

The State of Nature in Wales: One Year On

May 2014

This paper has been produced for the Environment and Sustainability Committee session on the State of Nature report one year on. It is supported by the following organisations: RSPB Cymru, Butterfly Conservation Wales, Bat Conservation Trust, Wildlife Trusts Wales, Plantlife Cymru and Bumblebee Conservation Trust. This document reflects on the first State of Nature report published on 22nd May 2013 and looks at some achievements of the last year and the challenges that lie ahead. It aims to set out the key actions needed to address the natural crisis in the context of recent and forthcoming developments.

The suite of forthcoming legislation and policy reforms presents a critical opportunity to move forward, and in particular to ensure the health of the natural environment is properly recognised as a key outcome for a sustainable Wales, not something to be sacrificed in favour of other priorities. Ensuring that decision makers appreciate the importance and value of ecosystems and the services they provide, or natural resources, is important, but is not a 'quick fix' for our biodiversity. New approaches will only work in tandem with concerted efforts to stop and reverse wildlife declines, including:

- Prioritising protected areas;
- Protecting species and delivering targeted action;
- Making more space for nature; and
- Investing in research, data and monitoring

We need the Welsh Government to describe its vision for biodiversity, define what this means in terms of specific targets, and set out how we will measure success. We suggest a statutory target for biodiversity, in the Environment Bill, is an important mechanism to secure focused action.

It is vitally important that we seize this opportunity, not just to fulfil our moral obligation to protect the species which we share the planet with, but for our own health, wellbeing, social and economic prosperity. This paper focuses on the opportunities presented by the developing legal and policy framework to address the state of nature in Wales.

A groundbreaking report

The State of Nature report was the first national health check of nature across the UK. The report, which was produced by a coalition of 25 leading conservation and research organisations, was the amalgamation of decades' worth of data analysing the distribution and abundance of our native species across the UK.

The report found that of the 3,148 species assessed across the UK 60% of species have declined over the last 50 years and 31% have declined strongly. In Wales the availability of robust data sets was more limited and a key message is that we need to know more about how nature is faring. However, assessments were possible for a number of taxonomic groups which enabled us to draw a number of important conclusions.

We know from the thousands of species we do have data for in Wales that the state of much of our wildlife mirrors the widespread declines that we are seeing across the UK. One of the primary findings in the analysis of our wildlife is that it is largely the species that rely on particular habitats and conditions – 'the specialists' - which are being lost, while a relatively small number of more generalist species come to dominate once diverse wildlife communities.

A number of Wales level analyses (using different techniques) have been undertaken both prior to the State of Nature report and since it was completed. From these we know that:

- More than one in six plants in Wales are considered threatened. Wildflowers, especially arable flowers such as the small-flowered catchfly and corn buttercup, continue to decline and have a smaller range now than at any other time in recent decades.
- 63% of Welsh butterflies are declining. Since the early 1990s we've lost more than three quarters of our High Brown and Pearl-bordered Fritillaries.
- Red squirrels, once widespread, are restricted to three main areas within Wales (Clocaenog forest, Anglesey and pockets of mid-Wales), with a small populations clinging on in other, isolated areas.
- Farmland birds continue to decline and are now found in fewer places in Wales than at anytime in the last two decades: some, such as the corn bunting and turtle dove have disappeared completely as regularly breeding species.
- Water vole numbers in Wales, like the rest of the UK, have declined by around 95% due to habitat loss, habitat fragmentation and predation by mink. This loss is one of the most rapid and serious recorded declines of any British wild mammal during recent times.
- More than a third of all woodland species assessed are declining. Woodland plants, such as spreading bellflower and narrow-leaved helleborine, and lungwort lichens continue to decline in the absence of appropriate woodland management and the effects of atmospheric pollution.
- Numbers of breeding upland wading birds, such as curlew, lapwing and golden plover, have declined by more than three quarters in recent decades.
- A third of all widespread Welsh moths are severely declining.
- The number of swifts breeding in Wales has halved in the last few decades.

Developments in the last year

In response to the publication of the State of Nature report the Minister Alun Davies affirmed the need to “take urgent action to halt these declines”. He announced a number of key actions at the Royal Welsh Show, including the deployment of an additional £6 million for nature conservation (“the Nature Fund”). The Minister also confirmed last summer that a new Nature Recovery Plan would be developed.

These announcements were extremely welcome, and considerable work has been done over the last ten months, by government, NRW and stakeholders. However we are concerned about the pace of progress: the Nature Recovery Plan seems a long way from completion, and we are concerned over the Welsh Government’s willingness to address key issues within it. Notwithstanding the Minister’s announcement on 14th May 2014, deployment of the Nature Fund is still a work in progress.

Seizing the moment

The raft of new policy and legislation under development during the last two years of the current Assembly provides us with a critical and rare opportunity to set the framework through which future governments can go on and deliver the resilient, wildlife rich ecosystems aspired to by the current Minister. The Nature Recovery Plan is the main mechanism to identify the key actions required to halt declines and ensure the long term resilience of species and habitats that underpin our environment, to identify key targets and reflect responsibility for delivery. In the following sections we recommend a number of ways in which the developing legal and policy framework needs to work in tandem with, and reinforce the aspirations of this plan.

1. Prioritising protected areas

Designated sites are the cornerstones of protection for our beleaguered wildlife. Typically, they represent our best quality habitats and are havens for much of our most charismatic and threatened wildlife. However, our terrestrial protected sites in Wales are becoming increasingly isolated and many are deteriorating. Encroachment by development or other land uses, lack of appropriate management of the sites themselves, the impacts of widespread environmental change such as climate change, and a decline in the ability of the surrounding countryside to support wildlife means that habitats and the populations of wildlife they support are becoming smaller and more fragmented. Under the legislation, our national protected sites (Sites of Special Scientific Interest – SSSIs) are intended to be representative of the range of habitats and species, which means there are important areas that were never designated. In practice these areas are more likely to have deteriorated due to a lack of protection and appropriate management, so that SSSIs have become disproportionately important for our wildlife. In addition, resource constraints meant that the sites designated in Wales did not represent the full range of important habitats and species in any case, so that some key gaps remain in the SSSI series.

Reviews of current protected sites have found that while they play an absolutely critical role, they need to be 'better, bigger, more and connected' to secure wider ecological resilience; Local Wildlife Sites and undesignated areas of semi-natural habitat also have a key part to play. Studies have also pointed to the importance of protected sites in enabling nature to persist, recover, and adapt in the face of climate change.

The Environment Strategy for Wales set targets for securing good condition of Wales' protected sites: By 2010, 95% of international sites to be in favourable condition; by 2015, 95% of Welsh SSSIs to be in favourable condition; and by 2026 all sites (international, national and local) to be in favourable condition.

It is challenging to get comprehensive, up to date information on the condition of protected sites but we already know that the 2010 target has been missed and there seems to be little prospect of securing the 2015 target. For example, the latest 'rapid review' of SSSI condition – in 2006 – concluded that 68% of SSSIs were in unfavourable condition.

This is bad news not only for wildlife and our enjoyment of it but also for the natural services on which we all depend. These include clean air and water regulation, carbon storage, as well as the economic contribution from tourism and health benefits from improved wellbeing through recreation. Research has estimated that every £1 spent on maintaining SSSIs delivers benefits to society worth over £8. The conservative methods used in the analysis undertaken by the UK Government's Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) mean that this cost:benefit ratio of 1:8 is almost certainly an underestimate of the true value of the benefits that these sites provide. In spite of this we believe that under-investment in site management is a key reason for poor delivery.

For the marine environment, the Welsh Government has a legal obligation to deliver Wales' contribution to an Ecologically Coherent Network of Marine Protected Areas in UK seas by 2016, as the foundation of an ecosystem-based approach to marine management. This means designating and securing appropriate management for SACs, SPAs and nationally important Marine Conservation Zones in order to complete the network by 2016. An ecologically coherent network must provide protection for mobile species within the marine environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Nature Recovery Plan must:
 - set out revised, time-bound targets for terrestrial and marine protected areas based on sites achieving favourable condition and species meeting favourable conservation status
 - clearly define time-bound targets for protecting nature (ie the number of priority species and habitats for which declines are halted in Wales – or agreed regions of Wales)

- set out clear measures for assessing the effectiveness of mechanisms to halt the loss of nature (ie what has been put in place that better allows nature's needs to be taken into account and effectively contributes to halting the loss of nature)
- set clear targets for addressing past losses in species populations and restoring or creating new habitats
- Welsh Government investment in nature conservation activity (e.g. managing protected sites) should reflect the value of the broader benefits they provide.

2. Protecting species and delivering targeted action

Conservation organisations have long recognised the need to work beyond the boundaries of protected sites. For example, we provide advice to land owners, developers and regulators, and directly implement projects and undertake habitat management to support species populations. We also support the development and upholding of voluntary codes of conduct for marine areas. We know that where we invest in conservation projects, they work, and that they can deliver benefits that apply well beyond the targeted species.

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 places a duty on all public bodies to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity, insofar as is consistent with the proper exercise of their functions. It also requires (under section 42) the Welsh Ministers to publish a list of the species and types of habitat that are of principle importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity – known as the section 42 list.

While important action has been taken at various levels for biodiversity it has not been at sufficient scale to halt declines. The NERC duty has not stopped biodiversity damage linked to public bodies' decisions around land use, for example. Furthermore, it is not clear – e.g. in the new corporate plan - what specific responsibility NRW has to further the conservation of those species and habitats on the priority list.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Future Generations Bill must make it clear that a healthy, biodiverse natural environment is a sustainable development goal. As our life support system biodiversity must be a cross cutting theme across Government departments and public bodies; guidance will be needed as to how each can deliver against this goal to make a real contribution towards delivering targets to halt and reverse declines.
- The Environment Bill must put the measures in place to ensure this sustainable development goal is delivered, including:
 - a statutory target for biodiversity recovery as the responsibility of Welsh Ministers, to be reported on regularly to the Assembly.
 - clarity of NRW's role as champion for Wales' nature, protecting species and habitats from adverse impacts as well as delivering conservation projects.
 - a duty for public bodies to deliver against the priorities identified through the natural resource management process; this is necessary, for example, to ensure that land use plans and planning decisions, environmental regulation by NRW, and the deployment of rural payments, properly reflect both opportunities and constraints identified through the process.
- Glastir, as one of the Welsh Governments main tools to deliver for nature, must adopt a more targeted and outcome based approach as part of the wider strategy for meeting the Welsh Governments environmental objectives.
- The Nature Recovery Plan must give clarity on NRW's responsibility for delivering species conservation, as well as for habitats and protected areas

3. Making more space for nature

Landscape-scale conservation is a big, bold approach to nature conservation. This approach looks to tackle the problem of habitat loss, the need to help wildlife adapt to climate change, and the need to

make space for wildlife as our demands from the land and sea increase. It involves working with land owners, local communities, business and public bodies to support wildlife populations and drive habitat restoration on a larger scale. A number of our organisations invest directly in landscape scale approaches, and work in partnership on the ground. The area based approach proposed in the Environment Bill is an excellent opportunity to identify opportunities and prioritise habitat restoration. It is critical that species' needs are integrated into this process, and it is used as a means of delivering against biodiversity objectives as well as providing 'ecosystem services' for human benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Environment Bill must make clear that delivering biodiversity conservation and recovery is a part of the purpose of natural resources management as established by the Bill; this is essential if the area based approach is to be seen as a means of delivering for priority species.
- Existing and innovative funding mechanisms – including Government initiatives such as the Nature Fund, Glastir, and new developments around Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) must recognise the role of biodiversity in underpinning resilient ecosystems and the benefits they provide, and integrate delivery for species and habitats.

4. Recognising progress and understanding change

Moving towards a broad vision of sustainable natural resource management delivered through an ecosystem approach requires clear measures to understand our impacts on the foundation of ecosystems, the species and communities of which they are comprised. The State of Nature report provides us with an important baseline, and must be seen as a call to action.

In order for us to know how we are progressing towards targets it is vital that we improve upon the data sources available and monitor progress. Citizen science initiatives can play an important role in observing broad trends in the fortunes of many common species and broad habitats but there are limitations on their use to inform specific objectives.

Scientific research must set the compass for us in this regard. Well-designed surveillance and monitoring schemes with experienced staff and/or skilled volunteers collecting data in a controlled manner are essential in developing the evidence that enables targets to be set and refined and supporting effective interventions. However, this evidence has to be applied; we have to invest in practical management that applies the solutions to our negative impacts on nature.

We must also invest in monitoring and surveillance to understand the current picture and identify trends, and importantly to assess the value of different interventions. Clear targets and indicators are vital, and effective monitoring will ensure progress towards targets can be assessed and reported regularly and communicated effectively to the people of Wales.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Welsh Government must work with partners to strengthen existing monitoring and surveillance initiatives as well as identifying additional priorities for establishing the necessary surveillance, monitoring and research to deliver nature conservation objectives (including those set out in the forthcoming Nature Recovery Plan)
- Reporting against biodiversity targets and indicators should be integrated into NRW's State of Natural Resources reports, to be required under the Environment Bill.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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- set clear targets for addressing past losses in species populations and restoring or creating new habitats
- Welsh Government investment in nature conservation activity (e.g. managing protected sites) should reflect the value of the broader benefits they provide.
- The Future Generations Bill must make it clear that a healthy, biodiverse natural environment is a sustainable development goal. As our life support system biodiversity must be a cross cutting theme across Government departments and public bodies; guidance will be needed as to how each can deliver against this goal to make a real contribution towards delivering targets to halt and reverse declines.
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