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# The Defra White Paper on the Natural Environment: laudable ambitions, but timid actions

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Despite some recent conservation successes, there is little doubt that the status of British wildlife remains an issue of considerable concern. For example, although the programme to improve the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) was perhaps the most important and successful conservation initiative for several decades (Kirby *et al.* 2010), only 37% of SSSI area in England is currently in Favourable condition (Natural England 2011). Other Defra biodiversity indicators show some successes, but 31% of Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority species and 43% of priority habitats continue to decrease (Defra 2011). Wildlife in the wider countryside also remains under threat, with continuing declines in butterflies, farmland birds (despite considerable efforts to reverse these) and plant diversity in both neutral grassland and boundary habitats.

The recent review, led by Sir John Lawton, of England's wildlife sites and ecological network concluded that the network of SSSIs 'clearly does not in itself comprise a coherent and resilient ecological network' (Lawton *et al.* 2010). Conse-

quently, the review calls for 'a step-change in our approach to wildlife conservation, from trying to hang on to what we have, to one of large-scale habitat restoration and recreation'.

While the impoverishment of ecosystems and the need to start restoration before it is too late have been well understood in nature conservation circles for some time, it is less clear whether it had generated any political valency. Concerted lobbying by NGOs was required to create a sense of urgency, and in 2010 the three main UK political parties all stated in their pre-election manifestos that they would act to improve the conservation of nature. Following the election of the Coalition Government, hopes were raised further by David Cameron's statement in May 2010 that they intended to be the 'greenest government ever' (DECC 2010). There was, therefore, considerable anticipation when the Defra Secretary of State, Caroline Spelman, announced in July 2010 that the Government would prepare a White Paper on the Natural Environment [for England], and at the same time opened a wide-ranging and public consultation exercise.

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The consultation document released at the time was encouraging, outlining a strong justification for the protection and restoration of a vibrant natural environment. From the various consultation events and many thousands of submissions, one message to the Government was clear, above all else: we need action, not just words. This was reinforced by the evidence set out in the UK *National Ecosystem Assessment* (NEA) (UK NEA 2011; <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/>), a pioneering and illuminating exercise confirming the scale of the challenge for a restoration agenda. This was the backdrop to the publication on 7th June 2011 of the White Paper, entitled 'The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature' ([www.defra.gov.uk/environment/naturalwhitepaper/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/naturalwhitepaper/)).

#### The rationale and ambitions

The White Paper devotes considerable space to making a strong case for the conservation of nature and the restoration of the natural environment. This is based largely on the recognition that nature is the foundation for ecosystem services (such as healthy soils, clean water, pollination, protection from extreme weather and cultural heritage), in turn providing economic, health and other social benefits. In this respect, the White Paper draws heavily on the concepts and evidence presented in *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity* (TEEB) initiative (TEEB 2008, 2011) and the UK NEA. These studies show that to maintain such services and the flow of benefits, we need to maintain our natural capital, i.e. the quantity and quality of our ecosystems. The need to conserve nature for its own sake, for its intrinsic value, is acknowledged, but is not presented as a prominent justification for action.

In addition, the White Paper aims to take forward commitments made at the Conference of Parties to the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), which was held in Nagoya, Japan, in October 2010. This reinforced the growing recognition of the importance of nature in terms of providing ecosystem services in one of its primary agreements, which is to 'take effective and urgent action to halt the loss of biodiversity, [so] that by 2020 ecosystems are resilient and continue to provide essential services, thereby securing the planet's variety of life, and contributing to human well-being, and poverty eradication'.

These substantially reinforced foundations

with an explicit economic component undoubtedly strengthen the rationale for intervention and broaden the potential constituency for investing in the natural environment. Like others centrally involved in the TEEB studies, at the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) we welcome the recognition of the value of ecosystems and their services, and the need to invest in our natural capital. However, this line of reasoning, extensively elaborated in the White Paper and picked up in the press reports, does not obviate the validity of valuing nature for its own sake. It should not open the door to the commoditisation of biodiversity, and the eclipsing of passion-based nature conservation with hard-nosed cost-benefit based decision-making (e.g. Saunders 2011). It is also important to avoid the pitfall of assuming that what is good for providing ecosystem services is always good for broader nature conservation, and vice versa (e.g. Anderson *et al.* 2009; Bradbury *et al.* 2010).

The political benefits of the new rationale are plain to see in the ambition of the White Paper. Defra has clearly got the message and committed the Government to an ambitious 2020 mission, which is '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'. This is a laudable and broad ambition. Judging whether such a mission has been achieved will be difficult, of course, and much will depend on the selection of indicators. The lack of a clear measurable overarching target could therefore be seen as a weakness. A number of other aims are even more vaguely articulated (e.g. 'moving to a net gain in the value' of nature).

However, perhaps surprisingly, given recent political rhetoric about target-led cultures, the White Paper recognises their value in nature conservation. Clear measurable targets include the plan to have 90% of priority wildlife habitats in Recovering or Favourable condition by 2020, and at least 50% of SSSIs in Favourable condition, while maintaining at least 95% in Favourable or Recovering condition. In response to the *Making Space for Nature* review, there is the intention to achieve 'more, bigger, better and less-fragmented areas for wildlife, including no net loss of priority habitat and an increase of at least 200,000ha in the overall extent of priority habitats'.

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The White Paper also reiterates one of the Government's CBD commitments in which 'at least 17% of England will be managed effectively in order to safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem services, and at least 15% of degraded ecosystems that are important for climate change mitigation and adaptation will be restored'.

It therefore seems hard to criticise the White Paper in terms of its ambitions. Indeed, some may feel that we are entering a new phase of nature conservation, in which it moves from an issue promoted by minority interests to the political mainstream.

#### The actions and resources

There is no shortage of actions to deliver the Government's mission and targets, with some 92 measures relating to the following four themes:

- 'facilitating greater local action to protect and improve nature;
- creating a green economy, in which economic growth and the health of our natural resources sustain each other, and markets, business and Government better reflect the value of nature;
- strengthening the connections between people and nature to the benefit of both; and
- showing leadership in the European Union and internationally, to protect and enhance natural assets globally.'

Actions that are considered by Defra in the White Paper to be key reforms are listed in Table 1. Looking at this list, it is clear that a lot of emphasis is being placed on local actions, monitoring, voluntary and enabling measures. This seems to be at odds with the level of ambition that is aspired to, and the severity and scale of the problems to be addressed. The scope for action has been obviously hampered by two major political constraints: antipathy both to new regula-

**Table 1 Actions listed as key reforms in the White Paper on the Natural Environment**

#### Protecting and improving our natural environment

- Supporting Local Nature Partnerships, to strengthen local action;
- New Nature Improvement Areas in response to the recommendations set out in *Making Space for Nature* to enhance and reconnect nature on a significant scale;
- Ecologically coherent planning, retaining the protection and improvement of the natural environment as core objectives of the planning system; and
- Piloting biodiversity offsets, to make requirements to reduce the impacts of development on biodiversity simpler and more consistent.

#### Growing a green economy

- A new independent Natural Capital Committee, to put the value of England's natural capital at the heart of our economic thinking;
- Inclusion of natural capital in our national accounts, to capture nature's value in how we measure economic progress;
- Actions to support the creation of new markets for green goods and services, expanding the opportunities for UK business; and
- New support and guidance for businesses, to promote responsible use of natural capital.

#### Reconnecting people and nature

- Improving public health locally, by making high-quality green space available to everyone;
- Action to get more children learning outdoors, by removing barriers and increasing schools' abilities to teach outdoors;
- New Green Areas Designation, empowering communities to protect local environments that are important to them; and
- Help for everyone to 'do the right thing', at home, when shopping or as volunteers.

#### International and EU Leadership

- Strong implementation of the Nagoya commitments on biodiversity, pressing for effective implementation internationally;
- A new intergovernmental platform for biodiversity and ecosystem services, measuring progress towards meeting the new biodiversity targets;
- Helping developing countries to value their ecosystems, improving the quality of the lives of the poorest on the planet;
- Reform the Common Agricultural and Common Fisheries Policies, to achieve greater environmental benefits; and
- Support for the EU Roadmap for a Resource-Efficient Europe, to secure supply chains for critical resources.

tions and additional expenditure. New spending commitments amount to just £10 million, instead of the hundreds of millions that both the *Making Space for Nature* review and NEA identify as being necessary. Even more worrying is the lack of a longer-term funding strategy. Consequently, many of the actions proposed are rather tentative, with many being pilots, small-scale initiatives, dependent on further reviews, task-force investigations or initiatives with slow timetables.

#### Reconnecting nature

One of the highest conservation priorities relates to the need for substantial landscape-scale restoration. In this respect, the White Paper's commit-

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ment to establish Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) has been widely welcomed, especially by NGOs. However, it is not clear if NIA objectives are to achieve the large-scale ecological enhancements envisaged for Ecological Restoration Areas in the *Making Space for Nature* review. The current proposal is to establish 12 NIAs, with a budget of £7.5 million. By itself, this fund is clearly inadequate to achieve significant landscape impacts, particularly in lowland areas where some needs are most acute but where land-purchase costs would be very high.

Another initiative that it is hoped will help with the restoration of habitats is the establishment of Local Nature Partnerships (NPAs). Although their rationale and objectives are also rather unclear, it seems that their focus will be on growing a green economy. But they will not really be local bodies since the Government envisages the establishment of about 50, crossing administrative boundaries to provide strategic benefits at a landscape scale. While the principle is sound, it is not clear how local authorities are supposed to collaborate, and many will not have much capacity to do so, given the lack of local authority ecologists and other current resource constraints. The Government is providing a one-off fund of £1 million, but across 50 NPAs this will be very thinly spread.

A sympathetic and supportive approach in the land-use planning system is critical to the effective delivery of conservation objectives and the restoration agenda. However, there are widespread concerns over the treatment of planning in the White Paper, and its fit with the substantial reforms now being pursued by the Government, which appear to favour a strong localism and pro-growth agenda of the kind espoused by the Department for Local Government. Although the White Paper states that planning systems will protect and enhance the natural environment, it is unclear how the proposed National Planning Policy Framework will achieve this, and the balance seems to be tipping against conservation in favour of development. To achieve the White Paper's aims, local objectives also need to coherently contribute to more strategic regional and national objectives, but there are doubts about how this can be achieved, following the Government's abolition of the Regional Spatial Strategies. The proposed Localism Bill does introduce a duty to co-operate, but Wildlife Link argues that, as

currently drafted, it may fail to encourage proactive co-operation between local authorities (Wildlife Link 2011).

#### Biodiversity offsets

One of the innovations of greatest note in the White Paper is the intention to use offsets to achieve the goal of no net-loss of biodiversity from developments. Offsets are measures that result in measurable conservation benefits that outweigh negative impacts. If thoroughly implemented for all residual impacts (i.e. after appropriate avoidance and mitigation measures), and coupled with strategic planning, proper regulation and thorough monitoring, offsets could result in significant strategic and large-scale conservation benefits (Eftec & IEEP 2010; Treweek 2009). As recognised in *Making Space for Nature*, offsets could be a means of enhancing the coherence of the ecological network.

However, Defra has chosen to introduce a voluntary pilot initiative to test a simple system, with light-touch regulation organised at the local authority level. Consequently, this will not, at least for the moment, make much of a contribution to 'no-net-loss of biodiversity' because few local authorities seem likely to take this on, again for capacity reasons but also to avoid extra burdens on developers. Furthermore, if offsets are organised purely on a local basis, greater national benefits will be difficult to achieve.

#### Local action

The theme of local empowerment and local action runs throughout the White Paper, chiming with the Government's espousal of the Big Society. It is right to celebrate the achievements and potential of voluntary organisations, local initiatives and the depth of commitment to nature conservation. However, this leads to the question of what the state can do to support and amplify this effort. More resources could be helpful, in the form of direct funding, support for training and equipment aid for enhanced management. So, too, might greater control over certain sites through sympathetic tenancy agreements or, in some cases, purchase, as well as strengthened regulation to enable and energise more sustainable management.

It is certainly true that we need to win over the hearts and minds of many more people to get their backing for the level of nature conservation

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envisaged. This is a challenge partly because the natural world has been so impoverished in many areas that it is increasingly difficult for people to witness and understand what they are missing. But very few of the proposed measures to reconnect people with nature are new or significant, and to make a big difference on this issue greater funding is undoubtedly required. For example, much more could be done to help visitors to SSSIs and local wildlife sites to see, understand and enjoy the species for which such sites provide protection. At the moment, many people are unaware of even the existence of their local nature conservation sites.

#### International perspectives

Appropriately, international issues get a chapter of their own in the White Paper, with the scale of the challenge outlined and the potential contribution of the UK, or in this case, England, outlined. This helps to give weight to the commitments made in Nagoya and compliments the heightened ambition of the domestic agenda. Rather oddly, it does not refer to the EU's new biodiversity objectives for 2020, which could have a significant impact on the UK. The favourable references to Pillar 2 payments of the Common Agricultural Policy in the White Paper, which are much the largest source of funding for nature conservation in Europe, were not matched by action by David Cameron when the budget came under severe threat a few weeks ago.

#### Natural capital

The link to the 'Green Economy' is more than a sign of the times. It brings nature closer to the political mainstream and signals engagement with the Treasury. Several of the policy recommendations from the TEEB initiative (TEEB 2011) are taken up, with the White Paper making the welcome statement that natural capital will be put at the heart of Government accounting. Measures of natural capital will be included in national accounts, and the establishment of a Natural Capital Committee was announced. The progress of this and other new groups taking forward the agenda set out in the White Paper will be watched with interest.

#### Conclusion

There is a real sense in the White Paper that the natural environment is at last being taken more

seriously. This is reflected in its ambitions, which have been widely applauded by nature conservation organisations (e.g. see EFRA Committee evidence 2011). But, unfortunately, these ambitions are not matched by a strong or sufficiently comprehensive programme of adequately funded conservation measures. The chances of the 2020 nature conservation targets being met without significantly more resources and positive action seem rather slight. In this sense, we hope that the White Paper is only the beginning of a renaissance in policies for nature.

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