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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

THE UK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN AND COUNTRY BIODIVERSITY STRATEGIES

1. Background

- 1.1 In response to the 1992 Convention of Biological Diversity, the UK launched *Biodiversity: the UK Action Plan* in 1994 outlining how the UK would deal with biodiversity conservation implementation, its conclusions were summarised by the '59 Steps'. In 1995, the UK Biodiversity Steering Group published *Biodiversity: the UK Steering Group Report – meeting the Rio challenge* which established the framework and criteria for identifying species and habitat types of conservation concern. Action plans for 116 species and 14 habitats (Tranche 1) were published in this document.

2. The UK BAP tasks

- 2.1 The *UK Steering Group Report – meeting the Rio challenge* took forward four tasks contained in the UK Action Plan. These were to:
- i. develop costed targets for the most threatened and declining species and habitats;
 - ii. improve accessibility and co-ordination of biological datasets and consider future information management requirements which include monitoring agreed targets;
 - iii. increase public awareness and involvement by targeting key sectors; and
 - iv. recognise the importance of Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) which complement national action plans and use a top down and a bottom up approach.

3. Progress with the UK BAP tasks

- 3.1 Monitoring progress on the UK BAP tasks has been a key aspect of JNCC's contribution to UK BAP. Between 1995 and 1999, *Action Plans* had been costed and published (Tranche 1 and Tranche 2; six volumes) for 391 species and 45 habitat plans. Reporting on the Action Plan targets was conducted in 1999 and 2002, with the 2002 report including the work done by LBAPs. The 2002 report *Sustaining the variety of life; 5 years of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan*, also called the Millennium Biodiversity Report, provided an assessment of the UK BAP, reported on progress of the Species and Habitat

Action Plans and made recommendations to government about changes to the UK BAP structure. These changes were subsequently implemented (see below under UK BAP management and administration). A third reporting round will take place in 2005.

- 3.2 The initial proposal for a *UK Biodiversity Database* has grown into the National Biodiversity Network (NBN), independent but still complementary to the UK BAP process, and administered by the NBN Trust. Most of the planning has been completed, and the structure, database procedures and software have been developed. More than 70 new Local Records Centres are being established, exceeding the target of 50 new centres set in the 1995 UK Steering Group Report, and these are being encouraged to join the NBN. The NBN is now moving to a stage of service and application of its 16 million species records and has huge potential for the future. For example, NBN data, linked to the UK BAP website, can be seen in relation to LBAP areas and the distribution of priority species can be plotted with GIS overlays. However, NBN does not include in its brief the monitoring of UK BAP targets as required by the 1995 report although the new Biodiversity Action Reporting System (see paragraphs 5.5-5.7 below) may fulfil this role.
- 3.3 Achievements in the field of *Public awareness* are difficult to assess. Government have made some progress in getting biodiversity considered in all relevant policy issues and at local council level, in key sectors and in education and training. Local Biodiversity Action Plans have played an important role in publicising information about local wildlife and giving opportunities for people to become involved in recording schemes. The ecosystem approach links biodiversity, the economy and people plays an important awareness raising role. "Champions" for priority habitats and species continue to be identified. However, public awareness-raising is highly placed in the new country strategies (see paragraphs 4.1 - 4.3 below). At a UK level, the annual UK BAP Partnership meetings, the recently redesigned UK BAP website and the work done by the LBAPs, are key pieces of work in the area of awareness-raising.
- 3.4 Guidelines set up in 1995 resulted in the development of 162 Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) in England, Scotland and Wales, with LBAPs currently being set up also in Northern Ireland. National LBAP co-ordinators have also been established in England, Scotland and Wales. Links between national and local targets got off to a slow start and were not reported in the first 1999 Reporting Round. However, these links were considered in the 2002 Reporting Round and form a fundamental part of the new Biodiversity Action Reporting System (see paragraphs 5.5-5.7 below).

4. Devolution

- 4.1 In 1998, schemes of devolution were introduced to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland making these administrations responsible for environmental regulation. Since 2002, England, Northern Ireland and Scotland have developed separate Biodiversity Strategies, and Wales is in the process of agreeing an Environmental Strategy.

- 4.2 These strategies guide the direction each country will take in conserving its biodiversity and environment. All countries focus on sustainable development, raising public awareness and integrating biodiversity considerations into all sectors of government and levels of policy making. They advocate a sectoral approach with the environment, economy and people featuring in each sector. Scotland's presents a 25 year strategy, England's a five year strategy and Northern Ireland's covers the period up to 2016. Northern Ireland aims to produce their own Species and Habitat Action Plans and will further develop close co-operation with the Republic of Ireland. Scotland will define Scottish priority lists for species and habitats. Each country will regularly report the progress of these strategies.
- 4.3 During 2004, the country strategies have gathered momentum and this has changed the focus and priorities of the countries. The next two years will be a critical phase in the UK BAP with a review planned for 2005 / 2006. A country strategy focus makes it increasingly difficult for the countries to find resources to engage with the demanding UK process. NGO's, most of which are structured at a UK level, face the opposite problem and find it difficult to engage at a country level. That said, considerable efforts are being made to resolve this. Nonetheless, the consequence is that the NGOs and the country agencies fail to communicate effectively on some biodiversity issues. This makes sign-off at the highest level risky and provides JNCC with considerable difficulties. JNCC needs to co-ordinate the NGOs, the devolved administrations and the agencies on behalf of the UK Partnership.

5. UK BAP management and administration

The UK Biodiversity Partnership

- 5.1 The recommendations from the Millennium Biodiversity Report were accepted by government and a new UK BAP structure was implemented in late 2002. The UK Biodiversity Partnership, comprising stakeholders involved in the UK BAP process, replaced the UK Biodiversity Group. The UK Biodiversity Standing Committee manages the business of the UK Biodiversity Partnership and is assisted by the Biodiversity Reporting and Information Group (BRIG) and the Biodiversity Research Advisory Group (BRAG). Four Country Groups are also active in the UK BAP process and promote public awareness of biodiversity, co-ordinate progress reports to the UK Partnership and promote action on the Species, Habitat and Local Action Plans.
- 5.2 BRIG provides technical and scientific advice to the UK Biodiversity Partnership Standing Committee (and Country Groups where appropriate) on the biodiversity information, processes and standards needed to implement the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and report biodiversity information on behalf of the UK Biodiversity Partnership. Currently, BRIG is planning the third (2005) Reporting Round, revising the UK BAP Targets and updating the UK BAP species and habitat priorities and has a deadline to complete all reviews by the end of 2006.

- 5.3 BRAG provides advice about biodiversity research priorities and co-ordination in the UK. Its aims are to promote and facilitate research that supports the delivery of UK BAP objectives, and hence implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and to enable effective and efficient UK engagement with European and international biodiversity research initiatives and hence fulfil the role of a national biodiversity research platform.
- 5.4 The devolved administrations and country agencies are well represented on these UK-centric groups. However, with the recent rise to prominence of the country strategies in the devolving UK, there is a need to reassess the UK-focussed approach. It is apparent that the countries want to set their own direction without entirely disengaging from the UK, but the exact nature of this relationship needs to be determined. This is all the more relevant as the effects of devolution are likely to increase.

Reporting

- 5.5 The first Reporting Round in 1999 used paper (hard copy) reports from Lead Partners which were difficult and time consuming to analyse (much free text, need to categorise and computerise the data *etc.*). In 2002, these problems were partly resolved by an online Reporting Round with standardised drop down menus facilitating data entry and analysis. However, the data still needed to be entered onto the computer, so the 2005 Reporting Round will be based on an online database Biodiversity Action and Reporting System (BARS) in which previously entered data will be used to answer the reporting questions.
- 5.6 In BARS, which is being developed by English Nature, the Scottish Executive, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Wales Biodiversity Partnership, each action is stored once, reducing the risk posed by several organisations reporting the same activity several times and creating a high risk of double counting.
- 5.7 BARS is to be released towards the end of 2004 when it will be evaluated by JNCC and English Nature. For example, how countries will make use of BARS to prepare their reports is unclear. Given the breadth of country strategies, it is possible their need for UK information might go beyond the scope of information being collected by BRIG.

6. Future progress with the UK BAP tasks

A future look at the four tasks set in the 1995 Steering Group Report

- 6.1 The UK BAP priority *Species and Habitat Action Plans* are under review. The first review is of the targets, many of which are out of date, to facilitate meeting the 2010 targets. The second is a review of the Species and Habitat Action Plans themselves using a three stage process. Stage 1 considers scientific criteria, Stage 2 looks at what can be done to conserve the species and habitats, and Stage 3 looks at the best way to achieve this.

The Species and Habitat review is being conducted at a UK level but countries have requested this information be used by them to generate their own priorities. Although the Species and Habitat Review appears to be highly valued by the devolved administrations, the reviews are rapidly being overtaken by devolution. For example, the relationship between the implementation of country specific styles of delivery may well impact on the existing plans and their targets; and the relationship between UK and country targets is unknown, as is the ability of some countries to measure these targets at a country level.

- 6.2 The Review of Marine Nature Conservation (RMNO) report recommends the combination of the RMNO priority features work with the UK BAP, using the identification criteria and methods tested and refined during the Irish Sea Pilot. This work will list marine priority features that can be fed into the current UK BAP review.
- 6.3 Great progress is being made with the *NBN database* and this resource has huge potential to form the basis of independent biological assessments, UK BAP trends, and the provision of advice. This project will continue by focusing on service delivery in the immediate future. However, NBN does not monitor UK BAP targets and neither is BRIG doing this work. This is despite co-ordination of monitoring and surveillance to meet country biodiversity strategies being seen as a high priority by Wildlife and Countryside Link among others. Fortunately, BRAG is starting to address research needs in this area and JNCC is developing a project using NBN data to determine species status and trends; work that fits well with the new JNCC strategy.
- 6.4 Increasing *public awareness* of biodiversity is fundamental and has been taken up by the country strategies. However, there is a need for UK government departments to be held to task on integrating their work with consideration for biodiversity and promoting biodiversity to the UK public.
- 6.5 The country strategies place much importance on developing *Local Biodiversity Action Plans* and should continue to use LBAPs both to complement national action plans and to deliver non-HAP and SAP work. The ability of the countries to measure how well national and local plans integrate is unknown, but it is hoped that BARS will facilitate this.

7. Conclusions on current situation and Way Forward

- 7.1 The UK BAP, as envisaged in the UK Biodiversity Steering Group report, was not intended to provide a holistic strategy for the delivery of the 'conservation of biological diversity' objective of the Convention of Biological Diversity. It was intended to develop additional effort in relation to the four tasks summarised in Section 2 above. In this, it has been successful to a considerable degree, although the benefits achieved for wildlife as a result remain somewhat uncertain because of inadequacies in the monitoring and reporting processes. Currently, reporting progress against targets is the responsibility of the Action Plan Lead Partner; there is a need for this to be underpinned by adequate surveillance of the habitats and species concerned.

This could be assisted by the work now underway summarised in paragraph 6.3 above.

- 7.2 The country biodiversity strategies do take a more holistic approach, setting the objectives of the UK BAP within a wider strategy for the conservation and sustainable use of the land and inshore marine areas of these countries. The strategies retain important elements of the UK BAP, while adapting them to local circumstances.
- 7.3 The multiplicity of the processes now in play is causing a number of problems. Country agencies are having to endeavour to contribute fully to UK as well as country processes. JNCC, and also many of the NGOs, only have resources to contribute effectively to the UK BAP and not to individual country strategies.
- 7.4 The way forward is likely to be to view the UK BAP as a core component of each country's biodiversity strategy which has additional components to meet each country's individual needs. JNCC has an obligation to support the 2005 UK BAP Review which peaks during the second half of 2005, ending in late 2006 and a continuing obligation to conduct UK BAP reporting every three years thereafter.
- 7.5 The relationships among JNCC's UK role, the UK BAP and the country strategies need to be reconsidered in the light of devolution. The timetable to do this is critical and planning should start in 2005 - the peak period of the current UK BAP review - building up through 2006 so that implementation of any new roles can begin in 2007.
- 7.6 Strategically, a view of the future relationship between JNCC and the individual countries could focus on three broad issues: International Obligations; Information Provision; and Independent Advice. JNCC needs to fulfil the UK's statutory international obligations and, to do this, needs to maintain coherence among the countries' conservation efforts and help facilitate UK engagement with international conservation directions. JNCC needs to form relationships so that the countries' interests are effectively communicated to the international community and the implications of international developments are shared with the countries.
- 7.7 JNCC would want to develop guidelines in relation to these themes that enable effective delivery at the UK level while providing the flexibility to enable the countries to develop and implement their strategies. Such guidelines would enable assessment of progress towards achieving strategy goals on reliable data, and also to help enable the UK to meet its international commitments.