

Halting Biodiversity Loss by 2010

A Progress Assessment by Wildlife and Countryside Link and Wales Environment Link

January 2007



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Progress assessment

In January 2006, Wildlife and Countryside Link and Wales Environment Link published a challenge to government in a leaflet setting out what we thought the 2010 biodiversity commitment meant and how progress should be measured. We agreed to look at progress on an annual basis.

Presented below is our assessment, made in January 2007, against the performance indicators we included in the leaflet. These assessments have been made at a UK level where possible, but in some cases, we have given the more detailed picture for England or Wales.

Green indicates that good progress is being made, amber means moderate progress has taken place and red means progress has been slow.

1. Protecting and enhancing threatened species and habitats (stop the rot).

Our performance indicator: *No BAP priority species and habitats 'still declining' by 2010.*

2005 reporting showed that 17 (38%) priority habitats and 102 (27%) UK BAP priority species were still declining¹. We are still a long way from achieving this target.

Are we making any progress? The figures had changed little since 2002 (17 habitats and 97 species) though direct comparison is not appropriate because there were slightly different categories used in the two years and greater efforts were made to obtain assessments in 2005 than 2002. Overall, our knowledge of species and habitats suggests we have made some progress towards this target since 2002 but there is still much to do. In addition, progress in updating the UK BAP priority list (identifying those species and habitats that should be added to, or removed from, the list because of changes in status or new information) has been painfully slow.

Assessment: Amber

2. Protecting and managing our finest wildlife sites (Protect the best)

a). Marine

Our performance indicator: *A complete Marine Protected Area network (including Natura 2000 sites, OSPAR MPAs, Nationally Important Marine Sites and Highly Protected Marine Reserves) identified and notified by 2010.*

The omission of a Marine Bill from the Queen's speech was a major disappointment. Site protection in the marine environment continues to lag decades behind that on land. In spite of some recent advances and the Government's development of a Marine White Paper, it appears extremely unlikely that this 2010 target will be met.

Assessment: Red

¹ Defra 2006. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan: Highlights from the 2005 reporting round. Wildlife and Countryside Link & Wales Environment Link
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b). Terrestrial and freshwater sites

Our performance indicator: 95% of UK SSSI/ASSIs in favourable condition by 2010.²

It is difficult to assess progress across the whole of the UK because only 57% of the A/SSSI network has been assessed. However, figures from JNCC work suggest that 57% of features are in favourable condition, 16% unfavourable-recovering, 26% in unfavourable condition (-declining or -no change) and 1% destroyed.³

Overall assessment: Amber

England

There is more information available in England where the latest assessment (November 2006) is that 45% of SSSIs are in favourable condition, 29% are unfavourable-recovering, 18% unfavourable-no change and 9% unfavourable-declining⁴. The favourable and recovering categories combined give a figure of 73.5%. This compares to 56.9% in March 2003 and 72.3% in March 2006. It therefore appears that this target is currently on trajectory. However, we do not underestimate the challenge of addressing the issues facing the remaining sites that are in unfavourable condition. These may well be harder to crack than those that have already been resolved and the impacts of external factors such as climate change will bring their own problems. All SSSIs are of national importance and we should be as concerned about the condition of the last 5% as much as the first 95%.

Assessment: Green/amber

Wales

In May 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government set new targets for improving the management of designated sites in Wales. By 2010, 95 per cent of Welsh sites of international importance should be in favourable condition; and by 2015, 95 per cent of Welsh SSSIs should be in favourable condition. These targets were set in the Environment Strategy⁵ and have brought new energy and commitment to site management but considerable work will need to be done and resources invested if they are to be met. Full condition monitoring in Wales is not yet possible but the CCW's 2006 Rapid Review⁶ reported on 47% of Welsh SSSIs, of these, less than a third (32%) were in favourable condition and two thirds (68%) were in unfavourable condition.

Assessment: Red

² The Government PSA target for SSSIs refers to England only. Separate targets have now been set for Wales (see below).

³ Williams J M, ed. 2006. Common Standards Monitoring for Designated Sites: First Six Year Report. Peterborough, JNCC.

⁴ <http://www.english-nature.org.uk/Special/sssi/reportAction.cfm?Report=sdrt15&Category=N&Reference=0>

⁵ <http://new.wales.gov.uk/about/strategy/strategypubs/935833/?lang=en>

⁶ Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in Wales: Current state of knowledge Report for April 2005 – March 2006. CCW Council Paper I 06 29 December 2006

3. Making space for biodiversity (Restore the rest)

a) Wider countryside

Our performance Indicator: *By 2010, there should be a positive trend in the indices for farmland and woodland bird populations, for bats and for butterflies.*

The annual UK Wild Bird Indicator was published in October 2006⁷. This included information from 1970 to 2005. Farmland bird populations are about 60% of the levels they were at in the 1970s, although the index has been stable since the 1990s. However, there was a decline (though not statistically significant) between 2004 and 2005 in the UK as a whole and in England, with 11 of the 19 species showing a downward trend, it remains to be seen if this is just a blip. The woodland bird indicator increased between 2004 and 2005 and reached its highest level since 1990, albeit still down at 91% of the 1970 starting level. In Wales, more than two thirds of the birds of farmed habitats and nearly half of woodland birds cannot be included in the annual Welsh indicator because they are now recorded too infrequently.

Assessment: Amber

Trends for 11 of the 17 UK bat species have been assessed using data from 1997-2005⁸. A positive trend was reported for four species, no clear trend was apparent for six species and a negative trend was suggested for one species. There is currently no composite trend produced for bats.

Assessment: Amber

For butterflies, a composite all-species indicator has been produced (covering 52 species) at a UK level going back to 1976, which can be separated into migrant, specialist and generalist species. Populations of butterflies have fluctuated over the last thirty years, especially migrant species. The all-species index has peaked at four to eight year intervals, with an underlying increase of 17%, attributable to increases in common species. Generalist species have increased by 20% and migrant butterflies (chiefly immigrants from southern Europe) by 200%, with both increases consistent with climate change predictions. Specialist species have not recovered from drought condition in 1976 and have declined by 20% overall, though there are signs of a recent improvement in fortunes since 2002.

Assessment: Amber

b) Education

Our performance Indicator: *By 2010, all school children should have gained experience of the natural world through out-of-classroom learning as an integral part of school education.*

The Government's long awaited 'Learning outside the classroom manifesto' for England was published in late November⁹. Secretary of State for Education, Alan

⁷ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/statistics/wildlife/kf/wdkf03.htm>

⁸ BCT/JNCC 2006. The National Bat Monitoring Programme, Annual Report 2005.

⁹ <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/resourcematerials/outsideclassroom/>

Johnson, spoke about the need to match the vision of the document with real action to ensure that all children benefit from experiencing nature as part of their formal education. Funding issues and incorporating out of classroom activity in Ofsted inspections (and therefore providing some monitoring) could be better covered.

The Welsh Assembly Government's Education for Sustainable Development & Global Citizenship Strategy¹⁰ that includes promotion of outdoor learning was launched in September 2006. A new Champion has been appointed by the Assembly to drive forward implementation of the action plan. All the policies are now supporting the delivery but it is too early to identify progress on the ground. If appropriate resources are allocated, Wales should be on track to meet the target.

Assessment: Amber

This document is supported by the following organisations: Bat Conservation Trust, Buglife – the Invertebrate Conservation Trust, Butterfly Conservation, The Herpetological Conservation Trust, Mammal Society, Marine Connection, Marine Conservation Society, Plantlife, Pond Conservation Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Wildlife Trusts, Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, Woodland Trust, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, WWF-UK and Zoological Society of London.

¹⁰ <http://www.esdgc2006.co.uk/strategy.html>