

CHAPTER 9 - Biodiversity (Wildlife and Nature Conservation)

Aims:

- Support the achievement of local and national Biodiversity Action Plans for species and habitats.
- Record, monitor and evaluate change in biodiversity assets.
- Protect and enhance existing areas of nature conservation and wildlife interest.
- Manage areas of existing wildlife habitat.
- Create new areas for wildlife and nature conservation.
- Link new and existing wildlife areas.
- Increase people's understanding and enjoyment of wildlife.
- Integrate wildlife and nature conservation objectives into the creation of new woodland.

9.1 The Forest area has been subjected to many pressures over the last 50 years which have had a significant diminishing effect on biodiversity, both in terms of species diversity and habitat type and area. There still remains a remnant of sites and species which act both as the 'seed source' for any future expansion of biodiversity and as evidence of the rich and complex animal and plant communities people may enjoy. The task of the Forest partners is to maintain this existing pool whilst at the same time seek to expand and extend biodiversity, making up for some of the recent loss. This task requires a number of key steps.

Recording and identification

9.2 Many sites of nature conservation interest are well documented and have extensive records going back many years. Many others, however are only just being identified and as techniques for recording improve, new sites of interest are added. This work is centred around the Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC), which employs both professional and volunteer recorders to add to and maintain records of sites and species. An important task for the Forest partners is to maintain and improve the quality, frequency, availability and reliability of environmental records via BRERC so

that evaluation is as reliable as possible.

Evaluation

9.3 As records are collected and data grows, decisions need to be made as to what it means in terms of 'value' and 'importance'. This tends to be done on a site basis but there is an increasing movement to look at wider landscapes and areas, as seen in English Nature's Natural Areas work. The development of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) and its cascading down to Species Action Plans, Habitat Action Plans, Local BAPs requires that records and data are put into context, not only from a past and present perspective but that the context is monitored into the future. Much evaluation has resulted in designations at International, National, Regional and Local levels. These, and locally derived evaluations, are important in terms of protection within the planning system and resource targeting. The Forest partners will need to continue the debate about the criteria for evaluation and to implement the appropriate designations to ensure the Biodiversity, Habitat and Species Action Plans are supported.

Protection and management

9.4 Evaluation of sites has led to a range of designations, which give protection under various statutes. International designations include RAMSAR sites, Natura 2000 Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas for Conservation (SACs). National designations include National Nature Reserves (NNRs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs); local designations include Local



Woodland ground flora (Photo: Forest of Avon)

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Nature Reserves and Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs). In addition, Tree Preservation Orders can protect individual trees and woods. Felling regulations, operated by the Forestry Commission protect against loss and or inappropriate works. Most protection is against inappropriate development or management and the list of sites is continually being refined in the light of new knowledge from survey, changing views within the environmental profession and in response to specific threats. The Forest partners should keep under review protective designations and enforce them as far as the law allows.

- 9.5** Protective designations are also the focus for resources and English Nature, local authorities, the Forestry Commission and the National Lottery all use them to target resources for management and sometimes acquisition.
- 9.6** Land acquisition by the Wildlife and Woodland Trusts, particularly with support from the National Lottery is proving to be an important tool in helping ensure the long term future of important sites. The ability of partner organisations to take opportunities for the acquisition of important sites will need to be maintained into the future.
- 9.7** However these protected sites alone will not ensure the sustainability of wildlife; habitat fragmentation needs to be addressed and a whole landscape approach to conservation and enhancement be taken, within the philosophy of Natural Areas and Countryside Character. A range of habitat types representative of the naturally occurring range of habitat types for the area needs to be supported as do species indicative of the favourable condition of those habitats.
- 9.8** In addition, a range of mechanisms exists and will evolve into the future to assist in the management of other sites and habitats. Section 106 agreements, management agreements and planning conditions are available to the planning authorities and a range of grant schemes, both large and small can help apply resources to this essential task. These include grants from local authorities, Countryside Stewardship agri-environment grants, English Nature grants, the Environment Agency, the National Lottery funds and the Forestry Commission. It will be important for Forest partners to pursue these and future mechanisms to ensure the long term management of sites. The existence of clear, well researched management plans is essential to ensure that resources are applied appropriately.

- 9.9** Ancient semi-natural woodlands are a scarce and valuable resource both locally and nationally. Even where these have been converted in the past to non-native broadleaf or conifer plantations, they may retain elements of their former diversity, e.g. a good flora, which with careful management can be protected and enhanced. Natural regeneration will often be desirable for ancient semi-natural woods, otherwise restocking must be with native species, using stock derived from local sources wherever feasible and especially for the most important and sensitive woods. The expansion and linkage of ancient semi-natural woodlands and restoration of priority ancient woodland sites to semi-natural condition will be a priority for Forest partners. The UK Forestry Standard and Forestry Practice Guides set out the technical requirements.

Creation

- 9.10** The creation of new habitat can also make a significant contribution to BAPs by extending woodlands, creating new native woodlands, linking isolated sites, regenerating and planting hedges, creating new wetlands and changing the management of farmland to new objectives. These new habitats can also be achieved through both forestry grants (new habitat can be created within woodland areas established under Forestry Commission grants; these can incorporate up to 20% open space and 10% woody shrub species), agri-environment grant schemes and through planning agreements when mitigating the effects of development. The concept of wildlife corridors is an excellent model and can be applied on a wider basis alongside strategies for a broader based approach to 'whole landscape' conservation, in line with Natural Areas and Countryside Character work. An issue for Forest partners will be the essentially opportunist nature of achieving progress through grant schemes as opposed to a strategic, demand led approach. Forest partners will need to give clear indications as to where priorities lie, through BAPs and similar plans.

Monitoring

- 9.11** As the Forest grows and agri-environment schemes take effect, they should have a positive impact on the area's biodiversity assets. However, pressures which diminish biodiversity will remain, so the need to monitor change and to respond to it will be important.

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The focus for recording this change will be BRERC, with data being collected by a wide range of organisations and individuals.

Local Action

- 9.12** The Wildlife Trust manages many sites as nature reserves, and local authorities, parish councils, schools and local groups are involved in practical management and care on a huge variety of urban and rural wildlife sites, from local nature reserves to school grounds. These sites and other areas such as parks, gardens and the countryside provide the critical mass of land where plants and animals live; they do not have to be rare to be of value.
- 9.13** There is no doubt that people are fiercely protective of habitats under threat and that involvement in their care and management creates a long-term stake-holding into the future. The involvement of local people in protecting and enhancing local biodiversity is a keystone of Local Agenda 21 and achieving the Forest vision. Working to protect and enhance local biodiversity is also very enjoyable and educational. Much personal development occurs through learning new skills and gaining understanding of the natural environment.



Veteran Tree, Ashton Court (Photo: Forest of Avon)

Proposals

- 9.14** A range of activities will be required to achieve wildlife and nature conservation aims:
- Forest partners will develop a range of BAPs and HAPs and these will provide the strategic guidance for survey, work and investment in wildlife and nature conservation within the Forest.
 - Forest partners will agree and monitor the favourable condition of representative habitats within the Forest.
 - Existing areas of wildlife and nature conservation importance in the Forest area will continue to be protected by local authority policies and by extensive consultation with local authorities prior to schemes being approved. Alongside this, existing habitats will be enhanced through use of appropriate grant schemes related to clear management objectives.
 - All sites of nature conservation importance, including ancient semi-natural woodlands, will be protected from further loss and appropriate management will be encouraged.
 - The Forest partners should seek net environmental gains through the creation of the Forest and its related infrastructure.
 - New areas of wildlife value will be created, in addition to woodland. These should be used where practical to link isolated wildlife areas and to create new networks for wildlife. A whole landscape approach to nature conservation, in addition to the current site based approach, will need to be adopted by Forest partners.
 - Schools, local communities, local groups and the public will be encouraged to take an active role in the long-term care, management and use of wildlife sites in the Forest where the owner is agreeable.
 - Education and interpretation facilities and activities will be developed in relation to appropriate wildlife sites in the Forest and they will provide an important focus for arts, theatre and similar events designed to raise awareness, enjoyment and understanding of the local natural environment.