

Wildlife and Countryside Link position on Ecological Restoration Zones

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together over 30 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK and manage over 690,000 hectares of land.

This position is supported by the following 14 organisations;

- Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
- Bat Conservation Trust
- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign for National Parks
- Hawk and Owl Trust
- The Grasslands Trust
- The Mammal Society
- People's Trust for Endangered Species
- Plantlife
- Pond Conservation
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Salmon & Trout Association
- WWF – UK

Last year, at both the EU and global level, the UK Government rightly committed to ambitious agreements for the natural environment¹. We have less than ten years to initiate a turn-around in our natural environment and address the loss of biodiversity. Having missed the previous biodiversity commitment for 2010, and currently falling short of other commitments such as those in the Water Framework Directive, it is clear that current levels of activity fall far short of what is required.

The Making Space for Nature report made a series of recommendations that, taken together, would establish a strong basis for ecological recovery. As stated in Link's response on the Natural Environment White Paper we expect all of these recommendations to be taken forward by the White Paper. We understand that Defra is preparing a separate response on the Making Space for Nature report recommendations and Link's opinion has been sought specifically on recommendation 3 to establish Ecological Restoration Zones (ERZs), beginning by initiating a competition to implement 12 ERZs over the next three years. In this paper we use the term 'Ecological Restoration Zones' as expressed in the Making Space for Nature review.

The Making Space for Nature report states clearly that we require a step-change in the approach to wildlife conservation and calls for the establishment of a coherent and resilient ecological network throughout England, all of which Link strongly supports. It goes on to

¹ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/113591.pdf and <http://www2.defra.gov.uk/news/2010/10/29/nagoya-statement/>

describe “areas [within the ecological network] within which both the scale of what can be delivered and the scale of the benefits will be very high. These areas should be formally recognised as ERZs”².

Link fully supports the implementation of each of the 24 recommendations in the Making Space for Nature report, and member orgs look forward to playing an active role in their delivery. These were set out so that together they would achieve an extensive ecological network, and therefore Link recognises recommendation 3 on ERZs to represent **only one part** of the step-change solution required.

ERZs and the delivery landscape: principles

We know that to halt biodiversity loss we must take action for our most vulnerable species and habitats to avoid further extinctions and declines. We also know that the ecological network, including ERZs, will need to **build on the current framework of site protection**, allowing us to realise their potential by buffering and reconnecting them. As recognised in the Making Space for Nature report, whilst biodiversity conservation is the main driver for the creation of the ecological network, and thereby ERZs, there will be numerous other co-benefits including improved ecosystem service provision and connecting people with wildlife-rich places.

Implementing a process for establishing ERZs will not in itself be sufficient to generate the step-change needed to restore meet the 2020 global agreement. It is important that the Natural Environment White Paper also contains other mechanisms for improving natural environment delivery, and outlines how the ERZs are nested within these. The *Making Space for Nature* report provides a useful checklist of the delivery mechanisms needed, although there are others, as Link members have highlighted previously, such as local nature partnerships with appropriate rights and responsibilities. ERZs therefore represent only one of several local delivery options, including only one of several ecological restoration or landscape approaches, and in no way negate the need for other conservation efforts elsewhere. However, they should **represent those areas of England most urgently in need of such large scale activity to achieve our overall national aim of halting biodiversity loss and restoring ecosystems by 2020.**

The ERZ approach should be **built on locally-developed partnerships within locally-identified areas with locally-agreed objectives**. In keeping with the suggestion in the Making Space for Nature report, and Link’s views on the Natural Environment White Paper and England Biodiversity Strategy, the ecological network and ERZs should be **part of a national framework** to ensure quality, cost-effectiveness and the delivery of national priorities.

As recommended in the Making Space for Nature report, we need strong leadership from government alongside greater stakeholder collaboration, to ensure better integration and improved effectiveness of delivery mechanisms (e.g. Water Framework Directive implementation, the planning process), if we are to deliver England’s ecological network. In the case of ERZs, government’s role includes ensuring the **implementation of all Making Space for Nature recommendations**, and **making available substantial and sustained**

² See Making Space for Nature report pages viii/ix, 68, 71, 72 for fuller explanation/definition of ERZs

national resources to support local delivery. National Government funding for the ERZ programme cannot be the sum total of resources or support made available at this level for the natural environment; there remains an urgent need to better deploy other sources of funding (such as those available to the Forestry Commission and Environment Agency), and to draw in new sources of funding.

The **establishment of criteria and final decision-making on ERZs should occur at national level** to enable assessment against the national framework and the deployment of national resources.

A successful system for establishing Ecological Restoration Zones

We support a system for establishing ERZs that:

1. Aims to deliver national restoration ambitions for the purpose of securing the conservation status of our most vulnerable wildlife (Section 41 species and habitats) alongside the co-delivery of ecosystem processes, ecosystem services and access for people where appropriate, within ecologically sound landscape units.
2. Is led by Defra and takes place within areas put forward by local consortia composed of NGOs, statutory agencies, local authorities, local businesses, landowners and individuals; who are assessed against a set of national criteria, where:
 - a. The national criteria are established by the England Biodiversity Group³ (EBG), and relate to the delivery of (1) above, consistent with the approach set out in the Lawton Review. The criteria should seek to ensure the outcomes from these ERZs will make significant progress towards achieving the 2020 global agreement to halt biodiversity loss and restore ecosystems, and that the consortia are best able at this time to achieve results.
 - b. The assessment of ERZ applications is undertaken by an expert panel, chaired by Defra, and reporting to EBG, composed of funding bodies, NE, EA, FC, nature NGOs, and representatives of the land owning and managing communities.
 - c. The panel should aim to approve at least 12 ERZs over 3 years (see 9 below), as recommended by Sir John Lawton
3. Is supported by place-based natural environment information, formed by integrating local and national data sources to enable local consortia to set their objectives in a national context. National Character Areas (subject to these being improved e.g. to fully reflect the importance of priority species and habitats) could be used as a spatial framework for administering this, led by Natural England and supported by the planning process. Wildlife and natural processes do not respect administrative boundaries so ERZs will need to be identified at a strategic scale, and could cross boundaries.

³ Assuming the EBG retains its current form and function – if this changes through the EBS review, it is important that the group establishing national criteria are embedded within the biodiversity process so that this delivery mechanism can be integrated with others, and that it contains NGO stakeholders.

4. Incorporates a requirement to monitor and report on progress toward local and national species and habitats ambitions at all spatial scales, through information systems managed by Natural England. These will allow conservation objectives to be both well articulated and their achievement monitored.
5. Recognises the validity of existing landscape scale schemes, and treats these equally. Any existing or emerging landscape scale scheme can become an ERZ and therefore receive national ERZ funding, as long as they meet the national criteria.
6. Facilitates the local integration of a range of delivery mechanisms, policies and funding which affect the way land is used and managed, to solve issues such as habitat fragmentation, water quality, flood risk management and species loss.
7. Provides ERZs with additional national funds toward delivery and provides support for implementation through better alignment of other statutory agency resources and programmes. It is important that national delivery funds are additional to existing sources so the ERZ process does not divert funding away from other national or local delivery.
8. Is recognised to be the first phase of a larger programme that will be informed and re-invigorated by a review after the initial first 3 years, There should follow further tranches of ERZs in 2014 and 2017, building on lessons learnt from the first tranche - this makes sense economically as the nations finances build over the coming years.
9. Inspires and focuses local action. A range of organisations and communities should be empowered to deliver within these areas and develop bottom-up solutions for national priorities.

**Wildlife and Countryside Link
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