB Partnership members, Countryside Commission, CA24, November 2001, p.6.

5 Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006: Section 99.

