

Background briefing for Biodiversity sections of NERC Bill

This briefing provides some general background information on the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UK approach to biodiversity conservation in response to this Convention. It underlines why sections 40-42 of the NERC Bill are very important.

“Biological diversity” or “biodiversity” is the variety of life on earth. The concept was placed firmly on the international agenda by the 1992 **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)**. The convention came out of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil – the ‘Earth Summit’. The convention has been signed by 168 parties, including the UK and the European Union.

The three key goals of the CBD are:

- *Conservation of biodiversity*: the CBD advocates the protection of species and ecosystems through in-situ conservation, including nature reserves and policies to save endangered species.
- *The sustainable use of the components of biodiversity*: the CBD promotes measures to ensure that future generations will benefit (economically and otherwise) from today’s biological resources.
- *The fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources*: the CBD sets ground rules for access to genetic resources (chromosomes, genes and DNA) by acknowledging that when a microbe, plant, or animal is used for a commercial application (e.g. biotechnology and the development of new pharmaceuticals) the country of origin should benefit.

To further these goals the CBD places various obligations on parties, including:

- Requirements to produce a national biodiversity plan and to ensure that strategies for conserving biodiversity are integrated into sectoral policies.
- Requirements to identify and monitor biodiversity.

UK Policy on the conservation of biodiversity was first set out in **Biodiversity: the UK Action Plan** in 1994.¹ This was the UK’s initial response to Article 6 of the CBD, to develop a national strategy for the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of biological resources.

The plan recognised the need to conserve the range of biodiversity in the UK but also the need to identify biodiversity priorities, i.e. those species and habitats that urgently required conservation action. These were selected against certain criteria including international threat or rapid decline in the UK. Some 579 species and 45 habitats were identified in this way. Detailed **Species Action Plans** (SAPs) and **Habitat Action Plans** (HAPs) were drawn up to set targets and define actions for the conservation of the majority of these priorities between 1995 and 1999. The SAPs and HAPs and the overarching UK plan are collectively referred to as the **UK Biodiversity Action Plan**. The delivery of the UK BAP is now a devolved responsibility.

A considerable amount of conservation action for our most threatened biodiversity has been generated by the UKBAP. Although there remains a considerable amount

¹ HMSO (1994) Biodiversity: The UK Action Plan. Cm2428.

to do there have been some notable successes, such as the recovery of the bittern population from 11 males in 1997 to over 50 in 2004. This has been achieved by the expansion and improved management of this bird's reedbed habitat.

The UKBAP is undergoing its first **major review in 2005**. This will include a review of all SAP and HAP targets and a review of the lists of UK priority species and habitats. It makes sound conservation sense to assess conservation priorities at the UK level, since this is the level at which international commitments, such as the CBD, have been made and is the level at which government has a duty to report on these commitments. However, once this review has been completed, it will be important for England and Wales to publish lists of priority species and habitats relevant to the respective countries and to plan and promote conservation action for these priorities. This is the purpose behind sections 41 (England) and 42 (Wales) of the NERC Bill.

Link fully supports the requirements within clauses 40, 41 and 42 of the NERC Bill which extend the duties introduced on government by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) to have regard to the UN Biodiversity Convention, to publish lists of priority species and habitats, to further the conservation of these species and habitats and promote others to do likewise. However, we believe there should be a stronger, clearer duty 'to further' biodiversity conservation rather than the proposed 'have regard to' duty, and suggest that clause 40 is amended accordingly (please refer to the accompanying briefing "*Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill Amendment for Committee: duty to conserve biodiversity*").

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic environment and biodiversity. Taken together, our members have the support of seven million people in the UK and manage over 398,000 hectares of land. This statement is supported by:

- Bat Conservation Trust
- British Mountaineering Council
- Buglife - The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Friends of the Earth England
- Herpetological Conservation Trust
- Mammal Society
- Marine Conservation Society
- Plantlife International
- Pond Conservation: The Water Habitats Trust.
- RSPB
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society
- Woodland Trust

For further information please contact Alexia Wellbelove (alexia@wcl.org.uk or 020 7820 8600).