

An invitation to shape the Nature of England

Discussion Document Summary



This is a summary of a discussion document designed to kick-start the debate about how we can all contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural environment. For the full version please go to www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/ The deadline for responses to this document is 30 October 2010.

Please email your responses to: naturalenvironment@defra.gsi.gov.uk; or submit comments over the Defra website at www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/; or post them to: Natural Environment White Paper Team, Area 3D, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR.

Introduction

Deficit reduction and ensuring economic recovery are the Government's top priorities. But we also know that we can no longer afford the costs to our economy and quality of life which arise from a degraded natural environment.

Our natural environment underpins our economic prosperity, our health and our wellbeing. Whether we live in towns and cities, small villages or open countryside, we rely on natural systems for our food, our water, the very air we breathe. Our land, seas, rivers, woods and fields, parks and open spaces provide us with benefits so fundamental that they are often overlooked. These natural assets have an enormous collective value and as a nation we are, rightly, passionate about the places where we live and the landscapes that surround us. However, in recent years we have seen an ongoing decline in many aspects of environmental quality, over which many people feel they have little control.

We now know more than ever before about the value provided by natural systems and the costs associated with their degradation. The time has come to make sure we act on that knowledge. We have the opportunity to be the generation that finally puts a stop to the piecemeal degradation of our natural environment and instead seeks active opportunities to enhance its value.

In Spring 2011 we will publish a bold and ambitious statement outlining the Government's priorities for the natural environment, setting out a framework for practical action by Government, communities, businesses and civil society organisations to deliver on that ambition.

An opportunity for change

The more we understand about the natural world, the more we realise that it supports us in ways which may not always be visible but which have a very real value. Our natural environment is a source of personal relaxation and enjoyment, community pride, public health and economic security. For example, the value of natural resources extracted for use in the UK economy in 2007 was £41 billion. There are also costs to the economy and society from environmental degradation, for example, the annual cost of soil erosion in the UK is around £40 million. And there are opportunities to create additional value, for example, action to prevent degradation can have a benefit to cost ratio of as much as 100:1. But these costs and benefits are often not adequately reflected in the way we make decisions that impact on our natural environment leading us to squander valuable natural resources.

Question 1: What do we need to do to embed the true value of our natural resources in decision making at all levels?

Progress to date and today's challenges

This White Paper will be the first on the Natural Environment since 1990. The intervening twenty years have seen a wide range of measurable improvements to England's natural environment: the air we breathe is cleaner; the quality of the water in our rivers has improved and our very best wildlife sites are in better condition. These successes show that properly focused environmental policies can deliver real change.

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But, whilst we have made important progress, we have also continued to see piecemeal degradation – leading to an ongoing decline in the quality and sustainability of many of our natural assets. These pressures are different from those which we have successfully addressed and require new approaches and solutions. The White Paper will need to address a range of overarching challenges for future policy on the natural environment including:

- Climate change – both the challenge to the natural environment represented by climate change and the role of the natural environment in managing the impacts of climate change on people and business as well as being the source of the renewable energy that will help us mitigate climate change.
- Demographic changes – not just global population growth but also key changes in patterns of consumption at home and across the globe.
- Incremental impacts – all the apparently minor choices we make that lead to piecemeal degradation of our natural environment and which together can lead to permanent damage to the natural systems we all rely on.

Question 2: Have we identified the right overarching challenges for the White Paper to consider?

- a. If not, what should we focus on?**
- b. How should we approach these challenges?**

Tackling the erosion of our natural value

The value of our natural environment is being eroded both at home and abroad. The social and economic costs of this degradation are unacceptable.

Protecting and enhancing England's natural assets

We know that the pressures we currently place on our natural environment are driving use of natural resources to the point where we risk damaging the system as a whole. As a nation we are in environmental as well as economic deficit and, just as we must live within our means to ensure future financial sustainability, we must also show restraint in our use of natural capital if we wish to protect our children's prosperity and quality of life. For example:

- *Our biodiversity* – we have made progress, but many priority habitats are still declining and many species are still under threat.
- *Our seas* – face competing demands for space, risks from pollution and climate impacts. Use of resources versus conservation remains a tension. Fish stocks are at an historic low.
- *Our rivers and waterways* – water quality has improved, but climate change and population growth will reduce the future predictability and reliability of water resources.
- *Our air* – air quality is good across 99% of the UK, but air pollution continues to harm human health particularly in some urban areas.
- *Our soils* – the ability of soils to continue to provide essential functions is threatened by intensive agriculture, pollution, development pressure and climate change.

Question 3: What are the existing policies and practices aimed at protecting England's natural assets (including but not limited to those set out above on our biodiversity, seas, water bodies, air and soil) that currently work most effectively?

- a. What works less well – what could we stop doing or do differently?**

Question 4: What mechanisms should we focus on to ensure we manage our natural systems more effectively in future?

- a. How should we define success?**
- b. How can we agree on common goals and assess our progress towards them?**

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England's footprint on the natural environment overseas

As individuals and consumers, we often have an impact on the health of the natural environment overseas. This is a result of the 'hidden' impact of the goods and services we buy. They are made using natural resources from abroad, and can lead to pressure on wildlife habitats, water and other important services which local communities rely upon. We also rely on a healthy natural environment overseas, to provide us with the food we need which we cannot grow ourselves, and to help prevent dangerous climate change.

Question 5: How best can we reduce our footprint on the natural environment abroad, through the goods, services and products we use?

Building and enhancing our natural value

For too long our environmental goals have suffered from a poverty of ambition. We need to grasp the opportunities we now have to build a more prosperous, fairer and healthier future where everyone plays their part.

A greater role for the big society

Communities, businesses, civil society organisations and local authorities should have much bigger roles in protecting and enhancing the natural environment and a much bigger say about our priorities for managing it. As a nation we are passionate about our natural environment and frustrated by long-term downward trends in environmental quality.

In seeking to encourage businesses, people and communities to manage and use natural resources in a sustainable manner we need to both build on best practice, both here in England and in other countries and develop new and imaginative approaches. In particular, we want to look at the scope for actions to offset the impact of development on biodiversity.

Question 6: What best practice and innovative approaches to protecting and enhancing our natural environment do you think should be considered as we develop the White Paper?

Civil society organisations channel the passions of hundreds of thousands of individuals into independent advocacy, building the capacity of communities to influence their environment and promoting changes in our behaviour as well as engaging communities in the management of valued sites. The White Paper will need to reflect the importance of the natural environment to individuals and communities in terms of much-loved landscapes, local quality of life and the links between our behaviour as consumers and our concern for the wider environment.

Question 7: How best can we harness and build on public enthusiasm for the natural environment so people can help improve it through local action, as informed consumers or by shaping policy?

Question 8: What should be our vision for the role of Civil Society in managing and enhancing the natural environment and for engaging individuals, businesses and communities in setting the agenda for that work?

People working together with local councils have a very important role too. A healthy natural environment is key for local jobs, public health, recreation, community safety and to support new homes. The White Paper will need to give local communities and councils freedom to take control and find innovative new ways of protecting and enhancing the natural environment.

Question 9: How best can Government incentivise innovative and effective action on the natural environment, across England, at the local level?

- a. **How best can local government and other local partners work together to improve local outcomes on the natural environment, and pursue a more integrated approach linking a healthy natural environment to economic prosperity, sustainable development and a better quality of life, health and wellbeing?**
- b. **What are the most effective mechanisms for managing the natural environment where cross-boundary issues are involved, and making the link to other mechanisms for economic growth, transport and planning?**
- c. **How best can the value of the natural environment be considered within local planning?**

Creating a smarter, greener economy

A healthy natural environment is essential for our economy, for jobs and economic prosperity. Our businesses and industry rely on it for resources and materials, and can save money by using these resources efficiently. New jobs and opportunities can be created from activities which protect and enhance the natural environment. For too long we have failed to challenge the misconception that we must choose between a healthy natural environment and economic growth. The evidence shows that our future financial security requires consumers, businesses and the economy as a whole to work with, rather than against, the grain of nature. To do all this, we need to reflect the true value of nature's services in the way we do business. We cannot take it for granted or for "free".

Question 10: How best could the economy reflect the true value of nature's services in the way business is done, to drive smarter, greener growth?

Question 11: Responsible businesses are already looking for ways to reduce their impact on the environment. How can we encourage more action like this?

Managing our land: thinking big and joining up

The interconnected nature of our natural systems means that, on issues such as planning, food production, water and flood risk management and biodiversity, where the impacts of our decisions don't stop and start with administrative boundaries, we need to move towards more integrated, management approaches that work at the most effective spatial scale. These are often called "landscape scale" approaches. At the same time we need to start making decisions that encompass all of the multiple benefits we receive from land rather than just focusing on one objective at a time – an approach which is wasteful at best and at worst limits our capacity to manage real risks such as flooding and climate change.

Question 12: What are the barriers to joining-up and seeking multiple benefits from our natural assets?

Question 13: What are the barriers to thinking big and taking a landscape scale approach to managing our natural assets?

Influencing Europe and working internationally

The UK Government and the Devolved Administrations work together for a strong UK position in EU negotiations over environmental policy. There is already a comprehensive suite of EU environmental regulation in place, covering water quality, air quality, habitats and industrial pollution. The Government's focus will be to ensure this is implemented in the most appropriate and cost effective way. The Government will be pressing for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, the Common Fisheries Policy and the EU Budget so that expenditure is better targeted at environmental challenges.

Question 14: What should be the priorities for the UK's role in EU and international action, to protect and enhance the natural environment at home and abroad?

And finally

Question 15: If you could choose *just one* priority action for the Natural Environment White Paper to drive forward locally, nationally or internationally – what would it be?