

Halting Biodiversity Loss by 2010

A Progress Assessment by Wildlife and Countryside Link

February 2010



HALTING BIODIVERSITY LOSS BY 2010

Wildlife and Countryside Link assessment of progress during 2009

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 2010 assessment of progress in the last year against the performance indicators we included in the leaflet. These assessments have been made at an England level, but in some cases, we have had to use broader information for the UK.

Our final assessment will be carried out at the end of 2010, the International Year of Biodiversity, to assess progress overall. By then, we hope that the UK government will have made a clear commitment to ambitious post 2010 biodiversity targets both at a European Union level and globally.

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.

In 2005, the BAP reporting showed that **17 (38%) of BAP habitats** and **102 (27%) of BAP species** on the original priority list were still **declining at a UK level**¹. A slightly higher proportion of the UK priority species and habitats that were relevant to **England (42.5% of habitats and 28% of species)** were reported to be declining.

The results of the 2008 reporting round² show a disappointing lack of positive change in the number of species and habitats reported to be declining in the last three years, either at a UK level or in England. Indeed, the proportion of habitats that were declining actually increased to **45% in England and 42% at UK level**. Although the number and proportion of species in the declining categories decreased (**to 24% in both England and UK**), this improvement was mostly offset by an increase in the number of species that were reported to have been **lost since the publication of the BAP** (7 from England and 8 from the UK).

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

² Unpublished data available to Link

Some priority habitats, such as reedbeds and lowland heathlands are increasing in England and a number of species, e.g. stone-curlew, large blue butterfly, ladybird spider and stinking hawk's-beard have benefited from targeted species recovery measures. However, these success stories are too few and far between, there are still too many species and habitats in trouble. Overall, it appears that some of the progress that was made in the early years of the BAP has stalled.

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 their severe decline (more than 50% in last 25 years). At present, there is no timescale for reporting the status or trends for the species and habitats added to the list in 2007 or for the development of targets.

In November 2008, Natural England launched the 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. A year on and this new approach is still being developed and deployed. We hope that it will lead to more conservation action on the ground but it is still too early to assess whether it will make sufficient difference to conservation delivery.

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 sites) identified and notified by 2010.

Site protection in the marine environment continues to lag decades behind that on land. The Marine & Coastal Access Act received Royal Assent in November 2009 and is a significant step in the right direction and, given proper implementation of the new law, provides the legal tools to better deliver marine protection.

The Act provides for Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) to be designated to contribute to a representative and ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which will also include Natura 2000 sites. Regional site selection projects are already being set up to identify MCZs in our seas. Separately, some additional marine Natura 2000 sites are also being considered but progress is still slow, and for Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in particular, coverage is still inadequate. The Government's current timetable is for the MPA network to be established by 2012, meaning that the above target will therefore not be met. The Government should also ensure comprehensive and effective application of management measures to existing and future Natura 2000 sites.

Assessment – (**Amber** upgraded from **Amber/Red**)

b). Terrestrial and freshwater sites

Performance indicator:

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

The latest analysis from Natural England suggests that the Public Service Agreement (PSA) target in England (95% of SSSIs by area in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition by December 2010) will be met. This reflects the very real efforts made by Government and its agencies to improve the condition of England's SSSIs, and the effective way in which they have worked with stakeholders to focus attention on delivery of the target.

The latest assessment for England (01 November 2009) is that 43.80% of SSSIs are in favourable condition, 45.22% are unfavourable-recovering, 7.05% unfavourable – no change and 3.88% unfavourable declining⁴. Under Natural England's analysis, the favourable and recovering categories are combined to give a figure of 89.02%. This compares with 56.9% in March 2003, 72.3% in March 2006, 80% in January 2008 and 84.3% in December 2008.

It is important to note that most progress towards the PSA target has been made in the transition of large areas from unfavourable to unfavourable recovering condition. This has been triggered by the introduction of management and associated funding intended to address the causes of unfavourable condition. However, it will take time to see whether or not this is effective, and even where it is, some sites will take many years to recover. Over the life of the target there has, in fact, been a slight decline in the area achieving favourable condition. This means that the commendable progress to date is very vulnerable to reversal linked to threatened cuts in public sector spending. We are concerned that the progress to date may not be sustained, and may not therefore lead to real improvements in the condition of SSSIs on the ground.

As we move through 2010 and beyond, the emphasis must now shift to delivery of favourable condition to ensure that the good work to date is sustained and not wasted. Sound scientific understanding of the causes of unfavourable condition, and of the efficacy of management measures, will be key to assessing the extent to which measures now in place will deliver the desired results. It is clear that greater investment in science to 'crack' particular issues (e.g. the effects and management of diffuse pollution in fresh water ecosystems) will be necessary along the way.

Assessment: **Green/Amber** (unchanged)

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

⁴ <http://www.sssi.naturalengland.org.uk/Special/sssi/reportAction.cfm?Report=sdrt15&Category=N&Reference=0>

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 latest annual England natural environment PSA (28) indicators on bird populations were published in October 2009⁵. This included information from 1970 to 2008. The smoothed index for **farmland birds** (19 species) in England was 52% lower in 2008 than its 1970 level and there was a 2.26% decrease in the index between 2007 and 2008. Twelve of the 19 species on the indicator declined between 2007 and 2008 and of those 10 have been in continual decline for the past four years. The signs of an upturn in the unsmoothed trend in the last year may have just been a blip. It is hoped that the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (the voluntary replacement for set aside) will be successful and help to reverse this trend.

The smoothed **woodland birds** index for England (35 species) was 21% lower in 2008 than its 1970 level. The index was unchanged between 2007 and 2008. The most severe decline occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. 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. However, other woodland specialists such as great spotted woodpecker and nuthatch have increased.

Assessment: **Amber/Red** (unchanged)

Trends for 11 of the 17 **UK bat species** have been assessed using data from 1997-2009. Significant positive trends were reported for three species, the other eight species showed no clear trend. Three have shown signs of shifting, but at this early stage the trends are being treated with caution. The Bat Conservation Trust 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. These indicators were updated in 2009.

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. Large fluctuations in numbers between years are typical features of butterfly populations, 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,

⁵ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2009/091029a.htm>

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 and an overall decline of 22%, highlighting the lack of recovery from drought conditions in 1976 which have been compounded by lack of connectivity in landscape and continued decline in wild flowers as nectar and food-plant resources.

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.

There were some positive steps taken by the Government in 2009 towards delivering this target. Unfortunately these are over-shadowed by missed opportunities in the reforms of the primary school curriculum.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) consulted on revised health and safety guidance for learning outside the classroom in November 2009. This long expected information will significantly reduce one of the main barriers for teachers and schools taking learning outside the classroom for all pupils.

As part of the England Biodiversity Strategy, and in support the International Year of Biodiversity, Defra and DCSF are producing a booklet for schools to introduce various ways to engage with biodiversity, and the diverse benefits associated with doing so. This is in support of the DCSF's National Framework for Sustainable Schools, and is a welcome step in acknowledging the critical role of the natural environment in delivering this framework.

A large number of environmental and sustainability organisations responded to the Government consultation on the reformed primary school curriculum. As well as asking for specific content to be added relating to ecology and the natural environment, they also called for the curriculum's core aims and essentials for learning and life to include every child developing the understanding and skills necessary to care for the environment. None of these recommendations were incorporated within the curriculum, and this represents a significant failure by the Government.

There are always some teachers in schools who will contribute to achieving this target, and find opportunities to do so through the existing curricula. However, the Training and Development Agency for Schools continues to fail to ensure that every teacher is confident, competent and committed to thoroughly engage with learning outside the classroom and environmental sustainability. This barrier must be addressed if the Government is to successfully meet the education target.

Assessment: **Amber** (upgraded from **Amber/Red**)

This assessment is the fourth 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 ⁶	2008	2009	2010
1. Protecting and enhancing threatened species and habitats	Amber	Amber/Red	Amber/Red	Amber/Red
2. Protecting and managing our finest wildlife sites				
a) Marine	Red	Red	Amber/Red	Amber
b) Terrestrial and freshwater	Green/ Amber	Green	Green/ Amber	Green/ Amber
3. Making space for wildlife				
a) Birds	Amber	Amber	Amber/Red	Amber/Red
Bats	Amber	Amber	Amber	Amber
Butterflies	Amber	Amber	Amber	Amber
b) Education	Amber	Amber	Amber/Red	Amber

The 2010 Challenge for Government

It is clear that 2010 will not see a halt to biodiversity loss, either nationally or globally. By the end of 2010, there should be new global targets for biodiversity. We expect this to be backed up by more detailed measures and commitment at EU and national levels. 2010 has been designated as the International Year of Biodiversity and it is the year in which we should redouble our efforts to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. More needs to be done than to just celebrate some of our success stories and highlight the importance of wildlife conservation. Concerted action and more binding commitments from Government are now required to ensure sustained progress towards the 2020 targets.

We have looked at the detail of the proposals we put forward in 2006 and we set out below eight areas where action by Government should be taken in 2010 in England.

- 1. An effective surveillance strategy.** The 2002, 2005 and 2008 BAP reporting rounds highlighted glaring gaps in the ability to monitor the trends of priority species and habitats. A clear strategy is required which sets out these gaps and by the end of 2010 a prioritised timetable for filling them. The current UK strategy fails to do this. The revised strategy and timetable needs to be signed off by Government.
- 2. Resources to deliver species and habitat conservation.** Although funding for biodiversity conservation has increased since 2006 there is still a significant gap in resources for delivering species and habitats in both

⁶ The date shown is the date we published our assessment but is an assessment on progress in the previous year.

terrestrial and the marine environment. This gap is currently being quantified by the England Biodiversity Strategy Economics Implementation Group with the results expected in March 2010. The Government should make a commitment during the International Year of Biodiversity to find innovative solutions to fill the resource gap and begin immediately deploying them. Recent studies suggest that the returns from investing in biodiversity far outweigh the costs.

3. **Support for Local Authorities.** The review of the implementation of the biodiversity duty for public authorities (NERC Act 2006) will be completed in early 2010. Implementation by local authorities has been very patchy. Having staff dedicated to biodiversity work appears to be key to successful implementation. The Government should ensure that Local Authorities appoint biodiversity champions and resource them appropriately.
4. **Marine sites designated.** Marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) which have previously been, or are currently subject to, consultation should be designated and conservation objectives finalised in 2010. Remaining sites (SACs and SPAs) required to complete the MPA network should be brought forward for consultation.
5. **Delivering sustained recovery of SSSIs/ASSIs.** To realise the benefits of the work to deliver 95% of England's SSSIs by area into favourable or unfavourable recovering condition by December 2010, it will be essential that effort and investment be maintained to ensure that measures now in place deliver on the ground. Over the life of the target, while huge areas have moved from unfavourable condition to unfavourable recovering condition, the area actually in good favourable condition has declined. The start of a new decade requires a new target focussed on finishing what has been started by delivering truly favourable condition for our most important wildlife sites and keeping them that way.
6. **Agri-Environment Schemes.** It is crucial to ensure that agri-environment schemes maximise the benefits for all farmland biodiversity, and specifically priority species and habitats, in 2010. This can be achieved through improving delivery of Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) to ensure it is able to deliver biodiversity interests, and that monitoring is adequate to show that this is happening. ELS needs improving by addressing the imbalance in option uptake, ensuring that ELS renewals in 2010 include the range of options necessary to deliver of BAP targets. The Government should also target high quality classic scheme renewals into Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) in 2010 to avoid the benefits to biodiversity of habitat restoration projects from being lost. The Government should support implementation and monitor delivery of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment in such a way that it will also provide tangible biodiversity benefits for all farmland species and habitats.
7. **Water policy delivers for biodiversity.** Gains for priority species and habitats are integral to delivery of the Water Framework Directive. Current River Basin Management Plans propose limited action to address water quality and additional measures will be needed if the improvement targets agreed at EU level are to be met. New legislation relating to floods and water management must maximize environmental gains, particularly through the

use of natural processes within flood risk management, including supporting biodiversity delivery.

8. **Resources for out of classroom learning.** The Government should make a commitment to provide £40 million per annum⁷ to ensure that all children who qualify for school meals in England have contact with the natural world through formal education.

Wildlife and Countryside Link
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This document is supported by the following 22 organisations;

- **Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust**
- **Association of Rivers Trusts**
- **Badger Trust**
- **Bat Conservation Trust**
- **Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust**
- **Butterfly Conservation**
- **Campaign to Protect Rural England**
- **Friends of the Earth England**
- **The Grasslands Trust**
- **The Mammal Society**
- **Marine Conservation Society**
- **The National Trust**
- **Plantlife International**
- **Pond Conservation**
- **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds**
- **Salmon & Trout Association**
- **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society**
- **Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust**
- **The Wildlife Trusts**
- **Woodland Trust**
- **WWF-UK**
- **Zoological Society of London**



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⁷ http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/challenge_tcm9-238034.pdf