

National Ecosystem Assessment: Joint response from Wildlife and Countryside Link and Wales Environment Link to Defra's Stakeholder letter

December 2008

1. Introduction

Fifteen voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation, enjoyment and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment have joined forces under the umbrella of two UK Link organisations (Wildlife and Countryside Link and Wales Environment Link). We welcome the proposal made by the Rt Hon. Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for the Environment, for the preparation and commitment of £500,000 for an Ecosystem Assessment for England. We support the principle that the proposed assessment follows the approach taken in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005 and congratulate Defra for the work they have done so far in developing their "ecosystem approach". We urge the other devolved administrations to take similar budgetary commitments to ensure a robust UK response.

Wildlife and Countryside Link brings together 39 environmental voluntary organisations in the UK united by their common interest in the conservation and enjoyment of the natural and historic environment.

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of 29 environmental and countryside Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales, most of whom have an all-Wales remit. WEL is officially designated the intermediary body between the government and the environmental NGO sector in Wales.

This response is supported by the following organisations:

- Anglers' Conservation Association
- Association of Rivers Trusts
- Badger Trust
- Bat Conservation Trust
- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Friends of the Earth England
- The Grasslands Trust
- Plantlife International
- Pond Conservation
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Cymru
- Salmon & Trout Association
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust
- Woodland Trust

2. General comments

The two Link organisations as umbrella bodies, and their individual constituent members, have much to offer the development of an Ecosystem Assessment. We are keen that in developing the analysis, Defra makes wise use of the wealth of data and studies already describing the provision of ecosystem services from the UK landscape, and make any outputs as tangible and easy to communicate as possible. We urge those developing the project to remain as transparent as possible throughout the development of the project, and to provide timely updates. A final report that could be readily understood by the ‘interested public’ would help us all by raising the profile of the services that we all gain from the natural environment.

Link* can potentially play as important a role as the LWEC (Living With Environmental Change) members. We hope that the analysis will give due consideration to the fact that it is inherently difficult to quantify the full breadth of ecosystem services (e.g. spiritual replenishment, and many of the regulatory services), and therefore develop methodologies that recognise this. Furthermore, we welcome Defra’s financial commitment to the assessment and suggest that a similar financial commitment from all the devolved governments is required.

3. Geographic scope

Link supports the notion of a UK-level assessment and suggests that engagement with Link could facilitate NGO sector engagement. Wildlife and Countryside Link focuses on Westminster and Whitehall and deals mostly with England related policy issues or UK wide issues which are dealt with by the UK Parliament. It should be noted that for issues related to and/or affecting Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, there is a Link organisation in each of the devolved administrations - Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL), Scottish Environment Link (LINK), and Wales Environment Link (WEL).

As a UK-level assessment, we suggest that Government should invite each of the four Link umbrella organisations of the devolved administrations and their constituent members to be part of the stakeholder community for the assessment.

4. Leadership and expert panel

It is of some concern that the assessment is to be led by a LWEC partnership that does not include representation from the NGO sector. Again, given Link’s broad membership, engagement via Link could enable this gap to be filled efficiently and effectively. Link should be included on the ‘register of interest’ and individual NGOs should be directly approached for their involvement where their expertise is relevant and Link is able to advise Defra on who may be best placed.

5. Data and information

The Defra funded project ‘*Ecosystem Service Assessment: Valuing the UK BAP (Defra Project SFFSD 0702)*’ undertaken by Aberystwyth University identified several

* Use of the term ‘Link’ in this joint response refers collectively to Wildlife and Countryside Link, and Wales Environment Link

barriers early in the process to directly link ecosystem services to habitats and species. We would be interested to understand whether progress was made in determining solutions to these barriers, and if so, whether they can be taken account of in relation to case studies for the National Ecosystem Assessment.

There is a range of evidence initiatives not included in Annex B which Link members could advise on. In the current timescale of this consultation, we have been unable to gather a comprehensive list but would welcome a further opportunity to add to this. As a minimum, we urge the inclusion of appropriate regional and local projects as well as national datasets and initiatives.

There are a number of Link member organisations that have data sets that would be useful to the assessment, for example Woodland Trust has a number of relevant datasets including space for people and spatial mapping using the BEETLE model.

6. Level of detail

Whilst we support the notion of using this assessment to provide a 'big picture', recognition should be given to the various scales to which ecosystem services can be linked, from the landscape scale (such as river catchments) to micro-habitats (for example a small river tributary). Recognition is also required of processes which operate across landscapes and habitats, such as pollination. We would advise against a detailed species-based approach towards attempting to quantify ecosystem service value, unless a species truly stands alone independent of the habitat in which it is found.

A particular element missing from existing ecosystem function research relates to correlating ecosystem quality to capacity to provide quality services, and identifying 'tipping points'. This kind of detail would add value to how we all work and plan for the future. In addition to both detailed and bigger picture overviews, it would be useful to generate outputs that can be readily understood by our members so that we can help them further understand the multiple benefits derived from the natural world.

7. Valuation of services

Link remains concerned at pressures to place financial valuation on all ecosystem services and therefore the species and habitats which comprise ecosystems. It would be detrimental both to our overall valuation of the natural environment and approaches to its conservation if biodiversity were to be split into financially valuable and non-financially valuable components based on the inappropriate or forced use of existing economic valuation systems.