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**Evidence from RSPB Cymru to the Environment & Sustainability Committee  
Inquiry into Sustainable Land Management  
September 2013**

RSPB Cymru is part of the RSPB, the country's largest nature conservation charity. The RSPB works together with our partners, to protect threatened birds and wildlife so our towns, coast and countryside will teem with life once again. We play a leading role in BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of nature conservation organisations. The RSPB has over 1 million members, including more than 51,000 living in Wales.

**Introduction**

Sustainable land management is a vast subject that cuts across many policy areas encompassing a broad range of activities. In order to achieve this aim the Welsh Government must ensure sustainable development truly is its central organising principle. As well as ensuring its own land use decisions are set in this context the Welsh Government must use all the tools available to it – legislation, policy and guidance, and financial agreements – to ensure the wider public sector and private land managers contribute.

Fundamental to this is an understanding of what sustainable development means and how to apply it in practice. Genuine integration of environmental, economic and societal concerns to achieve sustainable outcomes is an enormous challenge, but one the Welsh Government must address in order to meet its sustainability commitments. The focus of this submission is the environmental aspect; the approach needed if we are to secure the healthy, flourishing environment that is central to the wellbeing of current and future generations.

RSPB Cymru is critically concerned that the Welsh Government risks eroding environmental protection in favour of a drive for economic growth at all costs. This move would be very short-sighted given the findings of a 2001 study<sup>1</sup> that the environment contributed £8.8 billion of goods and services annually to the Welsh economy, 9% of Welsh GDP and one in six Welsh jobs. This report valued traditional market benefits and did not attempt to put a value on ecosystem services, the actual value of the Welsh environment can therefore be assumed to be far greater. We urge the Committee to ensure this inquiry fully explores the importance of restoring our deteriorating natural environment to the overall goal of sustainable land management.

RSPB Cymru welcomes the Committee's timely inquiry into Sustainable Land Management. We hope the Committee will consider the forthcoming policy development opportunities, including those within the Welsh Government's legislative programme to ensure the natural environment is brought to the forefront of Welsh Government thinking, and to secure the appropriate delivery tools.

RSPB Cymru believes that sustainable land management in Wales:

- Should maintain and restore functioning biodiverse ecosystems, supporting resilient dynamic populations of the wealth of species and habitats found in Wales.
- Should support green jobs and vibrant rural communities based around sustainable provision of ecosystem services including food production.
- Must be governed by an ecosystem approach, which considers the real value of biodiversity and the benefits that arise from a healthy environment

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<sup>1</sup> The Valuing Our Environment study, 2001 (Countryside Council for Wales and the National Trust)

- Should be measured by the extent to which the Welsh Government delivers its legal obligations and commitments with regard to the environment, including those on biodiversity, water and climate change.

Sustainable land management does not stop in the countryside or at the coast, we must recognise the interrelations between rural and urban areas. This must include sustainable management of green space within urban areas, built development must be designed to minimise environmental impact and we must strive to enhance the connectivity of the wider countryside.

## **1. What is sustainable land management?**

The definition of sustainable development set out in, 'One Wales: One Planet', includes "enhancing the natural and cultural environment and respecting its limits - using only our fair share of the earth's resources and sustaining our cultural legacy." The concept of environmental limits may seem a challenging one, but put simply, a society that lives within environmental limits is one that will not tolerate continuing biodiversity loss; will not cause climate chaos; will not deplete or degrade finite natural resources, such as water, soils and minerals; and will not allow the erosion of ecosystems that support human needs, at home or abroad.

Targets set or committed to by the Welsh Government in legislation, policy and international agreements to prevent further deterioration and restore the environment are core to our ambitions to live within environmental limits and thereby achieve sustainability. Such targets include the EU commitment to, "Halting the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020," and the Welsh Government commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 40% by 2020 (a staging post on the way to the 80% reduction by 2050 target set out in UK law), as well as those set out in numerous European Directives and national strategies. Our progress towards achieving these targets provides a critical measure of whether we are achieving sustainable land management.

As the Committee will be aware, in May, twenty-five of the UK's leading wildlife organisations launched the *State of Nature* report, the first health check for UK nature. The report presented the grim facts regarding how nature is faring in the UK, and how we are failing to address the ongoing declines in biodiversity. In Wales, more than one in six plants are threatened, 63% of butterflies are in decline and numbers of breeding upland wading birds including lapwing, curlew and golden plover have declined by more than three quarters in recent decades. These declines are strongly linked to fragmentation, and deterioration in quality, of habitat. Around 60% of designated sites in upland areas are classed as being in unfavourable condition. Woodland, which once covered much of Wales, now covers only 14% of the land surface, of this only 4% is semi-natural woodland the remaining 10% consists of non native conifer species. Lowland meadows in Wales declined by around 97% between the 1930's and 1984. The urgency to recover our habitats and the wildlife which depend on them is clear.

The Welsh Government is currently failing to meet a number of requirements under EU Directives, such as:

- 70% of water bodies in Wales are failing to meet the requirements of the Water Framework Directive.
- 61% of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's), designated under EU Legislation are in unfavourable condition.
- Wild bird populations continue to decline, despite the Birds Directive requirement to maintain them by securing habitat, both within and outside of protected areas:
  - 32 of the 51 Principal Biodiversity Bird species are declining, including golden plover, which has declined by more than 80% in Wales in recent decades.
  - In 2012, the Farmland Bird Index fell to a record 19% below its 1994 value.

As the *State of Nature* report points out, the data we hold on the species and habitats of Wales gives an undeniable picture of declines. However, the data available only allowed an assessment to be made of 3,148 species; partly because many species are so rare that it is difficult to obtain data through existing monitoring sufficient to understand how and why they are declining. Therefore, to implement sustainable land management, as well as taking urgent action based on what we know, we must also strive to increase our knowledge and understanding of nature in Wales.

In addition to increasing our understanding of the environment, when referring to a baseline from which to measure progress it is important to recognise that current population levels and habitat distribution are the

result of years of environmental degradation, and in many cases do not represent healthy functioning ecosystems, merely fragmented remnant populations of a much wider historical distribution.

### **1.1 Steps to ensure Sustainable Land Management:**

- **The Welsh Government should work with RSPB Cymru and other voluntary organisations to improve the quality and accessibility of data and information on Welsh species and habitats. This is vital to inform the locations and timeliness of actions to halt the loss of wildlife and how to best effect nature's recovery.**
- **The forthcoming Future Generations Bill must recognise the protection and enhancement of the natural environment as a key outcome of sustainable development and make provisions to ensure the public sector understands its role in delivering it.**
- **The development of a Biodiversity Strategy with a clear, focused, and funded plan to affect nature's recovery. It is important that we have an effective plan in place as soon as possible.**

## **2. Achieving Sustainable Land Management**

There are a number of areas that will be fundamental to achieving sustainable land management in Wales, and RSPB Cymru feels the following are key:

### **2.1 Building Ecological Resilience in the Countryside.**

The ecosystem approach has been much discussed in the Assembly in recent years since the publication of the Natural Environment Framework – the Welsh Government's response to failure to meet the 2010 biodiversity target – and has latterly been described as “natural resources management”.

#### **Ecosystem Services**

Key ecosystems for Wales as set out in the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (UK NEA) included Mountains, Moorlands & Heaths; Woodlands, Semi-natural Grasslands and Enclosed Farmland. Ecosystem services are “the benefits provided by ecosystems that contribute to making human life both possible and worth living”. They are the aspects of ecosystems that are utilised (either actively or passively) to produce human wellbeing (physical and mental health). Key ecosystem services in Wales include climate regulation through carbon sequestration, flood regulation, water quality regulation, erosion control, recreation and tourism, aesthetic values, cultural heritage and health benefits.

The UK NEA recognised that many of our ecosystems are depleted and are unable to provide ecosystem services to their full potential. Biodiversity is not currently viewed as being of monetary value, when in reality biodiversity is key to the functioning of the ecosystems on which the Welsh economy depends. Biodiversity is fundamental to ensuring fully functioning, resilient ecosystems, and thereby ecosystem services, for example sphagnum mosses are essential for the creation of blanket bogs, which in turn are critical for the water and carbon services they provide. Soil microorganisms are vital in ensuring continued soil fertility that maintains agriculture and woodlands are key in managing water flow thereby alleviating flood risk.

The Convention on Biological Diversity describes the ecosystem approach as “a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way”. The ecosystem approach is central to achieving sustainable land management, and we suggest the following two goals are fundamental:

- Better integration of natural environment priorities, with each other and across the policy spectrum
- The need to scale-up conservation efforts, to restore nature throughout the countryside and enable it to adapt in the face of climate change.

### **2.2 Better integration of natural environment priorities**

The creation of Natural Resources Wales should signify a major opportunity for wildlife, given that the statutory body responsible for nature conservation is now one and the same as the body responsible for managing the Welsh Government's woodland estate and delivering other major operations on the ground such as flood management works. We suggest that critical measures of the value of merging the three

bodies, and of progress towards sustainable land management, include: the delivery of biodiversity priorities through management of the Welsh Government estate, including the public forest estate and National Nature Reserves; and the extent to which flood and coastal erosion risk management schemes protect and restore biodiversity. The Welsh Government estate should be a focal point for exemplary management, delivering biodiversity gain alongside other ecosystem services.

The wider challenge, of integrating the needs of the natural environment across the policy spectrum, in part depends on Natural Resources Wales robustly fulfilling its role as protector and champion of the natural environment. If the Welsh Government and other decision makers (such as local authorities) are to make land-use decisions that are sustainable in the long term, they must be supplied with robust, evidence-based advice on potential environmental impacts.

As the Committee knows, RSPB Cymru is concerned that the statutory purpose of NRW – and, particularly, the way it is interpreted by others - could impede the organisation's ability to give such advice and provide environmental leadership in Wales. RSPB Cymru is very disappointed that the Welsh Government has to date not honoured its commitments to provide guidance clarifying NRW's purpose.

Through the Natural Environment Framework, and latterly the Natural Resources Management Programme, the Welsh Government has developed a tool to help decision makers, or people designing plans or strategies, to take proper account of ecosystems in their decisions. In particular, this aims to enhance understanding of the value of ecosystem services and help to ensure that the true value of the natural environment is considered. As such, it could add value to the important environmental assessments that are already required by law (such as Strategic Environmental Assessment). The Committee may wish to explore how the Natural Resources Management Programme has promoted, or intends to promote, this tool for use by all Welsh Government departments.

The existence of government policies or programmes that fail to recognise the imperative to contribute to restoration of the natural environment, or indeed actively contribute to biodiversity decline, represents failure to achieve sustainable land management. An example of this would be recent Welsh Government support shown for the development of a new stretch of M4 motorway across the Gwent Levels. As well as damaging the suite of Gwent Levels Sites of Special Scientific Interest (consisting of seven SSSI's across both the Gwent and Cardiff Levels), this would promote further environmental degradation from increased carbon emissions by encouraging car use and through construction of the new road.

### **2.3 The need to scale up conservation efforts**

Protected sites provide the cornerstone for the conservation of many species and habitats that contribute to healthy functioning ecosystems; as such, they are fundamental to sustainable land management. Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's) and Special Protection Areas (SPA's) cover around 30%, or 620,000ha, of Wales' land and waters and are designated to safeguard the environment and biodiversity of Wales for present and future generations.

A 2006 study of Wales' suite of SSSI's by the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) revealed that 68% of the sites were in unfavourable condition, and 71% of notified habitat features were in unfavourable condition. A further CCW report from June 2010 stated more than 60% of SAC's were in unfavourable condition. Progress to address this has been alarmingly slow, with Wales falling significantly behind England in this area. Besides being critical to the health of our biodiversity, this means this is a key area where Wales is failing to deliver its commitments under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives. Furthermore, research has shown that the value of SSSIs, in terms of the ecosystem services they provide, is more than 8 times the cost, with a further £103 million in potential benefits if all SSSI sites in Wales were in favourable condition.

While protected sites provide the cornerstone, overall sustainable land management will not be achieved unless action is taken to protect, manage and restore habitat outside the current site network, turning our series of protected sites into a truly ecologically resilient network. Progress towards wider ecological resilience requires: buffering of protected sites with areas of favourable management delivered through agri-environment schemes or other management agreements; better protection of locally important sites through planning and other land management systems; reconnecting of fragmented habitats; and management of the wider countryside to make it more favourable to wildlife.

The EU Birds and Habitats Directives (as transposed through recently updated Regulations) include requirements for member states to protect and restore habitat in the wider countryside. The proposals emerging on the Environment Bill include the concept of area based planning for natural resources. This new process should be focused on helping NRW deliver the Welsh Government's obligations under international biodiversity commitments as well as the Birds, Habitats and other Directives, in order to build up this wider ecological resilience in support of sustainable land management.

## **2.4 Landscape-scale Approach.**

RSPB Cymru is committed to 'scaling up' sustainable land management, and demonstrating best practice in the application of the ecosystem approach. For this reason we have identified large areas of the Welsh countryside and coast where we are focusing efforts on partnership delivery of environmental management. This is our landscape-scale conservation work programme, referred to as 'Futurescapes'. RSPB Cymru is currently working in close partnership on three landscape-scale conservation initiatives, which in combination cover 14% of the Welsh terrestrial area. These include:

- North Wales Moors Futurescape - an extensive upland area stretching from Blaenau Ffestiniog in the west to Wrexham in the east.
- Three Rivers Futurescape – the Carmarthenshire coast and valleys, with an emphasis on wetland management, livestock farming and tourism.
- Gwent Levels Futurescape – a distinctive coastal floodplain grazing marsh with an historic wetland system, on the edge of Cardiff and Newport.

We are working with other leading conservation organisations, community groups, statutory agencies and local authorities to design projects that target environmental management where it matters most, whilst supporting local economies.

In applying the ecosystem approach, RSPB Cymru and our partners are working towards a model that integrates dialogue with relevant interest groups at key stages. We are developing and implementing a range of projects from upland habitat restoration that delivers catchment management improvements, to targeted landowner engagement on sensitive wetlands. We believe our landscape-scale partnerships are a positive vehicle to deliver sustainable land management solutions, garner community support, and promote best practice to a wider audience.

## **2.5 Steps to ensure Sustainable Land Management:**

- **We recommend protected site management to achieve favourable condition is fast-tracked. Protected sites, both terrestrial and within the marine environment, are critical for much of our priority biodiversity and provide the backbone of an ecosystem based approach. Research has valued the ecosystem services provided by SSSIs at several times the cost of protecting them.**
- **We recommend working towards building an ecologically resilient network across Wales to provide resilience for species and habitats in the face of increasing pressures including climate change. Welsh Government land has a vital role to play.**
- **A key purpose of the Environment Bill, including proposals on area based natural resource planning, should be improved delivery of domestic, EU and international biodiversity commitments and legal obligations.**
- **We recommend a clarified role for NRW as providing leadership for Wales' nature. We need robust expert advice on environmental impacts so decision makers can ensure their decisions do not adversely impact on biodiversity, or, on the occasions when they do, that appropriate remedial action is taken.**
- **We also need NRW to lead by example, securing biodiversity gains through its management of Government-owned land and through its roles in, for example, providing and maintaining flood defences. The body has a major role in ensuring the recovery of nature.**
- **We recommend support for landscape-scale conservation partnerships, as a cost effective mechanism to deliver integrated sustainable land management, effectively pooling the resources of organisations and landowners.**

### **3. Innovative tools to support sustainable land management**

As Welsh Government failed to meet the 2010 target of halting biodiversity loss, and existing initiatives such as agri-environment schemes have failed to halt the decline in biodiversity there is a need to develop new and innovative measures for conserving the species and habitats that ensure healthy functioning ecosystems.

#### **3.1 Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES)**

PES could be a mechanism for attracting investment in sustainable land management to Wales, and there are a number of successful examples below that demonstrate the potential benefits of PES. As mentioned above there are a multitude of services provided by the environment. Wales is well placed to be a major player in terms of carbon sequestration, water quality and flood regulation, as well as further improving the already economically important tourism and recreation industries.

The presence of substantial areas of blanket bog in the uplands of Wales provides an opportunity to pursue PES as a mechanism for attracting investment, by maintaining and restoring degraded peat in the uplands of Wales to increase carbon sequestration, water quality improvements and flood alleviation. Water companies could be encouraged to invest and support landowners within their catchments to reduce management practices that impact on water quality, reducing the need for expensive treatment down the line. The benefits of this approach have been demonstrated by the Sustainable Catchment Management Programme (SCaMP) developed by the RSPB and United Utilities in North West England, and the EU Life Blanket Bog project at RSPB's Lake Vyrnwy reserve in Mid Wales.

Agri-environment schemes are a widely used example of PES; public funds are used to purchase wider services, such as biodiversity, from land managers which include supplementary water and carbon benefits. By securing markets for the wider benefits provided through sustainable land management such as carbon and water, agri-environment funding can be focussed on supporting biodiversity.

#### **3.2 Conservation covenants**

Conservation covenants are agreements between a landowner and responsible body (charity, public body or local/central Government) to do or not do something on their land for a conservation purpose. The Law Commission has recently consulted on the possibility of introducing conservation covenants into law for England and Wales. These agreements are long lasting and continue after the landowner has parted with the land, ensuring that its conservation value is protected for the public benefit in perpetuity. Conservation covenants could be a useful mechanism for protecting habitats and species and securing ecosystem functions across the wider countryside. Conservation covenants have been successfully introduced outside of the UK including in Australia and Canada.

In countries where conservation covenants are widely used they have been linked to funding streams that have helped realise the potential benefits. This provides an incentive to the landowner whilst securing long term public benefits, and can contribute to the landscape scale conservation required for successful sustainable land management to be implemented.

#### **3.3 Steps to ensure Sustainable Land Management:**

- **We recommend an ecosystem based approach to managing the marine environment, integrated with new terrestrial measures being developed, through implementation of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. We will need to ensure healthy resilient habitats from which to derive ecosystem services.**
- **We recommend new tools to support nature's recovery - the Future Generations Bill, the Planning Reform Bill and the Environment Bill all have roles to play in making clear the Welsh Government's, and wider public sector's, role in protecting nature, ensuring no net loss of priority species and habitats, and working to secure net gain.**

## 4. Agriculture

Over 70% of Wales falls under some kind of agricultural management, and we contend that farming is dependent on a healthy natural environment across Wales to ensure its survival as an industry. Without functioning water and nutrient cycles, Welsh agricultural land will become unable to support farming. It is therefore in the interests of farmers to develop and adopt sustainable practices to ensure the resilience of their industry. There has been much talk recently of improving food security but surely securing the basic building blocks of farming, soil and water, is fundamental to guaranteeing food security.

There are farmers across Wales who already use sustainable practices, particularly extensive livestock systems that, as well as producing high quality food, provide homes for much of our wildlife and additional benefits, such as maintaining water quality and locking up carbon. These High Nature Value (HNV) farmers have traditionally received minimal levels of support, but rewarding these HNV farmers would support sustainable land management and provide a wealth of public services, as well as maintaining resilience through the diverse mosaic of habitats they support.

Rather than seeing farming areas in Wales that are unsuitable for maximum agricultural production in a negative light, we need to look at the public services these areas offer, including biodiversity, carbon storage and water quality, and reward the contribution these farms make to environmental resilience. These upland and marginal area farms are also instrumental in forming many of our iconic landscapes which support thriving and economically critical tourism and recreation industries.

There are a number of tools that should be used to ensure sustainable land management is adhered to in Wales. Unfortunately, some of these tools have been inadequately implemented and enforced such as Cross Compliance and the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (Agriculture) Wales regulations. The results of this are demonstrated by the continued bird declines shown in the Farmland Bird Index and continued negative impacts on water quality.

### 4.1 Glastir

Glastir, the Welsh Government's agri environment scheme, has suffered from limited take-up and fails to guarantee delivery of the full package of ecological requirements for species. Despite the popularity of agri-environment schemes amongst farmers, many are reluctant to participate in Glastir due to the poor design and delivery of the scheme. Poor scheme design has also severely reduced Glastir's ability to deliver for the targeted bird species (and probably other taxa), as barriers within the scheme prevent appropriate habitat management.

Many farms in Wales support multiple priority habitats and/or species. However, there appears to be a reluctance to establish agreements within Glastir that deliver benefits for all or the majority of habitats and species that may be present on a farm.

As discussed above, there is a current lack of support for HNV farmers who, as well as producing high quality food, provide a variety of public services and important habitat for some of Wales' iconic species, such as the increasingly-threatened lapwing and curlew. Unless HNV farmers are adequately rewarded for the protection and enhancement of environmental public goods they provide, the future of these farming systems hangs in the balance along with the livelihoods of these farmers and the survival of the rural communities they inhabit.

### 4.2 Steps to ensure Sustainable Land Management:

- **We recommend Welsh Government ensures adequate funding is available for agri-environment schemes, by transferring the maximum 15% from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 of the CAP. These funds must be used to provide the maximum public benefit through delivery of environmental obligations and should not be used to reinstate untargeted natural constraints support payments.**
- **We recommend the forthcoming Glastir review, provides an effective and integrated package of support [with Pillar 1 obligations and payments] to enable farmers to deliver genuine environmental enhancements.**

- **We recommend management practices undertaken as a result of joining Glastir must provide genuine environmental benefits, and agreements that require farmers to undertake few or no changes to their management practices on holdings of low environmental value must be avoided.**
- **We recommend that Glastir implementation must lead to the delivery of the full ecological requirements of priority wildlife at a scale and complexity that will protect and enhance diverse populations of priority habitats and species.**
- **We recommend greater recognition and reward for High Nature Value farmers who provide a variety of public services alongside food production.**
- **We recommend Improved enforcement of existing environmental legislation, such as the Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) (Wales) Regulations 2007 (uncultivated land or semi-natural areas). We also need to make better use of tools like EIA and SEA to design truly sustainable projects, integrating environmental considerations from the earliest stage.**

Consideration should also be given to the impacts of unsustainable land management on the wider ecosystem, especially if the Welsh Government is aiming to truly deliver an ecosystem based approach. For example, while management systems tend not to cross the interface between land and sea, ecosystems do. High nutrient and e-coli loading associated with run-off negatively impacts shellfisheries within the same river basin catchment area. High e-coli loading can reduce the value of shellfish either directly, or indirectly requiring expensive “dressing” to be undertaken prior to sale of the product on the open market. Tourism is also adversely affected, with e-coli counts determining whether a beach retains or achieves blue flag status under the bathing water directive. Loss of this status can negatively affect local tourism and associated business. Unsustainable land management will hinder Welsh Government in delivering GES under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and Water Framework Directive (WFD). Descriptor 5 under the MSFD requires administrations to address anthropogenic factors such as induced increased river nutrient loads, resulting in eutrophic effects in the marine environment, which in turn can negatively impact other industries such as commercial fishing and tourism.

## **5. Wider Value of Sustainable Land Management.**

Sustainable land management has wider social and economic benefits, both tourism and recreation largely depend on the natural environment of Wales. Maintaining and improving Wales’ natural environment should have significant benefits for both industries. As stated on the Welsh Government website, “*Tourism relies on the integrity of the natural environment. In Wales, beautiful landscapes and coastlines are the very foundation of tourism.*” Tourist and recreation industries must recognise the fact that their businesses rely on the natural environment, they should be encouraged to invest in local businesses that enhance visitor experiences through maintaining and improving the natural environment through use of sustainable land management. With nature and wildlife tourism recognised as growing industries, and 40% of visitors stating the quality of the environment as their main motive for visiting Wales it is important that tourism businesses recognise the value investing in and supporting sustainable land management can bring. This reinforces the economic benefits of sustainable land management and provides an incentive to land managers to adopt sustainable land management practices as tourism plays an important role in supporting many rural communities. A good example is the RSPB South Stack reserve on Anglesey. In 2009, prior to expansion and refurbishment resulting in demonstrable increases in visits and business, as well as directly providing 4.6 FTE jobs the reserve supported 17.5 local FTE jobs and attracted £570,000 in additional tourist spend to the local area.

The healthy natural environment obtained through sustainable land management can also provide many benefits in terms of health and wellbeing, by encouraging physical activity, providing space to ‘escape’ and providing space for outdoor learning for children. As pointed out in the UK NEA, there are also a number of cultural benefits including providing a sense of place, maintaining traditional landscapes and skills and also benefits from the aesthetic beauty of the landscape.