

Natural England Standard

Ecosystem Approach: why we do what we do



1:0 An introduction

Strategic standards for 'why we do what we do'

We have a set of standards for 'why we do what we do' for each of the main areas of our work where we help deliver environmental outcomes. These are: Access, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Ecosystem Approach, Engagement, Landscape, Land Management, Land use and Marine. They describe the relevant legislation and Government policy, our role, and the principles that we apply to our work.

The standards are for all our staff and will provide:

- a common framework to help us work more consistently
- a coherent picture of our role, Government policy and how we deliver for the natural environment, people and places
- a clearer and shared understanding of our role as a science-led, impartial delivery body
- our customers with a better understanding of what we do and why.

A number of common themes are listed below which run through the principles in the standards. As such they illustrate key attributes that will be evident across our work and our contribution to national and local priorities.

1. Gathering, interpreting and providing evidence and information that those making decisions and choices need.
2. Practical advice that helps secure a high quality and diverse natural environment, which provides services of benefit to people and the economy and is resilient to climate change.
3. Enabling and supporting people to act for and engage with the natural environment.
4. Ensuring that the natural environment contributes to green growth and quality of life.
5. Working with and through others.
6. Responsive to local circumstances and customer needs.

2:0 Ecosystem Approach strategic standard - definition and scope

The ecosystem approach is a high profile, internationally recognised set of principles for managing the natural environment. It is described under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) as *"a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way"*. It advocates a whole system approach, recognises that the natural environment is valuable in its own right and to people and society, and involves affected people in decisions about sustainable

management and use of ecosystems. Specifically the ecosystem approach:

- is a set of principles to follow; it is not a specific process or planning tool
- recognises that society and individuals benefit from the natural environment, these benefits are termed *ecosystem services*
- recognises that benefits come from a healthy natural environment which can only continue to provide those benefits if managed sustainably¹
- acknowledges that these benefits can be valued in both monetary and non-monetary terms to inform decision making
- seeks integrated management and decisions about the natural environment through considering the full range of ecosystem services provided and engaging people and their values in decisions
- enables delivery of different objectives to be combined and considered together, so synergies can be made and conflicts addressed
- can help us take a more integrated and holistic approach to planning and decision making.

The scope of the ecosystem approach is consequently broad, and this standard reflects the need to introduce it into all areas of our work and help others adopt it into different forms of planning and management that affect the natural environment.

3:0 Government policy and statutory context

The ecosystem approach is the common theme uniting most of the ambitions, themes and specific commitments in the Government's Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP) for England, [The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature](#). Key themes of the White Paper are protecting and enhancing the natural environment to deliver multiple benefits; enhancing local decision making; growing the green economy and reconnecting people and nature.

The 2011 England Biodiversity Strategy, [Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services](#) is a main mechanism for delivery of NEWP commitments and encourages the integration of biodiversity and ecosystem services in management of England's natural environment.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) published in 2012 encourages local planning decisions which recognise the wider benefits of ecosystem services.

The ecosystem approach was developed to support implementation of the CBD and countries are encouraged to adopt the approach as a way of meeting the aims of the convention (conserving biodiversity, sustainable use of ecosystems and equitable sharing of the benefits from genetic resources). The CBD has been influential in developing the ecosystem approach and in 2010 agreed the Aichi Targets which support its adoption and sustainable use of biodiversity.

¹ a helpful analogy is that of a bank account, one could theoretically live off the interest (benefits) indefinitely provided you were not drawing down the capital (natural environment)

Defra have embraced the ecosystem approach as a means of ensuring the environment and its value to society is reflected in decision making, and have also produced guidance which builds on the principles of the CBD. This is expressed as 6 principles:

1. **Taking a more holistic approach** to policy making and delivery, with the focus on maintaining healthy ecosystems and ecosystem services
2. Ensuring that the **value of ecosystem services** are fully reflected in decision making
3. Ensuring that **environmental limits are respected** in the context of sustainable development, taking into account ecosystem functioning
4. Taking **decisions at the appropriate spatial scale**, while recognising the cumulative impacts of decisions
5. Promoting **adaptive management** of the natural environment to respond to changing pressures, including climate change
6. Identifying and **involving all relevant stakeholders** in the decision and plan making

The publication of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005 and the UK National Ecosystem Assessment in 2011 provided us with a snapshot of the state of global and UK ecosystems respectively. For the first time the health of ecosystems was assessed in terms of how they could support and enhance human lives. This evidence base is likely to inform a number of policy areas into the future, including food and water security, flood risk and natural hazard management, international development, and health.

4:0 Natural England's role

Adopting and promoting the ecosystem approach is central to Government policy and to delivering our statutory purpose of ensuring that 'the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of present and future generations'. Natural England has an important role in helping to determine what these benefits are, who depends on them, and safeguarding the natural systems that supply them. It is therefore important that we play a leading role in working with partners to implement this approach and apply it in all we do.

This means that we will use the ecosystem approach to:

- Help local communities and partnerships identify the existing and potential benefits their local area provides as the basis for setting objectives and priorities for their local environment
- Identify the appropriate scale for planning to take account of ecological, hydrological and geomorphological processes that determine the flow of benefits and ensure that interactions neighbouring or connected ecosystems are taken into account
- Work with local communities and partners to develop integrated plans that reflect local, national and global benefits
- Ensure that plans for the natural environment are resilient and can adapt to future changes including changes in climate
- Shape delivery through our levers of regulation, advice and incentives such as agri-environment schemes.

5:0 The principles we apply to our work

EA1 Helping local communities and partnerships identify the benefits their local area provides as the basis for setting objectives and priorities for their local environment

We will work in partnership with others in local communities, businesses and local and national government to support the adoption of the ecosystem approach. A key step in doing this is to help communities and partnerships identify benefits that the natural environment does and could deliver in their area. This information provides the basis for setting objectives and priorities. We will do this by sharing our practical experience, knowledge and information to inform choices made by local communities and others on the ground, and to help local authorities and others in developing their policies.

EA2 Helping deliver the optimum set of benefits

A main objective of the ecosystem approach is to provide the best set of benefits from the environment at specific places, recognising that local preferences and decisions may have consequences for the flow of benefits elsewhere, or for future generations. For example, local choices affecting rainfall runoff and river flows may increase or decrease flood risk downstream. Similarly decisions which ignore long term consequences, such as loss of currently rare species which could play a major functional role in ecosystems under climate change, may rob future generations of benefits and choices. Based upon our evidence gathering and our own and other's practical experience, we will work with others to ensure that choices and decisions affecting ecosystem services take account of:

- the environmental processes that determine the flow of benefits
- local preferences and their consequences
- the need to plan and make choices at appropriate scales.

EA3 Information and advice we provide is tailored to those who use it at different scales and in different places

We are committed to translating available evidence and practical experience into information and advice which can be easily understood and used by others. This is so that:

- local communities and people understand the benefits we derive from the natural environment and contribute through local decisions and action to their enhancement; and
- the land and water management communities more fully understand and carry out their role as ecosystem managers and providers of services by making decisions which enhance the provision of ecosystem services.

EA4 Gathering evidence required for practical implementation of an ecosystem approach

For some ecosystem services such as food production and biodiversity conservation there is an extensive evidence base relating to their management but for others, such as flood regulation and natural pest regulation, the evidence is much less complete. We don't fully understand the way in which management for one service, such as water provision, might

positively or negatively affect other services, such as food production or biodiversity conservation. This lack of knowledge especially applies to social evidence which is important in managing many cultural services, such as recreation. Our contribution to the development of the evidence base will focus on those areas that will improve understanding of how ecosystem services can be safeguarded and enhanced.

EA5 Enabling existing arrangements for environmental planning and management to adopt and benefit from an ecosystem approach

We will work with others to help establish the ecosystem approach in the many arrangements for planning and managing the natural environment. This will involve working through area-wide plans such as those for local development, designated environmental sites and landscapes, water catchment management, shoreline management, landscape scale partnerships, marine plans and the new Nature Improvement Areas.

EA6 Ensuring our staff are able to use the most up to date knowledge on ecosystem approach to give advice and take decisions

We support our staff to develop their knowledge about the ecosystem approach and how they can build it into the different aspects of our day to day work, for example, our delivery of agri-environment agreements, landscape scale projects and planning responses. This includes supporting specialists in the ecosystem approach who are capable of providing expert advice to our staff and to those outside of the organisation who want to understand and adopt the ecosystem approach.

Quick reference	
Type of standard	Strategic standard
Purpose:	Explains why we do what we do across our main work areas and sets out the principles that all staff are expected to apply to their work
Sign-off:	Natural England Directors and Heads of Profession
Publication:	Publication catalogue - external
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Issue number:	Final v2.0
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