

Natural England Standard

Biodiversity: 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 Biodiversity strategic standard - definition and scope

Biodiversity is the variety of life on earth. This includes the diversity of genes, organisms, populations and species through to ecosystems; with ecosystems seen here as broadly identical to habitats. England's biodiversity includes species and habitats of international importance, including 40 endemic species, 54 species assessed as threatened at a global level (12 of which are critically endangered), and several habitats of global significance such as vegetated sands and shingles, estuaries and salt marshes. England also has over half of Europe's chalk cliffs and more chalk rivers than any other country in Europe.

This standard relates to all biodiversity in England, although the special characteristics of the marine environment mean some of our approach is different at sea. English conservation practice has typically been focussed at site level upon specific populations and habitats; or upon the range and abundance of certain species and the extent and condition of habitats. We now also recognise that we also need to address conservation issues at a large scale, through the identification and management of ecological networks (ecologically linked groups of sites) with the conservation of habitats and species addressed in a coordinated way. People's direct engagement with nature and the role of biodiversity in the provision of ecosystem services such as flood regulation and carbon storage, has become an integral consideration of conservation policy, in addition to the conservation of biodiversity for its intrinsic value.

3:0 Government policy and statutory context

A wide range of national and international legislation relates to the management and conservation of biodiversity. Key pieces of domestic legislation are (refer also to the Marine Strategic Standard for relevant marine legislation):

- **National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949**, which provided for the management of certain land in the national interest as nature reserves, the notification of land as being of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and a government conservation service.
- **Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981**, which provided for the protection of SSSIs, the declaration of certain land being managed as nature reserves as National Nature Reserves (NNRs), and consolidated and extended provisions for species protection (including implementing the species protection requirements of the Birds Directive).
- **Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (as amended)**, which transpose into English law the site, habitat and species protection requirements of the EU Habitats & Species Directive 1992 and some elements of the EU Birds Directive.
- **Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000**, enhanced the powers available to Natural England to conserve and enhance SSSI and provided duties on public bodies with respect to SSSI, including a general duty to take reasonable steps consistent with the proper exercise of their functions to further the conservation and enhancement of the features on SSSIs.
- **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006**, which gave a duty to all public bodies to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity and which requires the Secretary of State to identify the habitats and species of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity in England and to take (or promote) steps to further the conservation of these habitats and species (these are also called 'priority' habitats and species).

Among international laws, the **EU Birds Directive 1979** and **EU Habitats & Species Directive 1992** contain a range of legally binding obligations for certain habitats and species and their associated protected areas (i.e. Natura 2000 sites). The **UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) 1992** significantly shapes EU and UK government policy, most recently through the new strategic plan and 20 Aichi targets agreed in 2010, which set goals for signatories of the CBD to achieve by 2020. The Aichi targets have strongly influenced the objectives set in the England Biodiversity Strategy, *Biodiversity 2020*, published in 2011. Additional significant international agreements include the Bern, Bonn and Ramsar Conventions and CITES.

The 2011 Natural Environment White Paper, [*The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature*](#), represents a shift in policy to sustainable management of the natural environment, including using an 'ecosystems approach'. [*Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services*](#), provides a more specific overarching government policy framework for biodiversity and has as its mission: "to halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people."

Key outcomes of *Biodiversity 2020* are:

- 90% of priority habitats in favourable or recovering condition
- 50% of SSSIs in favourable condition
- 200,000 ha net increase in the extent of priority habitats
- 17% of land and inland water of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services conserved
- 15% of degraded ecosystems restored as a contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation
- fish stocks managed and harvested sustainably, and
- an overall improvement in the status of wildlife, with no further human-induced extinctions of threatened species.

4:0 Natural England's role

Natural England performs an independent, technical function with duties to advise government and others, including local communities, about biodiversity. Critical to this is our ability to translate a wide range of scientific and technical information into practical advice others can use.

We are nominated as government's lead body for the implementation of *Biodiversity 2020* and on behalf of government we also administer the agri-environment schemes under the Rural Development Programme for England. These schemes underpin significant aspects of biodiversity management inside and outside of protected areas.

We are responsible for the designation and protection of SSSIs and NNRs of biological importance (we also designate sites for geodiversity features), which are a cornerstone of government biodiversity policy, and we license activities that may impact upon protected species. We are also responsible for some implementation aspects of the EU Habitats & Species and Birds Directives, including the notification and conservation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). Through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) and various UK and European fora we also contribute to the delivery of government's international biodiversity commitments.

Our role requires us to have expertise in almost all aspects of biodiversity conservation. This includes significant operational expertise in land and water management to deliver favourable biodiversity outcomes, including through our protected area programmes, running agri-environment schemes and direct action on our NNRs. Our extensive network of contacts with land owners and managers, as well as our close working with local authorities, local communities and NGOs means we are well placed to support conservation action by others, including through providing effective advice. We hold extensive evidence relating to biodiversity and the success of different conservation interventions. Through close working with learned societies and other organisations, we have access to among the most complete biodiversity data found anywhere in the world.

5:0 The principles we apply to our work

BD1 Conserving and enhancing the range and abundance of England's biodiversity

We aim to help ensure that future generations can benefit from a natural environment richer in biodiversity. We will pay special attention to habitats and species which are threatened and/or of international importance; a particularly high priority will be given to those species most at risk of extinction. We will seek to achieve favourable conservation status for our habitats and species, whilst recognising some change to England's biodiversity is inevitable. Climate change is already causing changes in species distributions, communities and habitats and we will, where possible, take account of these changes in our conservation activities and plans.

BD2 Developing resilient and coherent ecological networks

We will support others in establishing resilient and coherent ecological networks. We will establish and manage protected areas (SSSIs, NNRs, SACs, SPAs and MCZs) not as isolated sites, but as core components of networks. We will also seek to achieve favourable condition of these sites, setting conservation objectives that, where appropriate, increase the structural diversity of habitats to provide suitable niches for a wider range of species and so enhance resilience to climate change. Similarly, through targeting of agri-environment schemes and other resources, and our advice to others, we will promote the restoration to favourable condition of habitats outside protected areas, to reinforce the network. Creating new habitat will also be targeted so that it enhances ecological networks, including by providing buffer zones and corridors. Through our advice to others and the decisions we take, we will seek to ensure the detailed management of habitats accommodates the ecological requirements (niches) of all England's species.

BD3 Achieving the recovery of species native to England whose conservation is not delivered through habitat conservation

It will not always be possible to prevent or reverse the declines of species by ecological network establishment and habitat management alone, for instance, where inbreeding contributes to extinction risk. A requirement for bespoke action for some species will remain, including for species which are mainly or exclusively found in the matrix between higher quality habitats (such as some farmland birds). Often conserving species in need of bespoke action will involve researching the causes of decline and testing solutions. Critical to our success will be the translation of these findings into practical action others can adopt. We will also support species re-introductions to secure species survival or to restore ecosystem function, provided internationally recognised criteria are met.

BD4 Reducing negative impacts on biodiversity

We will work in partnership with government and relevant economic and social sectors to reduce the negative impacts on biodiversity that can arise from a range of activities and processes, including climate change, agriculture, pollution, development and fisheries. In some cases, many of the remedies required are already available and the challenge is to scale up their implementation, for example to reduce the impacts of coastal squeeze. Other impacts, such as emerging pests and diseases, are recognised but we still need to identify solutions. Wherever possible we will seek solutions which enhance biodiversity and deliver wider benefits to society. We will help others to understand the benefits of a healthy natural environment and encourage them to adopt remedies to reduce negative impacts on biodiversity.

BD5 Putting people at the heart of biodiversity

For England's biodiversity to be enhanced we rely upon increased understanding, support and action across all sectors of society. Without public support, conservation efforts will not be sustained in the long term, and we will lose much of what has been achieved. We aim to improve support for biodiversity conservation and to increase the already large numbers of people who take practical action, including as conservation volunteers. We will do this by communicating the many positive benefits people derive from biodiversity and, through our own action and supporting others, improving the opportunities that everyone has to experience local environments rich in biodiversity.

BD6 Protecting and enhancing the provision of ecosystem services through conserving biodiversity

For all of society, the living components of ecosystems provide a wide range of benefits from 'ecosystem services'. Biodiversity is important for delivering some services directly, such as crop pollination or recreation opportunities. For many other services, like flood regulation and carbon storage, biodiversity has an underpinning role with species and habitats interacting to affect the structure of the ecosystem and/or its processes. In our decisions and advice about biodiversity conservation and management we will seek opportunities to enhance ecosystem services and the wider benefits biodiversity delivers.

BD7 Improving and making more accessible the evidence base

For conservation to be effective we need to gather information about the changing distribution and condition of our habitats and species, their ecological requirements, and the

effectiveness of conservation methods and approaches. We must translate this evidence into forms others can use to take practical action, not least in local communities. The biodiversity evidence base in England relies upon a wide range of organisations and many tens of thousands of volunteer recorders. With government and the learned societies we will coordinate this rich source of information to ensure its effectiveness and accessibility. We will also undertake our own strategic and tactical evidence gathering, and work in partnership with other bodies to fill gaps we are unable to fill ourselves.

Quick reference

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| 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 |
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