



## Biodiversity Inquiry

September 2010

**Wales Environment Link (WEL)** is a network of environmental and countryside Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales, most of whom have an all-Wales remit. WEL is officially designated the intermediary body between the government and the environmental NGO sector in Wales. Its vision is to increase the effectiveness of the environmental sector in its ability to protect and improve the environment through facilitating and articulating the voice of the sector.

Wales Environment Link values the opportunity to take part in this important inquiry.

### 1. Introduction

We are all shareholders in nature, but this is one company that simply can't go bust. Biodiversity is our basic life support system; we cannot live without it, and we should not take it for granted. 2010 is International Year for Biodiversity – the perfect time to check nature's balance sheet. The risk of neglecting nature comes at too high a price. The answer has to be smart investment in restoring the natural systems we all depend on.

The natural environment is the essential life support system that all species, including humans, rely upon for survival, and should be viewed as the foundation from which social and economic benefits can be derived. Without a healthy environment sustainable living cannot be achieved. The passing of 2010 is a crucial reminder of the need for a revitalisation of our relationship with the natural environment. We need to revive society's passion for and understanding of our dependence on nature, and help them to understand how utterly lost we are if we damage it beyond repair.

The challenge is to reconnect people with nature so they understand how central it is to our future. The Welsh Government must provide the framework and capacity for all sectors and civil society to take action to halt the decline in biodiversity and facilitate the recovery of terrestrial and maritime ecosystems, ensuring they are resilient enough to cope with future pressures and continue to provide important goods and services.

### 2. What delivery mechanisms were in place to achieve the 2010 targets?

It is important to recognise that whilst there are a number of mechanisms in place for the conservation of biodiversity, the 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss was a policy target, not a biodiversity target, and the imperative for action was not accepted across government. **There has never been a funded strategy in Wales that aimed to halt biodiversity loss by 2010.** However, the current policy and legislative framework has done much to protect Wales' most

important wildlife sites from damage. The network of protected landscapes, marine areas and wildlife sites must remain core to the approach to protecting and improving the natural environment, but this framework is not sufficient to reverse the continuing decline in the diversity of our wildlife and the quality of our landscapes. A broader, deeper approach is required which delivers protection, enhancement and restoration.

The introduction of an Environment Strategy for Wales was useful in setting the ambition to do more to protect and restore biodiversity, and whilst its approach has not been perfect, there are some notable successes. For the first time Wales has made a concerted effort to bring designated sites into favourable condition. The Environment Strategy set clear goals and united action and actors behind them. To date, the area in which the Government has made the most concerted effort to meet biodiversity targets has been the Environment Strategy Outcome 21, Target 32 to achieve favourable condition on 95% of internationally important sites (SACs and SPAs) by 2010 and 95% of SSSI's by 2015. These sites represent the best of Wales' biodiversity, offering vital protection to habitats and species. Through the Outcome 21 project, the condition of SACs and SPAs is much better understood, and there is a much better system for monitoring changes in management. However, putting a system in place is not the same as delivering conservation objectives through proper management, and there is still a huge gap in knowledge of the condition of SSSI features. At present there is no effective and coherent monitoring system in place which will allow us to assess our progress towards the 2015 target with any confidence.

Progress has also been made on Outcome 22 and particularly the underpinning Action 6 to develop a framework for the management of seas and coasts around Wales. The adoption of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 provides the Welsh Government with the appropriate tools and measures to deliver an ecosystem-based approach to the sustainable management of our seas, and the protection and recovery of biodiversity. The Act, however, is only the start. Its achievements will not be measured by the clarity, comprehensiveness and number of clauses in the Act, but rather by the delivery of marine conservation and improvements in management of increasing demands on the environment. One of the primary tools in the Act for the protection and recovery of biodiversity is the development and implementation of an ecologically coherent network of marine conservation zones. These form a critical component of wider marine spatial planning and management.

A large proportion of Welsh seas are already protected under European legislation but this is not halting the decline of our marine wildlife. Research has shown that many of the habitats and species that should be afforded protection within these areas are not in a favourable condition. Furthermore, much of our nationally important wildlife is not taken into account in the management of most of these areas. To reverse this decline we urgently need improved management of existing protected marine sites and new Highly Protected Marine Conservation Zones (HPMCZ) designated as part of an ecologically coherent network of well-managed MPAs by 2012.

The Wales Biodiversity Partnership (WBP) has provided a focus for delivery of the UK BAP in Wales. In recent years it has become more focused and has established structures to help prioritise and plan action. The new Wales Biodiversity Framework would be one mechanism to deliver biodiversity gain if given political backing and resources. There have been many successes with partnership projects focused on specific geographic areas or specific groups of species, for example the Anglesey Grazing Animals Partnership, or work on moths in Wales. Outcome 21 activity on Llŷn and Ynys Môn has seen good cooperation between a number of organisations working towards common goals, with Section 15 agreements secured. WEL sees these as useful models for future replication.

Many of the most degraded upland biodiversity sites are on common land. There has been some limited success in establishing groups of commoners to cooperate and improve site management. Where this has been achieved – for example Aber Common – it has taken considerable time, and relies on commoners recognising an economic benefit of working

together. We believe that work on common land will be aided by full implementation of the Commons Act. It is disappointing that there have been considerable delays to implementation and that progress in Wales is far behind that in England.

The NERC biodiversity duty on planning authorities has still not been given sufficient priority within the planning system. There has been political direction but there is a very mixed approach on the ground. More resources are needed to identify key sites that have significant biodiversity value and ensure that they are protected under the planning system, and that the true value of biodiversity and natural systems is taken into account in decision-making processes.

### **3. Why did these fail to deliver?**

There is no escaping the fact that progress has been stymied by lack of investment to support the Environment Strategy's ambitions for biodiversity. Management of terrestrial designated sites depends heavily on funds through Section 15 and agri-environment schemes, both of which have been unable to deliver adequate resources and are hamstrung by application delays. There has also been a shortage of CCW staff on the ground who can invest the time required to establish management agreements.

The majority of internationally important features in Wales with an unknown condition assessment are within marine designated SAC and SPAs. Continued investment in the monitoring effort for marine sites is required to enable condition assessments for these features, in line with Environment Strategy targets for internationally important sites. Resource allocation for marine protected areas is disproportionately low compared with terrestrial sites, despite marine sites covering a far larger area than those on land.

There are some clear failings with Wales' current approach to halting the loss of biodiversity:

- a good process for Environment Strategy Outcome 21 was set in place but delivery hasn't been driven through as quickly as was hoped. Whilst we applaud the efforts to get the SAC core management plans and database in place, buy-in to the process has not been consistent across CCW
- there has been a lack of effective mechanisms to deliver the ambition to make the wider countryside more favourable to biodiversity (Environment Strategy Outcome 20) at the scale that is required. Tir Gofal was poorly targeted and not suitably designed to deliver appropriate conservation management of special sites or at a landscape scale. Equally, it is poorly resourced (in terms of project officers and capacity to provide quality advice to landholders) and not effectively controlled
- there is concern regarding the future effectiveness of WBP sub-groups as they are heavily dependent on the capacity and commitment of individual members. Without resources to drive them forward it is difficult to get individuals motivated to identify priorities for action. There is a real risk of members becoming disillusioned and withdrawing their participation
- CCW grant allocations are not necessarily driven by WBP priorities so are not necessarily being invested in the best places. There is also inconsistency in how funds are allocated so, for example, action which would be supported by a Section 15 agreement in one area is not similarly supported elsewhere. This makes it difficult to understand the strategic thinking behind grant investment
- there has been a lack of joined up approach to tackling difficult sites, e.g coastal grazing where coordination is required to bring together land owners and agree solutions
- there has been inadequate monitoring of the condition of biodiversity, a lack of accessible data, and failure to assess the impacts of activity such as agri-environment schemes on biodiversity
- lack of legislation, tools and resources to tackle the needs of common land and improve management of the 45% of common land which is designated SSSI.

Crucially, there has been an absence of ownership across the political spectrum and lack of leadership to drive delivery of the targets and get behind the solutions over the years. In terms of environmental policy, biodiversity has become the poor relation to action on climate change. In the absence of a funded strategy to halt biodiversity loss, the following issues have contributed to the continuing decline of wildlife:

- the lack of recognition of the true value of Wales natural capital and the life support benefits it provides
- physical destruction and fragmentation of important habitats and the insensitive erosion of the landscape character of many areas of Wales
- direct removal of, or indirect impacts on, species and habitats e.g. through fishing
- lack of appropriate land management e.g. inappropriate types or levels of grazing or insufficient woodland management
- invasive species
- pollution of, and/or adverse changes to, hydrology of water dependent habitats
- a history of inadequate and uncoordinated investment in biodiversity conservation and landscape stewardship

The solutions to these problems and other pressures on biodiversity are not confined to the realms of nature conservation policy and require action and accountability across government.

#### **4. Is the current approach to dealing with climate change mitigation and adaptation in Wales sufficiently integrated with policies for biodiversity?**

Climate change gives a new urgency to the need to join up our landscapes. Spaces, whatever their size, role and the functions they deliver, should eventually be managed in ways which connect them to each other, whether they are small green spaces in town centres connecting to larger suburban woodland areas, or carbon-rich habitats spreading across large areas of open moorlands. In certain instances, managing biodiversity over larger areas will dramatically reduce the fragmentation and isolation of populations, improve their interconnectivity and support more resilient biological communities with higher populations and greater genetic diversity. This does not mean replacing the current system of protection and management as this will continue to have its role. Rather, we should build on the current system, adding new ideas and approaches.

By managing land effectively we can ensure that Wales adapts to the unavoidable impacts of climate change, and by making the most of our green spaces we can give wildlife a better chance of survival through future uncertainty. If habitats are restored and recreated in the right places they can help reduce flood risk and store carbon. We know that green places and spending time with nature is good for our well-being, so people will benefit as well.

In the marine environment, as well as providing protection for marine biodiversity and increasing the biomass and diversity within highly protected areas, it is acknowledged that well designed networks of MPAs can contribute to efforts to increase the ability of marine ecosystems to adapt to the impacts of climate change. A healthy marine ecosystem, supported by a well-designed, ecologically coherent network of MPAs, will be better placed to continue delivering crucial ecosystem services. For example, our oceans act as a major carbon sink. Not only will this help contribute to a reduction in the impacts of climate change-induced warming, it could also contribute to the threat posed by acidification. As such, MPA networks have a key part to play in securing sustainable development in the marine area, and sustainable use of marine resources.

Biodiversity loss is not currently addressed in the Wales Climate Change Strategy. The Climate Change Adaptation Sub-group, which reports to the Climate Change Commission, is developing sectoral adaptation plans for climate change, one of which will address adaptation

for biodiversity. WEL would like to see strong Welsh Government investment in the delivery of these plans, with focussed funding and resources behind them.

One way of providing the required eco-connectivity to enable wildlife to adapt, and potentially migrate to more suitable climates in the future, would be the development of a new green network of spaces in Wales, to make the land more permeable to wildlife. A new green network would:

- link, expand and buffer Wales' special habitats, allowing wildlife to survive, thrive and move
- restore and create new habitats, partly to replace areas which might be lost to climate change, particularly at the coast
- protect and enhance the services land provides and trial ways to get maximum benefits from land
- create beautiful new places for communities to enjoy healthy exercise, and revel in the wonders of nature
- encourage the removal in some areas of fly-tipping and other sources of pollution, which can be harmful to wildlife and people.

The first step will be to properly understand how climate change will affect the Welsh countryside. Then we can map where new green spaces will deliver the greatest benefits, with each spatial plan area identifying their potential green places. Mapping areas for other reasons, such as identifying areas at risk from poor management, will also be important to identify spaces where multiple benefits can be gained. Some important headway has already been made with mapping areas of importance for certain species<sup>1</sup>, but an important next step will be to combine information on Section 42 species with habitat/landscape spatial planning. A combination of private and public leadership and investment is required to create the network. Proportions of the Government's budgets for agri-environment schemes, flood risk management and public health can be diverted to the network in return for the future savings which will be delivered.

While it may be tempting to "write off" species if climate change is predicted to result in a shifting of their ideal climate space, for example, it must be recognised that this is a complex field, where we still do not have sufficient information to make such judgements. Furthermore, the species declines that we are faced with in Wales have been driven by habitat loss and fragmentation, resulting from the way we use and manage the land. If species are to be able to adapt to environmental changes in the long term, action is still needed now to restore habitats and populations.

## **5. What examples of good practice are there elsewhere in the UK and internationally that Wales can learn from?**

### **Habitat Restoration and Creation: Wicken Fen**

An ancient fenland landscape and internationally renowned wetland site, Wicken Fen is home to more than 7800 species of plants, fungi and animals making it one of the most species-rich nature reserves in Britain. A raised boardwalk makes this rare and unique wildlife haven accessible and enjoyable for everyone, all year round.

Wicken Fen is particularly important because it is a surviving fragment of the once huge area of fen wetland that stretched from Cambridge to the Wash. Many of the species that live there are now very rare, and the Fen is too small to provide a sustainable home. The National Trust has, therefore, established the Wicken Fen Vision, their most ambitious landscape-scale habitat restoration scheme.

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<sup>1</sup> Including Important Plant Areas, Important Bird Areas and Living Landscapes.

The Vision project aims to create a new nature reserve covering around 56 square kilometres (22 square miles) between Cambridge and Wicken Fen over the next 100 years. This will give the wildlife at Wicken Fen the space it needs to thrive and survive, as well as help compensate for loss of freshwater habitat through coastal squeeze on the Norfolk Coast. The project will also provide a huge and accessible area of countryside for people to enjoy on Cambridge's doorstep in one of the fastest developing parts of the country.

Since the Vision project started in 1999, and with the support of partners, the Trust has more than doubled the area of the nature reserve and there is land in various stages of restoration. The mosaic of habitats being developed will include wet and dry grassland, reedbeds, pools and woodland. The primary guiding principles will be to manage the land to enhance its nature conservation value, protect the depleting peat soils, secure sufficient water resources, and provide improved visitor access to the countryside.

### **Landscape-scale Conservation in the South Essex Marshes**

In South Essex, on the north bank of the river Thames, the RSPB has developed a 10 square kilometre wetland nature reserve, created from a mix of grazing marsh, arable farmland, Brownfield and restored landfill sites. This complex sits in the wider vision for the RSPB's Thames Estuary Futurescapes<sup>2</sup> Programme.

Acquiring and restoring these sites has involved working with regeneration agencies, local authorities, landowners and business and extensive consultations with local communities and statutory agencies. Working in partnership to contribute to the wider delivery of the Thames Estuary 2100 Strategy, this landscape-scale work typifies the creative, innovative and inclusive approach required to restore biodiversity and contribute to climate change adaptation.

### **Volunteer & Farmer Alliance**

The RSPB's Volunteer and Farm Alliance (V&FA) project<sup>3</sup>, funded through the EU LIFE+ programme, links up interested landowners with volunteer bird surveyors who visit farms three or four times in spring and summer to map the locations of breeding birds. The RSPB provides maps to the landowners, along with advice about management measures that could be taken to benefit the bird species that are present.

An obvious application of this information, for farmers, is entry into agri-environment schemes designed to deliver multiple environmental benefits throughout the farmed countryside. Knowledge of which species are present and where they occur on the farm is crucial when considering the ultimate objectives of land use and how best to achieve integrated land management designed to deliver a wide range of environmental services. Another benefit of the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance project is the links that it can help forge between farmers and other members of their communities. While farmers benefit from a greater understanding of the bird species using their farm and their basic needs, volunteers often gain valuable insight into food production and countryside management.

### **Sustainable Catchment Management Programme - an RSPB and United Utilities Project**

The Sustainable Catchment Management Programme (SCaMP) is a ground-breaking partnership project designed to simultaneously enhance habitats to benefit wildlife whilst delivering improved raw water quality and supporting rural economies. The project area is based in northern England and covers over 50,000 acres and is open to more than 30 large tenanted farms, as well as other grazing licenses and lets. One of SCaMP's integral aims has been to enable farmers to understand that by practicing sustainable land management they

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<sup>2</sup> Futurescapes is the RSPB's contribution to landscape-scale conservation, a growing movement among UK conservation groups to provide more rich habitats for wildlife and diverse, green spaces for people to enjoy in our countryside, not only in protected areas but far beyond. See <http://www.rspb.org.uk/futurescapes>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/vandfa/index.asp>

can afford to cut down on the level of animals they manage and move their sole focus from production. SCaMP has showcased that through sustainable land management farmers can maintain the same level of income whilst reducing the detrimental effect they have on the environment around them.

This project has made a real difference in an area that is vitally important for wildlife and is unique in that its outcome has had implications on policies such as the Water Framework Directive and carbon management and has subsequently influenced national legislation on how catchments and uplands are farmed. Monitoring has been a key element of the programme ensuring that our focus on wildlife, water quality and vegetation has produced results that enable us to showcase the beneficial impacts that sustainable and sensitive land management can have on the environment, the economy and the surrounding populations' mental and physical health.

### **Targeted Land Management**

Targeted agri-environment schemes are an excellent example of good practice. Butterfly Conservation has led projects in South West England and Scotland preparing agri-environment scheme applications for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly. This has helped landowners put together good quality applications that have a high probability of being successful as well as enabling the delivery of high quality management for particular habitats and species<sup>4</sup>.

Butterfly Conservation is also currently working with Forestry Commission on a targeted woodland management project through its HLF South East England Woodlands Project, targeting the new Woodland Grant Scheme applications in areas where woodland species are in most urgent need of management. As well as writing applications and management plans on behalf of landowners; project officers have also been making links with the local community and recruiting new volunteers to undertake monitoring.

### **Biodiversity Indicators**

WEL believes there should be a greater use of Biodiversity Indicators. Butterflies and moths, for example, respond very quickly to environmental change and are a very well recorded group of insects. They are thus very good indicators of the health of the terrestrial environment as well as the effectiveness of government policies on land use and biodiversity. In 2009, with the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Butterfly Conservation developed a draft Butterfly Indicator for Wales. The adoption of this indicator by the Welsh Assembly Government would be a positive step to understanding environmental change, as it has in England and the UK.

## **6. What are the implications of emerging international targets for 2020 and beyond?**

WEL welcomes the new targets as a signal of commitment to future action for biodiversity. We are concerned that momentum is not lost after 2010 and that the Welsh Government continues to give priority to the crucial goal of halting the loss of biodiversity beyond this date. Experience with the existing and past targets shows that they are only useful if there is political buy-in, a clear programme of action and designated budget to drive delivery. Without these the targets risk becoming meaningless. Given the fundamental importance of biodiversity and its restoration we would urge all political parties to support future targets and seek to build cross-party consensus on how they can be achieved. We have a number of suggestions as to how the future targets can be met - see our recommendations below.

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<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.butterfly-conservation.org/downloads/265/reconnecting\\_the\\_culm.html](http://www.butterfly-conservation.org/downloads/265/reconnecting_the_culm.html)  
& [http://www.butterfly-conservation.org/downloads/76/Lepidoptera\\_Conservation\\_Bulletin.html](http://www.butterfly-conservation.org/downloads/76/Lepidoptera_Conservation_Bulletin.html) Issue 10

## 7. <sup>SG(3)-BIO6</sup> Summary and recommendations

Ambition and political leadership will be crucial to success in halting and reversing biodiversity loss. We believe that nothing less than a social movement is required to bring about a society which is passionate about nature. The Natural Environment Framework could provide the springboard to achieve this, so long as it sets out a clear inspiring vision and delivers an engaging range of activity. WEL members are ready to play a part in delivering this, particularly by capitalising on their ability to reach the public and offer experiences of nature and the outdoors.

A coherent and resilient ecological network is essential if we are to protect biodiversity. The current network holds a good representation of our nation's biodiversity, but the resilience of these species and habitats is being pushed to the limit by the effects of climate change combined with isolation/fragmentation caused by human activity. The existing protected area system needs to be increased by expanding existing sites, alongside making the surrounding countryside and marine environment more permeable for wildlife and creating new protected areas where this would increase functional connectivity. We see merit in a strategy for the location and function of future sites to ensure that new sites deliver multiple benefits for biodiversity and people, and are suited to adapting to climate change. This may include looking strategically at filling gaps in the protected area network where there is a particular need to make the countryside more permeable to species movement, allow marine areas to recover and provide opportunities for people to reconnect with nature.

The future approach, starting with the Natural Environment Framework, should be founded on the following principles:

- **Cross Government commitment and accountability for biodiversity delivery** – all government departments must be held accountable for delivery of biodiversity and wider environmental targets. Unless the natural environment is central to Government thinking, the necessary culture shift will not happen.
- **Securing environmental assets** - the future enhancement of the natural environment can only be built on the assets we currently have. We are already in a situation of impoverished biodiversity and degraded landscapes: we need to secure the quality and range of all our existing ecosystems, habitats, species and landscapes. This will involve protection, ensuring no net loss, and guiding future positive change through inspired and positive management.
- **Recovery of the natural environment** - we need to move from net loss to net gain in terms of the quality and character of our natural environment. Key sites and landscapes should be robust cores, which ultimately need to be developed into a national network of interconnected natural spaces. Special sites will remain a great resource which we need to be in good condition, but the ability of the wider countryside to support wildlife and to allow plants and animals to move and flex, to adapt and respond to climate change, will be crucial for the survival of many species.
- **Connecting people with nature** - unless people understand the importance of the natural environment, the benefits it provides, and the risks it faces, they will not care enough to help restore it. People need to understand that they depend on a healthy natural environment, and be enabled to explore and enjoy it. They must be educated and persuaded about its importance and also made aware of the staggering decline in wildlife that we are facing. There is growing evidence about the personal and community benefits of contact with wildlife and the natural environment. We need to reverse the trend of decline in the amount of time people spend with nature.
- **Integrated sustainable land management** - Land use and land management are crucial factors in the health of the environment. Land is multifunctional, so land management will need to be multidimensional if it is to achieve this multifunctional role.



Action for biodiversity has been shown to benefit ecosystems services<sup>5</sup> but management should address all dimensions of the natural environment. Crucially, it should be driven by long-term, rather than short term, goals.

- **Landscape-scale working** - there is a much greater chance of maintaining the integrity of our environmental and cultural assets, and the functional role they play in providing the life support goods and services we need, if we plan at a larger scale. We need to work with areas that make sense to natural processes rather than human boundaries. Such an approach will also enable wildlife to move and adapt to the consequences of climate change. In a changing world, managing our natural resources at the appropriate scale gives animals and plants “the ability and room to move”, and a greater chance of dispersing to, and colonising, areas with a more suitable climate or conditions.

WEL members have produced a paper which details 10 actions that we believe will help halt and reverse biodiversity decline in Wales. To help wildlife and people to prosper we need:

- a new green network of places where wildlife and people can thrive
- every school child to have a natural world experience every year
- wellbeing prescriptions to encourage outdoor exploration
- a doubling in area of native woodland by 2050
- a biodiversity budget for Wales
- a legal requirement for public bodies to care for biodiversity
- a planning system which delivers net-gain for nature
- our special sites in good condition by 2026
- safe havens for marine wildlife
- Glastir to make the countryside better for wildlife and give value for money

A copy of the WEL biodiversity paper, which gives more detail on the proposed actions mentioned above, has also been submitted for the Sustainability Committee’s consideration.

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<sup>5</sup> Benayas et al (2009) ‘Enhancement of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services by Ecological Restoration: A Meta-Analysis. Science 325, 1121

**The following WEL members support this document:**

**Bat Conservation Trust**

**British Mountaineering Council**

**BTCV Cymru**

**Butterfly Conservation Wales**

**Campaign for National Parks**

**Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales / CPRW**

**Coed Cadw / Woodland Trust**

**Groundwork Wales**

**National Trust / Ymddiriedolaeth Genedlaethol**

**Plantlife Cymru**

**Ramblers Cymru**

**RSPB Cymru**

**Wildlife Trusts Wales**