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"Bringing together organisations in the UK to protect and enhance wildlife and landscape, and to further the quiet enjoyment and appreciation of the countryside."



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Letter from the Chair...

Dear Members,

As ever, this first quarter of the year has seen frenetic activity on a range of policy issues. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill received Royal Assent at the end of the quarter and work continues on the formation of Natural England. Link is ready to engage in the further development of Natural England's Strategy later in the year.

Link's Farming and Rural Development group has focused on the development of the next Rural Development Programme for England 2007 - 2013, meeting with Defra to ensure our concerns are taken into account from the earliest opportunity. This quarter the informal sub-group on Badgers and Bovine TB has re-activated its membership in response to Defra consulting on whether badgers should be culled as part of the Government's strategy to fight bovine TB. Link submitted detailed responses to both the EFRA Committee inquiry and Defra consultation on this issue and will continue to follow progress as the Government position develops over summer.

The Land Use Planning group has also seen a particularly busy time, responding to a number of consultations on Housing, Development & Flooding Risk and Local Strategic Partnerships. The group submitted detailed evidence to the Barker Review of Land Use Planning and will continue to engage with the review process as it progresses over the course of 2006.

Finally in this quarter, we saw the publication of the long-awaited consultation on the draft Marine Bill. Link continues to campaign actively on all aspects of the Marine Bill and has produced a number of detailed bulletins to date, which have been well received by all stakeholders. We will of course continue to maintain a high level of engagement with this Bill throughout the year until its introduction to Parliament later this year or early next year.

Best wishes,



Dr. Hilary Allison

Working Groups

Farming and Rural Development (FRD) Working Group

The FRD group's focus this quarter has been on the forthcoming consultation on the next Rural Development Programme for England 2007-2013 (the next ERDP). The consultation on the draft National Strategy for the next ERDP was launched on 27th February, as was the Uplands consultation. Both documents will be subject to the usual 12 week consultation period, however, at the group's meeting in February it was decided that Link will only respond to the next ERDP consultation.

Link representatives met Defra officials in March as part of Defra's national roadshow in order to help inform Link's response to the consultation on the next ERDP. Due to European Commission time pressures, Link is planning to submit its response to the consultation by Easter to ensure our comments can be incorporated into the strategy at the earliest opportunity.

The sub group on CAP met in January to continue its work on developing a vision for CAP, which helped inform Link's submission of evidence at the end of February to the EFRA Committee's inquiry on the UK Government's Vision for the Common Agricultural Policy.

Link representatives continue to attend a number of external meetings, including Defra's Rural Development 2007 Policy Advisory Group and the Agri-Environment Steering Group meetings, and the group continues to work on a Bioenergy proposal and a Link GM position statement.

Bovine TB and Badgers

In a parliamentary statement in December, Ben Bradshaw MP announced a series of new measures to tackle Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) including the statutory pre-movement testing of cattle, the rationalisation of compensation to farmers and the launch of a 12 week consultation on badger culling. Whilst both the principle behind badger culling measures and the proposed strategy/method are subject to consultation the cattle measures were not, and these were introduced in March 2006 after a month-long delay of the initial February start date.

Link held a special meeting in early February to discuss bovine TB and badgers and Link's response to the culling consultation. Link does not support the proposed culling measures and continues to maintain that, in the current circumstances, we do not support any moves to introduce any form of badger culling as a mechanism to control the spread of bTB. Link submitted evidence to this effect to the EFRA Committee inquiry and has also responded to the Defra consultation.

Structural Funds

Link will submit a response to the Structural Funds consultation in the second quarter of the year.

Woodland Subgroup

The first meeting of the Woodland group took place at the end of this first quarter at which the group discussed the next ERDP consultation, the England Forestry Strategy and forestry certification and procurement issues. The draft England Forestry Strategy was discussed at the England Forestry Forum Steering Group meeting in January, which was attended by a Link representative. The public consultation period on the draft Strategy is expected to begin in May.

Land Use Planning (LUP) Working Group

Early this quarter, LUP group members attended the Town and Country Planning Association conference on Planning and Climate Change at which Elliot Morley and Baroness Andrews gave keynote speeches. The Government has now committed to producing a statement on planning and climate change this summer, and the LUP group will closely track its progress and maintain pressure on government to deliver on this commitment.

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Working Groups

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The LUP group met in late January to finalise its workplan for 2006 and to discuss the consultation on PPS3 (Housing) to which Link submitted a response reiterating concerns about the proposal to move toward a 'market-led' rather than a 'plan-led' approach to land use planning. The group also submitted responses to PPS25 (Development & Flooding Risk) and the consultation on 'Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future'.

Following the announcement of the Barker II review of the Land Use Planning system in January, Link held a workshop in early March inviting external partners to share thoughts and information. A detailed Link response was submitted and the group intends to submit further evidence as the review progresses. Link also hopes to secure a meeting with the Review Team in the near future.

Work also continues on the production of a spatial planning briefing intended to assist local authorities and others implement the changes brought about by the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. The briefing document will be distributed to planning authorities in the coming weeks.

Wildlife and Trade Working Group

Last December the Wildlife & Trade group, together with Species Survival Network (SSN), wrote a joint letter to Defra urging it not to grant import permits for transport of 20 captive-bred green sea turtles from the Cayman Turtle Farm into the United Kingdom, expressing a number of serious concerns. A response was received informing Link that the permits had already been issued and the importing parties are the Brighton and Weymouth Sea Life centres.

In February, the group met in advance of the regular Defra-Link meeting to discuss the forthcoming CoP14 meeting which will be held from 3rd to 15th June 2007 in the Netherlands. Link has begun discussions with Defra on possible proposals to CoP14, which may include proposals on Non-Detriment Findings, Internet Trade and Spiny dogfish. Link has requested that Defra provide a detailed timetable of deadlines in the run up to CoP14.

Whale Subgroup

The Whale group continues to focus on the forthcoming IWC meeting in June 2006 in St Kitts and Nevis (IWC58), at which it is likely that Japan may obtain a majority. In light of these concerns, the group wrote a second time to the Prime Minister urging the Government to maintain a strong position against scientific whaling at the highest diplomatic levels. The group also wrote to Ben Bradshaw MP on this same issue. A meeting was held in February to discuss the group's strategy in the lead up to IWC58 and Link provided the Government with a list of representatives for the UK delegation to IWC58. Link also met with The Gambia's Deputy Commissioner in March to discuss his country's membership of the IWC.

This quarter, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Credit Guarantee Department (ECGD) both launched their consultation periods on Sakhalin II. In January, Link representatives held a meeting with UK Ministers from Defra, DfID and the DTI to clearly set out the case as to why the UK should not fund Sakhalin II. The UK Government continues to maintain the position that it can only promote good environmental practice through its involvement in the project. In February, Link and its member organisations held demonstrations outside the EBRD UK Stakeholder meeting in London to highlight the threats posed by the project to the Western Gray Whale. Link also attended the meeting to discuss the environmental impacts of the project and will continue to brief Ministers with its concerns.

The group's work on noise, particularly Sonar 2087 has continued this quarter. The group came to an agreement with the Defence Procurement Agency, following a meeting in June 2005, that as the minutes of this meeting could not be accepted by Link (as they are not considered an accurate reflection of the meeting), they will not be published or referred to in any way by either party. The group also wrote to the Secretary of State for Defence, following a stranding of beaked whales in Spain, to request any information the MoD may have on the event. A reply was received from the Royal Navy denying any involvement in these strandings.

WORKING GROUPS

Farming & Rural Development
Chair: Ian Woodhurst, CPRE
Vice Chair: Nick Collinson, WT
Sec: Alexia Wellbelove

Woodland Subgroup
Chair: Mike Wood, RSPB
Vice Chair: James Cooper, WT
Sec: Alexia Wellbelove

Land Use Planning
Chair: Henry Oliver, CPRE
Vice Chair (*Planning*):
Ed Pomfret, WT
Vice Chair (*Minerals*):
Ruth Chambers, CNP
Sec: Helen Meech

Wildlife and Trade
Chair: Rob Atkinson, RSPCA
Vice Chair: Cathy Williamson, WDCS
Sec: Alexia Wellbelove

Whales Subgroup
Chair: John Frizell, GP
Vice Chair: Leah Garces, WSPA
Vice Chair: Virag Kaufer, WSPA
Sec: Alexia Wellbelove

Task Forces

Biodiversity Task Force (BTF)

This quarter the BTF, together with the Joint Links, launched a leaflet/poster to raise awareness of the 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss. The leaflet is aimed at key decision-makers and explains what the target means, and what needs to be done to achieve this over the next four years. In early March, Link representatives met with the Biodiversity Minister, Jim Knight MP, to discuss the 2010 leaflet and other biodiversity issues. The group will continue to advocate the challenge set out within the leaflet throughout 2006 and is considering further opportunities for its dissemination. If you have any upcoming events at which you would be willing to distribute the leaflet please contact Helen on helen.meech@wcl.org.uk.

In February, the group wrote to Michael Jack MP - Chairman of the EFRA Committee - proposing an inquiry into the management and funding of biodiversity research and monitoring in the UK. Link also responded to the consultation on the proposed CEH centre closures that have now been confirmed. Link maintains that NERC has not set out a convincing economic case for the closures and that NERC's actions appear to be driven by short term thinking that will lead to long term damage to the UK's ability to do environmental research.

Members of the BTF have continued to engage with the BAP review process. Link is concerned that the timetable is slipping, the roles and responsibilities of the various working groups are unclear and it remains uncertain as to how the next stages of the review process will be taken forward. The group has agreed to raise these concerns at the highest level and to circulate the Joint Links statement on the BAP Review (produced in November 2005) to the UK Standing Committee for consideration.

With the NERC Bill receiving Royal Assent on 29th March, the biodiversity duty clause remains as a duty to "have regard to" rather than "to further" biodiversity conservation. The government has committed to report in three years on how this duty has been addressed by public bodies and Link intends to work with Natural England in the coming months to influence emerging guidance, encourage the implementation of the duty and to monitor the appropriate reporting by public bodies.

Marine Task Force (MTF)

In January, many members of the Marine Task Force (MTF) attended the Coastal Futures Conference in London. Sam Fanshawe gave a short presentation on behalf of Link on the MTF's aspirations for the Marine Bill, and there were a series of presentations by Link members throughout the conference.

The consultation package on the Marine Bill was launched on 29th March and is available to download from Defra's website. In response to the publication of the package, Link issued a press release - see www.wcl.org.uk/downloads/2006/Link_PR_Marine_Bill_Consultation.pdf. The MTF is planning a two-day workshop on 25th/26th April to develop a Link response to the consultation and to develop a strategy for engaging the media and members of the public during the consultation period. Representatives of the MTF will also attend Defra's Marine Bill Forum events in May and the group is planning to meet with Ben Bradshaw MP, Defra officials, EN, EA and other stakeholders during the consultation period.

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Task Forces

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The sixth in the series of Link's Marine Bill Bulletins - on the Overfalls - was published this quarter and is available for download from our website along with all Link's bulletins to date (see www.wcl.org.uk/marine_campaign.htm). Link will continue to produce further bulletins over the coming months, which will be widely circulated to all stakeholders in order to inform and focus thinking as the Marine Bill develops.

The MTF also recently submitted a response to the Defra consultation on the European Commission's Marine Strategy package, supporting the Commission's proposal for a Marine Strategy Directive, but highlighting a number of improvements necessary to make it sufficiently robust. Link believes that the Directive can add value to the UK Government's work to protect national waters and, through international conventions, the regional seas. The MTF is urging Defra to seek positive changes to the Directive through negotiation, rather than attempting to undermine the Commission's proposal.

Bycatch Subgroup

On 1st January 2006, Regulation (EC) No 812/2004 requiring fishing vessels (of 12m or over) using any bottom set gillnet or entangling net in waters to the south west of England to use acoustic deterrent devices ('pingers'), came into effect. The bycatch group has written to Ben Bradshaw MP regarding the UK's implementation of this legislative requirement.

The group met in February to discuss the implementation of the pingers regulation and the ICES advice on common dolphins in the North East Atlantic. A Link letter was sent to Ben Bradshaw MP expressing concern over current consideration of the significance of fisheries-related mortality of common dolphins in the North East Atlantic and the Minister has since offered Link a meeting to discuss this, and other bycatch issues, in more detail.

Members of the bycatch group have recently met with Defra to discuss the review of the requirements and funding arrangements for research into cetacean strandings. The outcome of the review is expected to be published in April 2006.

Water Task Force (WTF)

Early this quarter, Link members attended and gave presentations at the World Wetlands Day Conference 2006 "Landscape Scale Wetlands: Developing Visions" held in London. The WTF then met in February to discuss, among other things, Link's responses to a number of upcoming consultations.

The group responded to the Environment Agency & English Nature consultation on how to include additional water bodies of biodiversity significance in Water Framework Directive (WFD) implementation, the Environment Agency & Veterinary Medicines Directorate consultation on Sheep Dip Pollution Reduction Programme and also to Defra's consultation on River Basin Planning Guidance. The group has plans to pool its technical expertise to inform a Link response to the WFD UK Technical Advisory Group consultation on Environmental Standards and Conditions (Phase 1).

TASK FORCES

Biodiversity

Chair: Martin Harper, RSPB
Vice Chair: Nigel Bourn, BC
Sec: Helen Meech

Water Policy and Legislation

Chair: Sarah Oppenheimer, RSPB
Vice Chair: Tom Le Quesne, WWF
Sec: Jodie Bettis

Marine Nature Conservation Campaigns

Chair: Ben Stafford, RSPB
Vice Chair: Anthony Field, WWF
Policy

Chair: Joan Edwards, TWT

Vice Chair: Melissa Moore, MCS
Sec: Helen Meech

Bycatch Subgroup

Chair: Ali Ross, WDCS
Vice Chair: Lissa Goodwin, MC
Sec: Helen Meech

Overarching

Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Bill & Natural England

This quarter, the NERC Bill successfully passed from the Committee stages in the House of Lords, back to the House of Commons, receiving Royal Assent on 30th March. The Committee stages of the Bill took place over four days in late January/early February to which Link submitted a briefing focusing on Clause 2.1; the Role of Natural England and Sustainable Development. In March, the Report stages of the Bill took place over two days and Link attended the Defra Natural England Stakeholder Meeting, the management of which will be taken on by Natural England (NE) in future.

This quarter saw the formal announcement of the new Senior Management team at NE. In January, the Chief Executive Designate was announced as Dr Helen Phillips, former Director of Environment Agency Wales, and in March Poul Christensen was appointed Deputy Chair. Recommendations for the Non Executive Board are expected early in the second quarter whilst four of NE's executive directors have now been announced; Andy Clements has moved from English Nature to take up the role of Director, Science, Evidence and Policy; Adrian Belton is appointed as Director, Operational Delivery; David Young is Director, Strategy and Performance; and Guy Thompson will take up post as Director, External Affairs in June.

The NERC Act is available for download at www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/ukpga_20060016_en.pdf

Commons Bill

The Government amendments for consideration at the 3rd Reading of the Commons Bill were tabled in January and the House of Lords' 3rd Reading took place later that month. The Bill then passed from the House of Lords to the House of Commons and the 2nd Reading in the House of Commons is now expected to take place on 18th April. It is hoped that the Bill will attain Royal Assent before Parliament rises for Summer Recess in late July although this timetable is, as ever, subject to parliamentary programming.

The latest version of the Bill (including changes made at Report stage) can be downloaded from www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmbills/115/2006115.htm

Sister Links



Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) has had a busy quarter beginning with the launch of a major policy document *The Way Ahead* in January. This document was received with praise by the Minister for the Environment and has been sent to all political parties and Government departments. NIEL is following up with a series of meetings to raise environmental issues up the political, governmental and public agendas.

The Review of Environmental Governance was formally launched in February and there will be much work continuing over the next few months in organising NGO contributions and encouraging public involvement in the process, including the production of a briefing note and major issues paper. The Review of Public Administration remains a priority, as do other aspects of planning including a major new statement reversing the 'presumption in favour of development' which has been in place for the open countryside for the past few decades.

A major conference on water was held by the Freshwater Task Force in March and one on *Growing for Life: food health and the environment* will take place in April. Much work has taken place on developing the Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland - contributing to Government's work which will culminate in a strategy in May.

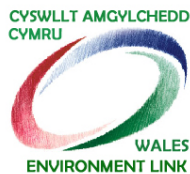
Sister Links



Scottish Environment Link's (SEL) main activity this quarter was the delivery of a second Scottish Environment Week in February focused on MSPs at the Scottish Parliament and constituencies. Events were held in and around the Parliament on Sustainable Development Education; Food as a route to environmental understanding; Scotland's Seas; and the launch of the LINK audit *The State of Scotland's Farmed Environment* at which the Minister launched SEERAD's consultation on the Scottish RDP; and a bike ride with local school children.

A reception at the Parliament, field visits and constituency visits were organised. The week was successful in engaging MSPs, in staging events with allies, and in showing the breadth of interest in the issues beyond the environment movement.

On the Parliamentary front, the Planning Bill continues to be a major concern with public campaigning focused on targeting MSPs. Fringe events on planning were held at the Scottish Labour and Liberal Democrat Conferences held in February. LINK also attended the other main Party conferences this quarter and completed its environment manifesto for the 2007 elections. The very readable *The Battle for Roinebheal* was launched in March and recounts the experience of the 10+ year campaign against the Harris Superquarry.



Wales Environment Link (WEL) staff and members were sad to say goodbye to Dr Tony Prater, Chair of WEL, at the end of March when he retired from the RSPB in Wales. Tony was thanked for his valuable contribution to the development of the organisation at a presentation during his last Council meeting. In his place members welcomed Geraint Hopkins, who is now undertaking the role of Chair on a voluntary basis, representing Wildlife Trusts Wales. Geraint has recently started working for the Wales Environmental Compact and will help build further links between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

WEL has been developing communications with the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) recently. CCW has invited members to a presentation and discussion session about their strategic work plans. As CCW is a key funder of the eNGO sector, learning about CCW's plans in advance will help members undertake their annual planning in order to fit in with funding requirements.

WEL has recently begun distributing questionnaires as part of its 2006 review. One questionnaire was developed for members and one for external partners, to collect feedback about the services and activities of WEL and help plan the future of the organisation.

News from the Secretariat

Management Committee Meeting

The first Management Committee meeting of 2006 was held on 16th March. With the addition of its newest member - Anna Shiel of the National Trust - Link now has a full Board of Trustees. Issues discussed at the meeting included Link's quarterly accounts, end of year accounts and Link's forward planning review. The next meeting is scheduled for 27th June.

News from the Secretariat

Other Link news

This quarter, Link welcomed Campaign Whale to the Link family as our first Associate Member and we said goodbye to the British Ecological Society and National Federation of Biological Recorders. This brings the total number of Link member organisations to 36 for 2006.

The redesigning of Link's library continues slowly but surely. We said goodbye to Philippa Lane who, as a retired librarian, helped enormously with the prototype design of the largest section of our library - literature on the marine environment. We have now recruited a volunteer from the MSc in Conservation course at UCL - Graeme Duckworth - to reconfigure the library database in MS Access on the back of Philippa's model marine section. More volunteers are always needed for this ongoing Library Project so if you know of anyone keen to help out, please direct them to www.wcl.org.uk/Become_a_volunteer/Become_a_Volunteer.htm for more details.

On the staff front, Link's Policy and Campaigns Co-ordinator - Annie Smith - began the second half of her extended secondment at the RSPB as Marine Policy Officer, covering for Sharon Thompson whilst she is on secondment to Defra's Marine Bill team. Therefore, here at Link, Helen Meech will continue as Policy and Campaigns Co-ordinator and Jodie Bettis as the Information and Office Co-ordinator until the end of the period of secondment, which is due to finish late October 2006.

