

Wildlife and
Countryside



Halting Biodiversity Loss by 2010

A Progress Assessment by
Wildlife and Countryside Link

February 2009



HALTING BIODIVERSITY LOSS BY 2010

Wildlife and Countryside Link assessment of progress during 2008

In January 2006, Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) published a challenge to Government by setting out what we thought the 2010 biodiversity commitment meant and how progress should be measured. We agreed to look at progress on an annual basis, to highlight successes or failures around the turn of the year.

Presented below is our January 2009 assessment against the performance indicators we included in the original leaflet. These assessments have been made at an England level, but in some cases, we have had to use broader information for the UK.

Green indicates that good progress is being made, amber means moderate progress has taken place and red means progress has been poor.

1. Protecting and enhancing threatened species and habitats (stop the rot)

Performance indicator:

No BAP priority species and habitats 'still declining' by 2010.

2005 reporting showed that 17 (38%) of habitats and 102 (27%) of UK BAP species on the original priority list were still declining¹. The full results of the 2008 reporting were not available at the time of this reports compilation. In this respect, this report represents an interim assessment.

We anticipate that the 2008 reporting will show that there has been some success in addressing the conservation of species on the original list and a number of declines have been halted or reversed. However, the picture is likely to be mixed and the 2008 BAP reporting did not cover the species and habitats added to the UK BAP list in August 2007. Some 324 of the 1150 species on this revised list were included due to severe decline (more than 50% in last 25 years). Species are being added to the list faster than they are coming off it. For example, there were 19 birds relevant to England on the original BAP list due to severe decline. By the 2007 revision, 9 were no longer listed for this reason, mostly due to successful conservation efforts, but 18 new species were added due to decline. The number of birds on the list under this category has therefore grown to 28.

In May 2008, the England Biodiversity list² was published. This includes 56 habitats, 942 species from the UK BAP list that occur in England and one additional species, the hen harrier. These are the species and habitats that the Government should be

¹ Defra 2006. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan: Highlights from the 2005 reporting round.

² Species and habitats of principal importance for biodiversity in England under section 41 of the NERC Act 2006. <https://www.ukbap-reporting.org.uk/news/details.asp?X=45>

taking practicable steps to conserve. They should also be encouraging others to do likewise.

In November 2008, Natural England launched their new framework for delivering priority habitats and species. One of the key elements of this framework is the aim to deliver a significant proportion of species conservation needs through habitat work.

The production of the list and the new framework do constitute progress, however it is too early to assess what difference they will make to conservation action on the ground.

Assessment – Amber/Red (unchanged)

2. Protecting and managing our finest wildlife sites (Protect the best)

a). Marine

Performance indicator:

A complete Marine Protected Area network (including Natura 2000 sites, OSPAR MPAs nationally important marine sites and Highly Protected Marine Reserves) identified and notified by 2010.

Site protection in the marine environment continues to lag decades behind that on land. The consultation on a Draft Marine Bill and later inclusion of the full Marine Bill in the Queen's Speech 2008 was a significant step in the right direction. We are hopeful now that good progress will be made with the Bill in Parliament, the wording of the Bill is promising but needs tightening up in some areas to ensure that a scientifically selected, representative and ecologically coherent network of Marine Nature Reserves is established. We hope that the Bill will be given Royal Assent during 2009. Regional site selection projects are already being set up to identify candidate marine protected areas in our seas. However, given the timescales involved it will not be possible to achieve a complete network of MPAs by 2010 and, therefore, meet this target.

Assessment – Amber/Red (upgraded from red)

b). Terrestrial and freshwater sites

Performance indicator:

95% of UK SSSI/ASSIs in favourable condition by 2010.³

The latest assessment for England (01 December 2008) is that 44.4% of SSSIs are in favourable condition, 39.9% are unfavourable-recovering, 10.6% unfavourable – no change and 5.0% unfavourable declining⁴. Under Natural England's analysis, the favourable and recovering categories are combined to give a figure of 84.3%. This compares to 56.9% in March 2003, 72.3% in March 2006 and 75.4% in March 2007

³ The Government PSA target for SSSIs refers to England only.

⁴ <http://www.english-nature.org.uk/Special/sssi/reportAction.cfm?Report=sdr15&Category=N&Reference=0>

and 80% in January 2008. This shows an increase of approximately 4 - 5% per annum and with a target deadline of 31st December 2010, this target appears to remain achievable. However, it is important not to underestimate the challenge of addressing the issues facing the remaining sites that are in unfavourable condition. These may well be harder to crack than those that have already been resolved and the impacts of external factors such as climate change will bring significant challenges.

Furthermore, a report published in November 2008 by the National Audit Office on 'Natural England's Role in Improving Sites of Special Scientific Interest'⁵, whilst welcoming the improvements that have been made to England's SSSIs, does question both the reliability of the figures presented and prospects for future progress. It raised a number of important issues:

- In 2008, 24% of all SSSI site units (with a combined area of 216,107 ha) had not been assessed within the required six-year timescale. Without these assessments, it is not possible for Natural England to know whether or not its targets are being met, or whether its money is being spent effectively.
- 35% of SSSIs do not have conservation objectives in place to describe the conservation management needed to achieve favourable condition and allow for changes in condition to be assessed.
- There is slow progress towards getting sites from Unfavourable–recovering into Favourable condition. In 2008, there was actually a small drop in the area in Favourable condition (n.b. this is different from the measure used by Natural England which counts both 'Favourable' condition and 'Unfavourable – recovering' as Favourable).
- There is no consistent record keeping of assessments.
- Only 1% of SSSI notifications have been reclassified to reflect changes to the notified features.

We have downgraded our assessment of progress this year to reflect these concerns.

Assessment: Green/Amber (downgraded from Green)

3. Making space for biodiversity (Restore the rest)

a) Wider countryside

Performance Indicator:

By 2010, there should be a positive trend in the indices for farmland and woodland bird populations, for bats and for butterflies.

The annual UK Wild Bird Indicator was published in October 2008⁶. This included information from 1970 to 2007. The farmland bird population index in the UK declined by more than half between 1977 and 1999, and after a period of relative stability, it has fallen in the last three years to its lowest recorded level (48% of 1970 level). The indicator for England has shown a similar pattern. Of particular note, the

⁵ National Audit Office. 2008. *Natural England's Role in Improving Sites of Special Scientific Interest*. The Stationary Office, London

⁶ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/statistics/wildlife/kf/wdkf03.htm>

index for England showed a fall of almost 2 percentage points between 2006 and 2007, relative to the 1966 level, the largest fall for 15 years. The trend is being driven by declines in a number of specialist farmland birds with generalists faring better. However, the indices for both specialist and generalists have declined over the last three years. Prospects for farmland birds are not encouraging because this recent downturn preceded the loss of set aside land in 2008.

The UK woodland bird indicator was 22% below the level in the early 1970s. The most severe decline occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s but the index has been broadly stable in recent years. The species showing the greatest declines overall are woodland specialists (those that breed or feed mainly or solely in woodland), with Lesser Redpoll, Willow Tit and Tree Pipit declining particularly severely. Wood warbler has also shown a severe decline (70% down on 1970 levels) but this has occurred more recently than other species (since 1994). However, other woodland specialists, such as Great Spotted Woodpecker and Nuthatch have more than doubled.

Assessment: Amber/Red (downgraded from Amber)

Trends for 11 of the 17 UK bat species have been assessed using data from 1997-2007. Significant positive trends were reported for three species, the other eight species showed no clear trend. The Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) has developed a composite index that uses trend data for six widespread species. In 2008, this led to bats being incorporated into the suite of UK Biodiversity Indicators used to measure progress towards the Government's target of halting biodiversity loss by 2010.

Assessment: Amber (unchanged)

For butterflies, a composite all-species index of butterfly abundance has been produced (covering 52 species) at a UK level going back to 1976, which can be separated into migrant, (habitat) specialist and generalist (wider countryside) species. Populations of butterflies have fluctuated over the last thirty two years, especially migrant species. The all-species index has peaked at four to eight year intervals, but the long-term smoothed trend is classed as stable. The smoothed trend for generalist species is also classed as stable, although some species including Speckled Wood and Comma have expanded northward responding positively to climate change, whilst others including Wall Brown and Small Heath have declined in their core range. For migrants, the underlying smoothed trend is upward, though the increase is not significant due to often large variations in the intensity of immigration from one year to the next. The situation for specialist butterfly species is less positive, with the smoothed index significantly lower than the period 1976-79, highlighting the lack of recovery from drought conditions in 1976.

Assessment: Amber (unchanged)

b) Education

Performance Indicator:

By 2010, all school children should have gained experience of the natural world through out-of-classroom learning as an integral part of school education.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) launched the ‘Out and About’ package in October 2008, to support teachers and schools in England in taking learning outside the classroom (see www.lotc.org.uk). However, this does not include revised health and safety guidance for teachers, or specific financing to ensure access to learning outside the classroom in the **natural environment** for all children, this remains a huge barrier for most schools. Ofsted, the schools inspectorate in England, also released a thematic report that found that “when planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils’ personal, social and emotional development.” However, this has not been reflected by making it a statutory requirement for schools to include out-of-classroom learning in their Ofsted inspection evaluation forms, and means that it is not possible to accurately report on numbers benefiting from these experiences.

The efforts and resources of a wide range of NGOs over recent years have begun to demonstrate the potential that could be achieved in this area were sufficient support given (for instance, BBC Breathing Places Schools). In addition, a number of Government Departments have engaged with the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto to represent their agendas (for instance Department for Culture, Media and Sports). However, to date, Defra has failed to do so, and not acknowledged the role they should play in all children and young people learning in the natural environment while at school. For this indicator to be realised and sustained beyond 2010, we believe it is essential for Defra to recognise their critical role and responsibilities, and work alongside the DCSF.

Assessment: Amber/Red (downgraded from Amber)

This assessment is the third made by Wildlife and Countryside Link since the publication of our challenge to Government. The table below shows the assessments for each area in each year.

	2007 ⁷	2008	2009
1. Protecting and enhancing threatened species and habitats	Amber	Amber/Red	Amber/Red
2. Protecting and managing our finest wildlife sites			
a) Marine	Red	Red	Amber/Red
b) Terrestrial and freshwater	Green/Amber	Green	Green/Amber
3. Making space for wildlife			
a) Birds	Amber	Amber	Amber/Red
Bats	Amber	Amber	Amber
Butterflies	Amber	Amber	Amber
b) Education	Amber	Amber	Amber/Red

⁷ The date shown is the date we published our assessment but is an assessment on progress in the previous year.

This document is supported by the following 17 organisations:

- Badger Trust
- Bat Conservation Trust
- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Froglife
- The Grasslands Trust
- The Herpetological Conservation Trust
- The Mammal Society
- Marine Conservation Society
- Pond Conservation
- Plantlife International
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT)
- The Wildlife Trusts
- The Woodland Trust
- WWF-UK
- Zoological Society of London