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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Paper by Marcus Yeo

1. Background

- 1.1 In December 2000, the Joint Committee agreed a Statement of Strategic Direction as a submission to the Quinquennial Review (QQR) of JNCC. This was based on discussion between JNCC and the country agencies, and also took into account views from other organisations, including NGOs and some parts of Government. However, at this stage JNCC was unable to engage with Government as a whole because of the ongoing QQR.
- 1.2 Following publication of the final QQR report, the Committee agreed that the Statement of Strategic Direction should be revised to incorporate Government views. Following a period of consultation, this process is now complete.

2. Consultation with Government

- 2.1 Over the last three months, staff from the JNCC Support Unit have met with UK Government departments (Defra, FCO, DTI and DfT), devolved administrations and country agencies to discuss JNCC's Statement of Strategic Direction. Committee members also provided valuable input to some of these meetings.
- 2.2 The consultation meetings have allowed JNCC to gain an overview of some of Government's strategic priorities for nature conservation, and to discuss how JNCC could contribute to delivery of these priorities.
- 2.3 All the Government stakeholders expressed general approval for the Statement of Strategic Direction. Various amendments were suggested, and these have been taken on board in revising the Statement. Revision has also addressed comments made in the Quinquennial Review (QQR) Stage 2 report and the results of ongoing strategic thinking within the Support Unit.

3. The revised Statement of Strategic Direction

- 3.1 The revised Statement of Strategic Direction is presented in Annex A.
- 3.2 Some of the introductory sections in the original Statement of Strategic Direction have been summarised or cut. While these sections provided useful

background when the Committee was formulating the strategy two years ago, it was now felt that they deflected attention from the key parts of the document.

- 3.3 The strategic themes and delivery mechanisms described in sections 7 and 8 of the Statement have been carefully revised. The main changes are as follows:
- i. The strategic themes have been refined and focused so that they are clearly defined and provide a comprehensive framework for considering JNCC's current and future work. For example, 'nature conservation information' has been split into two themes, while 'influence resource uses that impact on nature conservation' and 'respond to environmental change' have been combined.
 - ii. The text has been expanded to provide a fuller account of the work that JNCC currently undertakes, as well as the directions the organisation would like to move in. Where appropriate, examples of JNCC's work have been included for illustrative purposes.
 - iii. Text has been added to cover certain issues which were not included in the original version of the strategy statement, e.g. to describe JNCC's role in relation to sustainable development.
 - iv. A theme covering support services has been added.
- 3.4 None of these changes fundamentally alters the main thrust of JNCC's strategic direction, as agreed by Committee in December 2000.

4. Further strategic development and Committee involvement

- 4.1 The revised Statement of Strategic Direction is a useful summary of JNCC's current activities and can be regarded as a sound present position statement with some elements of a forward look. Although, it is not in itself sufficient to shape the future direction of the organisation it is a valuable product which will greatly assist further strategic thinking and development. We must now devise a compelling, aspirational vision for JNCC's future and set clear high-level priorities against which programmes should be formulated.
- 4.2 The Committee has a pivotal role to play, in particular by helping to define JNCC's purpose in terms of outcomes and by setting an overarching vision for what the organisation hopes to achieve over the next decade. This will set the context for the entire strategic process. The expertise and knowledge of Committee members will also be valuable here.
- 4.3 One approach Committee may wish to consider to achieve this is to work with the Management Team to resolve the following issues:
- i. What is JNCC's mandate?
 - ii. What are the strategic options?
 - iii. What are the opportunities for shift?

iv. What are the resulting strategic priorities?

- 4.4 The QQR endorsed the need for a strategic approach by JNCC and Government, and went on to recommend many operational improvements that will be implemented in the next two years. It is imperative that we reshape the organisation so that it is able to deliver the new strategy, and indeed the strategy will in many ways dictate the new shape and the shift from the old.
- 4.5 The political context is also important. JNCC must be in position to make a submission to the 2004 Spending Review (from late 2003 onwards); and this must be based on a clear strategy.
- 4.6 With these factors in mind, it is recommended that a full assessment of JNCC's strategic position and proposals for operational and organisational strategies are completed by September 2003.
- 4.7 It is recommended that Committee **nominate** a member to lead this important work, the Management Team provide significant support and full Committee involvement is programmed for March and June Committee Meetings

Annex A to JNCC 02 P26

A STATEMENT OF STRATEGIC DIRECTION AGREED BY THE JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

1. Background

- 1.1 The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) was established under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, by the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature and, as it became, Scottish Natural Heritage. It is an integral part of the three agencies.
- 1.2 The Committee comprises thirteen members: a chairman and three independent members, the chairman and one other member from each of the three country agencies, the chairman of the Countryside Agency, and two (non-voting) members appointed by the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland).
- 1.3 The JNCC is the forum through which the three country agencies act jointly to deliver their statutory responsibilities for nature conservation in Great Britain and internationally. Since devolution, these special responsibilities have related to the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government, as well as to the UK Government. The involvement of the Environment and Heritage Service, an agency of the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland), allows the JNCC to adopt a consistent approach across the United Kingdom, wherever this is appropriate.
- 1.4 The country agencies are to discharge the following functions only through the JNCC unless the Secretary of State directs otherwise:
 - i. provide advice to Government on the development and implementation of policies that affect nature conservation at the GB level or internationally;
 - ii. provide advice and disseminate information on nature conservation at the GB level or internationally;
 - iii. establish common standards for the monitoring of, and research into, nature conservation and the analysis of resultant information;
 - iv. commission or support research relevant to any of the above;
 - v. provide advice or information to any of the country agencies on any nature conservation matter which is judged to be of GB or international significance (even if it arises in only one country) or which raises issues common to all three countries;
 - vi. provide advice to Government on amendments to the Schedules of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

- 1.5 Under the 1990 Act, nature conservation is defined as the conservation of flora, fauna, geological features and landforms. In carrying out its work, the JNCC must take account of actual, or possible, ecological change.
- 1.6 The JNCC delivers its work through:
- i. the combined knowledge and expertise of its Committee members;
 - ii. a central Support Unit comprised of staff assigned from the three country agencies;
 - iii. a wide variety of inter-agency groups;
 - iv. one country agency acting as a lead agency on particular topics; or
 - v. work commissioned from outside bodies or individuals.
- 1.7 The JNCC is therefore a body that provides services on behalf of three other agencies and that draws constantly on the skills and advice of those agencies, and other partners, to deliver advice and information. As a result, it has developed skills and experience in co-operative working and information sharing. It is also a well-established mechanism for bringing UK partnerships on nature conservation together. This is a demanding but powerful way of working.

2. JNCC's strengths

- 2.1 The JNCC provides a diverse range of services to different customers. Its work is widely appreciated although inevitably different customers value different services more highly than others. It is clear from customer feedback that the JNCC is recognised as having particular strengths in the following areas:
- i. maintaining and enhancing existing wildlife surveillance and monitoring schemes, and establishing new schemes to cover other important species groups and also habitats; these provide the basis for identifying changes and trends in UK biodiversity;
 - ii. developing frameworks and standards to optimise the use of biodiversity information by allowing the results of different surveys and schemes to be brought together and then disseminated widely (e.g. the National Biodiversity Network, Recorder, and common standards for site monitoring) in a manner which will inform decision making at all levels from site safeguard to policy development;
 - iii. providing advice to Government based on scientific understanding and nature conservation information, particularly on international nature conservation obligations, and disseminating information on international innovations in nature conservation to UK practitioners;

- iv. facilitating joint working and partnerships.

3. Future developments

- 3.1 Over the next 10 years, the JNCC will need to maintain its key strengths, particularly in the fields of gathering, interpreting and disseminating nature conservation data and information. Indeed, there is still much to be done in these areas.
- 3.2 The JNCC's statutory remit, its position at the interface of national, European and international initiatives, and its skills in facilitation and partnership, mean that we could contribute more to UK and international nature conservation, especially in the following areas:
 - i. influencing the commissioning of, and use of, research relevant to nature conservation;
 - ii. fostering good practice in biodiversity and earth heritage conservation particularly through the international exchange of information and experience;
 - iii. furthering nature conservation through the influencing, interpretation and implementation of European directives and strategies;
 - iv. contributing to joint efforts to influence resource uses which impact on nature conservation by interpreting and disseminating environmental information;
 - v. providing a means for the country agencies to monitor and respond jointly to over-riding environmental changes with nature conservation implications;
 - vi. contributing to the development of new approaches, such as ecosystem-based conservation measures and data synthesis and modelling.
- 3.3 To develop in these areas, we will need to deliver work through mechanisms that support the use of existing expertise, in the country agencies and beyond, and encourage sharing of knowledge and resources to meet cross-cutting issues. Important issues, such as ecosystem management or approaches to nature conservation in a period of climatic change and widespread pollution, will be more effectively tackled by groups of organisations sharing information and skills than by single bodies. In this respect, the Joint Committee is well placed to act as a think tank for considering major national and international environmental issues.
- 3.4 This is not a radical change of direction for the JNCC, but rather a development of our work, building on existing strengths. In particular, all of our work rests upon our access to, and skills in developing and using, the

nature conservation data and information which first the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) and then the JNCC have invested in over many years. There is, however, an implied shift from reactive advice to being more proactive in identifying good practice and developing effective approaches to nature conservation under international, European and UK agreements, directives and initiatives. This will be done to benefit key customers: the UK Government, the administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the country agencies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. To the extent that we will develop new areas of work, these will depend on being able to establish effective partnerships with other bodies who hold research funds, expertise, information or influence, our role being to make these resources more accessible to nature conservation.

4. JNCC's strategic direction for the next 10 years

4.1 The JNCC's overall aims are:

- i. to contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of nature conservation in the UK; and
- ii. to support Government¹ in ensuring that the UK meets its obligations to biodiversity and earth heritage conservation globally.

4.2 To achieve these aims, we will work in seven key areas.

Providing advice on international nature conservation issues

4.3 The JNCC's role is to provide advice to Government, the country agencies and other relevant parties in support of nature conservation globally. This advice is based on scientific understanding and nature conservation information.

4.4 We act as scientific advisor to Government on the implementation of international multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Ramsar Convention, the Bonn Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and the World Heritage Convention. This includes participating in UK delegations (e.g. to Conferences of the Parties, and to achieve harmonisation within the European Union), co-ordinating reporting, and providing specialist services to Government, such as acting as the Scientific Authority for Fauna under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). There has been a recent increase in the number of subsidiary or regional agreements and initiatives relevant to the UK or its Overseas Territories (e.g. the Albatross and Petrel Agreement under CMS), and this is likely to lead to an increase in demand for our services over the next few years.

4.5 Work on MEAs is carried forward within a framework that seeks to see agreements working together rather than in isolation. This is a development that has already begun with the CBD increasingly being seen as an

¹ Unless qualified, the term Government refers to UK Government departments and devolved administrations

overarching framework within which other agreements will deliver particular aspects of biodiversity conservation. The JNCC's critical mass of expertise in MEAs means that we are well placed to enhance synergy between agreements.

- 4.6 We provide specialist advice to support nature conservation initiatives in the UK's Overseas Territories (OTs), including MEAs and Environment Charters, and contribute to building capacity in relevant skills to conservation practitioners and policy makers. This role may increase in the future in response to requests from FCO and OT governments.
- 4.7 More generally, we have a role in collecting intelligence on international problems, proposals and conservation initiatives, and sharing this with Government and the country agencies. We also work with international bodies, such as the International Maritime Organisation, to influence policies, regulations and procedures that impact on nature conservation.
- 4.8 The JNCC's ecological knowledge, combined with a thorough understanding of the UK's international nature conservation obligations, enables us to provide sound advice on international nature conservation issues. The full scale of Government's requirement for advice is unquantified, and attention needs to be paid to where our input would be most beneficial and how this work would be funded. Building on our existing skills in co-ordination, networking and partnership building, we will supplement these skills by drawing on expertise held beyond the Support Unit and the country agencies.

Furthering nature conservation in a European context

- 4.9 Nature conservation policy and practice in the UK are heavily influenced by developments in Europe and especially within the European Union. The JNCC already plays an important role here, and in the future will increase its contribution to developing effective means of achieving nature conservation in a European context.
- 4.10 We currently provide advice to Government and country agencies on the application of various European directives, strategies and programmes in the UK. For example, in relation to the EC Habitats and Birds Directives, we co-ordinate certain aspects of implementation in the UK, maintain common standards (e.g. selection criteria for Natura 2000 sites), and provide UK scientific representatives on EC committees and working groups. Over the next few years, we will build on this work, e.g. by developing, in consultation with the country agencies, interpretations of key concepts such as Favourable Conservation Status and wildlife corridors, and then discussing these within Europe to achieve consensus on their application. Full application of the Habitats and Birds Directives in the marine environment will also require the development of new approaches and co-ordination of their implementation.
- 4.11 In the longer term, a range of new European directives, strategies and programmes are coming into effect, notably the Water Framework Directive, the Sixth Environmental Action Programme, the EC Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans, and the EU Sustainable Development Strategy. The JNCC

should be used as a forum to develop thinking on the development and interpretation of these initiatives, for instance reference ecological status standards under the Water Framework Directive.

- 4.12 The JNCC should act as a locus for participating in the development and interpretation of European directives and policies with nature conservation implications. This will involve horizon scanning, the provision of intelligence and scientific advice to Government and agencies, and liaison with European partners. The recently established UK Nature and Landscape Office in Brussels will facilitate this work. The future enlargement of the EU will also present challenges and opportunities on which we can advise Government.

Encouraging the sustainable use of natural resources

- 4.13 Society's use of natural resources has profound effects on biodiversity and earth heritage, both in the UK and internationally. Influencing how society regulates, subsidises and perceives this use can have far-reaching benefits for nature conservation. This is a huge role in which many organisations have important parts to play. In comparison, the JNCC's contribution is modest. Other bodies, including the country agencies, are better placed to make contributions related to social, economic and cultural aspects of this work. Specifically, the country agencies, because of their direct contact with landowners and occupiers, local authorities and communities, are well placed to influence and advocate policy development.
- 4.14 One of our main roles is to use monitoring and surveillance data to assess the effects of wide-scale environmental change on biodiversity in the UK (e.g. in relation to air pollution and climate change). Such data may be used to provide information and advice on the wildlife implications of resource use policies, such as agriculture, fisheries, transport and energy, and to identify priority issues that require research to identify the causes of change and potential ameliorative actions. We can use our environmental and ecological understanding to predict the probable consequences of changes in resource use and, where appropriate, to identify alternative options. We can also act as a forum for the country agencies to share information and experience, and to deliver co-ordinated advice where this adds value. In particular, we can consider nature conservation issues, such as climate change, collectively in the light of the knowledge and scientific expertise provided by the JNCC independent members.
- 4.15 We also have a central role in providing UK advice on resource uses, notably fisheries, renewable energy sources, and oil and gas extraction, which lie outside territorial waters.
- 4.16 Through monitoring and evaluation, we will attempt to influence international developments in sustainable use, notably under the Convention on Biological Diversity. We will continue to contribute to and influence other international bodies with a scientific advice or regulatory role, e.g. the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas and the International Maritime Organisation.

- 4.17 Our work in this area must be seen within the context of sustainable development, which seeks to balance economic growth, social progress and environmental protection, and is now placed firmly at the heart of Government policy making. Our contribution to work on sustainable development is limited, and will be focused on those environmental issues where we can add value to the work of the country agencies and others or where we have particular responsibilities. In addition to the areas described above, we will work with other organisations to develop a more holistic approach to nature conservation and the management of human activities, and show how ecosystem-based approaches might be applied in the UK.

Developing common standards for nature conservation and co-ordinating UK approaches

- 4.18 This area of work involves the contribution that the JNCC makes to improving biodiversity and earth heritage conservation in the UK and elsewhere. Our role is not to undertake action on the ground, but rather to support nature conservation by developing common standards, co-ordinating UK-wide activities where this delivers increased efficiency or effectiveness, and disseminating knowledge about good practice.
- 4.19 Our work on common standards underpins much of the work undertaken by the country agencies and others. Examples include the development and maintenance of habitat classifications (e.g. the National Vegetation Classification and the UK marine biotope classification), systems for assessing species status (e.g. Red Data books), and standards for the selection of statutory sites (e.g. SSSI selection guidelines and the Geological Conservation Review). This work will continue into the future, and where appropriate will be developed to ensure compatibility with European standards.
- 4.20 In support of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), we currently co-ordinate various initiatives in the UK, including promoting and enabling biodiversity research (in partnership with Defra) and chairing UK-wide groups such as the Biodiversity Information Group and some Habitat Action Plan steering groups. Over the next few years, this role may be extended to include co-ordination of additional biodiversity initiatives on behalf of Government, e.g. further co-ordination of the BAP reporting process, including development of national indicators of success. More generally, the JNCC provides a suitable forum for discussing issues that affect biodiversity across the UK, and advising Government on the development of strategies and long-term objectives for nature conservation.
- 4.21 We currently play a modest role in disseminating knowledge about good practice in nature conservation (e.g. guidance on habitat management and vegetation survey). In the future, approaches already used elsewhere that could be applied in the UK will be identified and genuinely new approaches formulated. We will work with the country agencies and others to assess their usefulness. We will also use cost-effective means to disseminate examples of UK good practice to conservation practitioners outside the UK.

Assessing the status of UK biodiversity and earth heritage

- 4.22 The JNCC's advisory work is underpinned by information on the state of the UK biodiversity and earth heritage resource and how this resource has changed over time. This information is derived from a wide range of monitoring and surveillance programmes across the terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine environments of the UK, both within protected sites and in the wider environment. We undertake some of this work ourselves (e.g. seabird and cetacean survey), but more frequently work in partnership with other organisations and provide funding for them to deliver monitoring and surveillance schemes (e.g. for breeding and wetland birds, mammals and butterflies). We also work closely with the country agencies and others to develop guidance on monitoring techniques and approaches (e.g. common standards monitoring for protected sites).
- 4.23 The information derived from monitoring and surveillance schemes is an invaluable resource and represents a major investment by the country agencies and others. However, existing surveillance schemes provide only a partial picture of the status of UK biodiversity and earth heritage. Over the next few years, we will review and consolidate our work in this area, and seek to fill any major gaps in coverage. In particular, more effort is likely to be required to establish and maintain long-term surveillance schemes for the marine environment, terrestrial habitats and selected species groups. Where appropriate, we will participate in the development of European surveillance and monitoring programmes so that the status of UK biodiversity and earth heritage can be assessed within the context of wider international trends.
- 4.24 In addition to supporting the development and implementation of individual monitoring and surveillance schemes, we also have an important role in integrating data from different sources to provide an overview of the status of biodiversity and earth heritage in the UK. This information can be used to assess the impact of human activities on the environment and identify future conservation priorities.

Making nature conservation information accessible

- 4.25 The JNCC has developed a key strength in the collation and management of nature conservation information. This underpins our advisory work and is highly valued by the country agencies and other partner bodies. Our work in this area is supported by the development of systems for collecting and collating data (e.g. Recorder 2000), and for disseminating and sharing data and information (e.g. through the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) and various websites).
- 4.26 In the future, we will continue to ensure that the information needs of conservation practitioners are met, and will endeavour to provide a greater quantity and quality of information to support decision-making processes undertaken by Government, country agencies and others. There remain areas for which data are poor, unstructured or difficult to access, and more needs to be done to increase the usefulness and accessibility of existing information.

We will therefore continue to invest in providing technical expertise to develop tools to collate, manage and disseminate biodiversity and earth heritage information, such as Recorder and the NBN. Increasingly, we will disseminate information by electronic means, but paper publications will continue to be used where this is appropriate.

- 4.27 The development of our information management systems must also take account of wider Government requirements, such as the Modernising Government programme and the Environmental Information Regulations. This will require some changes to existing arrangements, and in particular the development of improved corporate systems for records management.
- 4.28 In addition to managing and disseminating information, we will use our expertise to synthesise available data with the aim of influencing the development of indicators, informing habitat and species status assessments, and meeting environmental reporting requirements (e.g. under UK BAP and European directives). We will also add value to UK biodiversity and earth heritage information by linking it with European and global datasets.

Supporting the JNCC's business by providing high-quality services

- 4.29 To deliver the work areas described above, it is essential to provide support services covering office accommodation, financial management and procurement, personnel management, corporate governance, and IT support. The way in which these services are provided will be kept under continual review to ensure that they continue to support the JNCC's business as efficiently and effectively as possible.
- 4.30 Within the next couple of years, there will be significant changes to the JNCC's support services as the recommendations arising from the recent Quinquennial Review are implemented. In particular, major changes to staff management systems, policies and practices will be required as the JNCC moves to employ staff directly on a single set of terms and conditions. Financial management and corporate governance arrangements are also likely to require substantial changes.
- 4.31 Change will also be driven by the Government's agenda for public sector reform, including Modernising Government and other initiatives, which emphasises that customers' needs should be the focus of public services. The implications of this for the JNCC require further consideration, but may involve the application of one or more quality management schemes, such as the Business Excellence Model or Investors in People.

5. The JNCC's role in nature conservation research

- 5.1 In order to deliver some of the work described above we will need to enhance certain aspects of our role in nature conservation research. The JNCC and the country agencies have relatively small research budgets. We currently seek to get maximum value by working in partnership with other bodies to fund key areas of research. A number of other bodies, notably the Natural Environment

Research Council (NERC), the European Commission and Government departments, hold much larger research funds, some of which are spent on research relevant to nature conservation.

- 5.2 Our role in relation to nature conservation research deserves further consideration. One priority will be to influence how research funds held by others are spent and how the results are exploited to address nature conservation problems. This is likely to include:
- i. identifying nature conservation priority issues that require research, based on an analysis of current and future nature conservation needs;
 - ii. establishing collaborative arrangements so that the data held by the JNCC and the country agencies can be used for research by others;
 - iii. contributing to the discussion of which themes and special topics funding bodies should adopt in future;
 - iv. tracking, co-ordinating and disseminating the findings of research work being undertaken on a small number of key topics by bodies close to JNCC, especially the country agencies and Defra.