

Wildlife and Countryside Link's Landscape Scale Conservation position statement

February 2010

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together over 30 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK and manage over 690,000 hectares of land.

This statement is supported by the following 12 organisations:

- **Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust**
- **Badger Trust**
- **Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust**
- **Campaign for National Parks**
- **Campaign to Protect Rural England**
- **Friends of the Earth England**
- **The Grasslands Trust**
- **The Mammal Society**
- **Plantlife International**
- **Salmon & Trout Association**
- **Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust**
- **Woodland Trust**

Context

The concept of a landscape scale approach to conservation is now more relevant than ever. However, we still need to work hard at communicating what this actually means to ensure it delivers for the habitats, species, landscapes and ways of life that Link members champion. The debate about protecting the natural environment through its proper financial valuation is re-emerging as the Ecosystem Based Approach: policies being aligned to this approach are increasingly being touted as the means to deliver healthy functioning landscapes, but where does this leave conserving biodiversity or landscape character for its own sake? The 2010 biodiversity targets have not been met, and the post 2010 agenda is now rapidly being formed and will be agreed shortly. The Lawton Review of ecological networks provides an opportunity to advocate the relevance of Landscape Scale Conservation (LSC) to biodiversity policy, to outline knowledge gaps and promote sound principles in all cases.

Opportunity

A landscape scale approach to conservation can place biodiversity conservation and the benefits it creates for communities at the centre of the Ecosystem Approach. This is not to say that Link supports a move away from protected areas, on the contrary Link fully supports a continued commitment to ensuring favourable condition of SSSIs post-2010. LSC is not intended to replace a protected areas approach; indeed central to a landscape scale approach is that every SSSI, SPA, SAC and national

landscape area needs to be in favourable condition because these are some of the core areas that will support biodiversity even if, as a result of climate change, it is different biodiversity from what is there now. It is vital to buffer these special sites and make connections within and between key landscape areas; Local Wildlife Sites and potentially Green Belts are also key elements of the network. These areas, combined with the landscape fabric, of hedgerows, scrub, streams, ponds, field corners, copses and rough pasture, are what create high quality landscape character.

For an LSC approach to succeed, existing SSSIs condition has to improve, and more SSSIs need to be designated. The level of baseline biodiversity information also needs to be improved, and habitat and species inventory data updated more frequently. Assessment of what constitutes Favourable status for priority species and habitats and what is needed to achieve this will also underpin an LSC approach.

Public funds continue to be spent supporting unsustainable land-use practices and patterns. This causes degradation of landscapes and ecosystems through, for example, diffuse pollution, requiring further public spending to clean up water for consumption. We have to look long term and be ambitious. A landscape scale approach to conservation will enable us to avoid these inefficient perversities.

We also have to avoid a strictly utilitarian approach to valuing ecosystem services, and a landscape scale approach can ensure that biodiversity is at the heart of ecosystem services provision, by seeing landscapes as serving functions that have both use and non-use values. Communities tend to understand and respond more positively to the value of landscapes more than the value of special sites designated for their wildlife. A focus on landscapes can more effectively communicate the benefit of landscape scale action for biodiversity and landscape character. This is especially true in National Parks, which not only constitute vast tracts of countryside that are less fragmented than elsewhere, but also receive millions of visitors each year and so are well-placed to communicate with the public about wildlife conservation and biodiversity on a landscape scale.

The Lawton Review provides an opportunity to look beyond protected areas and establish future conservation principles which seek to include existing protected areas, additional sites of high biodiversity value and biodiversity in the wider countryside. Stop the rot, protect the best and restore the rest captures Link's 2010 and post-2010 ambition.

Many of Link's members will be responding individually to this call for evidence. Link would welcome any further opportunities to add comment on this review, in particular to comment on draft sections of the report or to help fill any outstanding evidence gaps.

The Landscape Scale Conservation Principles

INTEGRATING

Integration of environmental objectives is fundamental to LSC. This can mean integrating biological and cultural approaches to landscape, heritage and biodiversity conservation. It also encompasses the integration of national priorities such as Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) targets, National Character Areas, protected landscape designations, Green Belt protection, Agri-Environment Scheme targeting, and land use influencing campaigns such as tranquillity mapping with locally negotiated, community-led initiatives, with full stakeholder participation. LSC uses

integrating solutions to build virtuous cycles, avoiding conflict between conservation objectives wherever possible, reducing this where some is unavoidable and finding mutually beneficial solutions which strengthen conservation actions across sectors.

SCALE

Scale in LSC means much more than just “large scale” and applies to temporal as well as spatial axes. Spatially, LSC encompasses clusters of sites and includes the landscape fabric as well as metapopulations of key species, or fragmented habitats. LSC also encompasses a greater depth of time than short term projects, recognising that it may take many decades to achieve LSC objectives. In terms of landscape character assessment and landscape designation, scale may apply to a whole designation or to a whole character area, but it may also have a more limited scope where a designated landscape is comprised of several landscape Character Areas. In terms of the experience of a landscape by human beings, such as tranquillity, landscape scale will be determined by the extent or power of influence of a factor or collection of factors across that landscape.

ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE

While habitat loss is the main driver for developing LSC, successful adaptation to climate change is a key indicator of success for LSC. LSC should help give landscapes and their species and habitats the resilience to cope with change in the face of changing climate and other drivers of land-use change, working with rather than resisting the emergent properties of landscapes. LSC should aim to retain and sustain as much of the value of the landscape as possible in the process. Existing structures like National Parks can make a major contribution to adaptation, through ecosystem service provision, habitat restoration and sustainable farming¹. In turn this will improve delivery of ecosystem services.

CONSOLIDATION AND UNIFICATION

LSC should help to establish true partnership working across individual sectors. LSC seeks to unify the biocentric with the cultural strands of conservation. Unifying also encompasses sharing resources and sharing management of initiatives, to achieve aims beyond individuals/organisations. The consolidation and recovery of fragmented habitats and fragmented communities is also central to the objectives of LSC.

COMMUNICATION

LSC is an important communication tool. It is an approach to communicating about conservation in a way that ideally appeals to a wide cross section of society, because it seeks to integrate and unify. A strong narrative is essential to the successful communication of LSC, rather than being sector or target-led. It is an important aspect of the value that a plan-led approach to development can deliver if it is founded on a strong conservation strategy and community engagement. Government already use the language of LSC.

IMPACT

¹ *Britain's National Parks as test beds for ecological mitigation and adaptation to the impacts of climate change – an agenda for action* – A statement by the Ecologists of the National Parks of England, Scotland and Wales (May 2008).

LSC projects should show tangible change is possible across landscapes and their components sustained over time. This could be compared with the piecemeal, uncoordinated and mutually antagonistic effects of intervention and change over widespread tracts of land where landscape scale action is not taking place. Such impact would include reversing trends in diminishing biodiversity, stronger appreciation of cultural landscape values, better provision of ecosystem services and genuine influence by and reconciliation of the range of interests found within local communities. Effective monitoring schemes will need to be in place to ensure that all aspects of biodiversity are benefiting from such work and that progress is being made towards gaining favourable status.

Case studies

The following four case studies have been chosen as good examples of LSC and illustrate two or more of Link's LSC principles. Please take the case studies as basic summaries as more detailed information is available from the Link Secretariat.

Pastures New Local Grassland Project, Dorset

Integrating / Scale / Impact / Adaptation

Pastures New local grassland project is a partnership project involving NGOs, Local Authorities, Government Agencies and Landowners, to restore Dorset's wildlife-rich grassland landscapes. The project is working in a specific set of Strategic Nature Areas within the Dorset AONB, and Dorset Downs and West Dorset Vales NCAs, to reduce habitat fragmentation and restore landscape fabric.

Focusing in particular on protecting grassland Local Wildlife Sites, and targeting habitat creation to create linkages between these sites and SSSIs, *Pastures New* is achieving real landscape change for adaptation and resilience. *Pastures New* also works with Natural England to focus agri-environment spending on priority areas (and developing innovative multi-owner HLS schemes), as well as having its own funding to support capital works which will help restore grassland sites.

Croome Park, Herefordshire

Integrating / Consolidation and Unification / Communication / Cross Compatibility with other key principles

Although the original National Trust site itself was only 700 acres, the systems and management which determined the success of the project required modelling and management relating to a whole (if small) catchment. The outlying 'eyecatcher' buildings are miles from the centre of the site and separated by much land owned by others, and much of the biological diversity of the site is connected to major invertebrate sites some miles away which are in some cases SSSIs and NNRs. The 'borrowed landscapes' of the Malverns and the Cotswolds and the sight of them was integral to the design.

Aesthetics, agricultural management and biodiversity are all interwoven across quite a wide area. Finally, the approach to restoration of the designed landscape presented many interesting challenges concerning protecting biodiversity while radically altering the way the site was.

Usk to Wye Project, Gloucestershire

Communication / Adaptation and Resilience

This campaign is a long-term, landscape scale initiative which aims to “create a landscape that is richer in wildlife, more closely connected to the lives of people who live in the area and which functions in a more ecologically sustainable manner”. The intention would be to link up natural habitats across the area. The initiative will involve both local people and landowners. This is intended to be a project which combines active involvement, biodiversity and landscape outcomes, building resilience to climate change and a recognition of social and economic futures. A broadly based partnership to move the campaign forward is led by the Woodland Trust and Gwent Wildlife Trust.

The Usk to Wye project illustrates a communications led approach to development of LSC. It is still in relatively early stages i.e. still in the phase of using communication to scope and vision and develop actions, rather than being illustrative of action on the ground.

Mire Restoration in Exmoor National Park²

Integrating/ Adaptation and resilience/ consolidation and unification/ Impact

The Exmoor Mire Restoration Project is re-wetting damaged peatlands in the Exmoor uplands. The four year partnership project involves Exmoor National Park Authority, Environment Agency, South West Water, Natural England, English Heritage and local landowners. Peat degradation causes habitat and species loss, carbon emissions; damage to archaeology and palaeo-ecology; and damage to moorland river hydrology and ecology.

Blocking drainage ditches means rainwater stays on the moors for longer leading to re-wetted peat. This reduces flood risk downstream, improves river quality, reduces wildfire risk and provides summer drinking-water for moorland livestock. The restoration work can also divert water from pathways, and improve access. To date over 270 ha of damaged mire has been re-wetted, which will now accumulate peat instead of losing it through erosion.

**Wildlife and Countryside Link
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² Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation In National Parks, English National Park Authorities Association, (2009)