

Wildlife and
Countryside



Halting Biodiversity Loss by 2010

A Progress Assessment by Wildlife and Countryside Link

March 2008



HALTING BIODIVERSITY LOSS BY 2010

Wildlife and Countryside Link assessment of progress during 2007

In January 2006, Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) published a challenge to Government by setting out what we thought the 2010 biodiversity commitment meant, what needed to happen and how progress should be measured. We promised to look at progress on an annual basis, potentially to highlight successes or failures around the turn of the year, and produced our first assessment in early 2007.

Presented below is our assessment against the performance indicators we included in the original leaflet. This year, these assessments have been made at an England level, but in some cases, we have had to use broader information for the UK. We have also indicated how the assessment compares to last year in brackets.

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 priority habitats and 102 (27%) of UK BAP priority species were still declining¹. We are still a long way from achieving this target.

Are we making any progress? In August 2007, a revised UK BAP list of 1149 species and 65 habitats was published². Whilst the publication of the list represents a significant step forward in defining those species and habitats in need of conservation action, the list has grown considerably and it has taken three years to produce. In addition, progress on identifying and developing clear mechanisms for taking such conservation action has been painfully slow. A considerable amount of the enthusiasm and positive action for biodiversity conservation that was generated by the original UK BAP has been lost or stalled over recent years.

In our original report, we highlighted the need for adequate monitoring of BAP priorities and increased habitat restoration. We are not aware of any significant progress in either of these areas. We should get a clearer picture of progress from the 2008 BAP reporting which should be completed early in 2009. Until then our assessment is that progress has stalled.

Assessment – Amber/Red (down from Amber)

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

² <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/NewPriorityList.aspx>

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 inclusion of a draft Marine Bill in the Queen's Speech 2007 was a step in the right direction. However, it is very disappointing that following the White Paper and consultation on bill content the Government did not go for a full Bill at this stage. The additional steps in the process to deliver a Marine Act only further reduces the likelihood of achieving a complete network of Marine Protected Areas by 2010 and, therefore, this target being met.

Assessment – Red (unchanged)

b) Terrestrial and freshwater sites

Performance indicator: 95% of UK SSSI and ASSIs in favourable condition by 2010³

The latest assessment for England (4 January 2008) is that 45% of SSSIs are in favourable condition, 35% are 'unfavourable – recovering', 14% are 'unfavourable - no change', and 6% are 'unfavourable – declining'⁴. Under Natural England's analysis, the 'favourable' and 'recovering' categories are combined to give a figure of 80%. This compares to 56.9% in March 2003, 72.3% in March 2006 and 75.4% in March 2007. This shows an increase of approximately 5% per annum and with a target deadline of 31 December 2010, this target is currently on trajectory.

However, we do not 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 their own problems. All SSSIs are of national importance and we should be as concerned about the condition of the last 5% as much as the first 95%. It is not yet clear whether the pressure on Defra and Natural England budgets will impact on this or other important areas of Natural England's work.

Assessment - Green (up from green/amber)

³ The Government Public Service Agreement target for SSSIs refers to England only.

⁴ www.english-nature.org.uk/Special/sssi/reportAction.cfm?Report=sdr15&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 annual UK Wild Bird Indicator was published in October 2007⁵. This included information from 1970 to 2006. The farmland bird population index in the UK declined by more than half between 1977 and 1999, and since then it has remained at between 55 to 60 per cent of its 1970 value. The indicator for England has shown a similar pattern. The indicator in England has fallen slightly in recent years, although it is too early to say whether this is the start of a further period of decline. The apparent overall stabilisation hides a variety of trends. Most of the species that have experienced major declines over the last three decades have continued to decrease, such as Grey Partridge, Turtle Dove and Yellowhammer. Recent upturns in the indices for others, including Reed Bunting and Tree Sparrow, may be early signs of recovery.

Since the early 1990s the UK woodland bird indicator has remained between 25 to 30 per cent below the level in the early 1970s. 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.

Assessment - Amber (unchanged)

Trends for 11 of the 17 UK bat species have been assessed using data from 1997-2006⁶. A positive trend was reported for four species and no clear overall picture was apparent for seven species. The Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) is developing a composite species index for bats that uses trend data for six widespread species.

Assessment - Amber (unchanged)

For butterflies, a composite all-species indicator 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 years, especially migrant species. The all-species index has peaked at four to eight year intervals, with an underlying increase of 17%, attributable to increases in common species. Generalist species have increased by 20% and migrant butterflies (chiefly immigrants from southern Europe) by over 750% with both increases consistent with climate change predictions. Specialist species have not recovered from drought conditions in 1976 and have declined by 22% overall, though the decline has stabilised since 2002.

Assessment - Amber (unchanged)

⁵ www.defra.gov.uk/environment/statistics/wildlife/kf/wdkf03.htm

⁶ BCT/JNCC (2007) The National Bat Monitoring Programme, Annual Report 2006.

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.

Building on the Government's Manifesto for Learning Outside the Classroom published in November 2006, revised guidance to schools and training modules are being developed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, working with a number of providers of out-of-classroom learning. However, this will not be available until later in 2008, and is not expected to come with specific financing to ensure access to learning outside the classroom in the natural environment for all children. While schools can now include out-of-classroom learning in their Ofsted inspection evaluation forms, this is not a statutory requirement, and means that the Government are still not able to accurately report on numbers benefiting from these experiences.

Assessment - Amber (unchanged)

This document is supported by the following 19 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
- Marine Connection
- Pond Conservation
- Plantlife International
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT)
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS)
- Woodland Trust
- WWF-UK
- Zoological Society of London