

An invitation to shape the Nature of England

Executive summary of responses to the Discussion Document

Executive Summary

This report summarises the findings of the public response to *An Invitation to Shape the Nature of England*. This Discussion Document was an open invitation for individuals and organisations to submit views on how best to protect and enhance our natural environment and the services it provides. The themes identified in the responses we received will help inform the content of the Natural Environment White Paper, which will be published in spring 2011.

Over 950 responses were received from individuals and organisations. In addition, there were over 5000 responses submitted in support for campaigns run by several organisations. Defra would like to thank all those that took the time to contact us with their views during the consultation period.

“We must rise to the task facing our generation, not leave it to those that come after us.” (Individual)

The Challenges and Ambitions

The Discussion Document outlined a vision and ambition for what was to be achieved through a Natural Environment White Paper. There was near unanimous support for this vision and widespread expressions of support for both the timeliness and need for such a policy statement, recognising that it had been twenty years since such a White Paper had been produced.

The responses largely concurred with the key challenges that had been identified in the Discussion Document – those of climate change, demographic change and the cumulative effect of a range of incremental impacts. However, respondents also identified a range of other ambitions. Halting biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation was one of the most prevalent issues in the responses, with the fragmentation of the natural environment identified as a key element of this. The need to understand and work within environmental limits and the importance of

environmental tipping points was also raised as an important concern. The concept of natural value and recognising the value of ecosystem services was a key issue.

“...the recognition that there are multiple small-scale drivers and impacts that operate incrementally is welcome: the challenge will be to develop coherent scientific expression and policy responses.” (A major national Museum)

Our lifestyles, unsustainable consumption patterns, and the resulting pressures on land and ecosystem services were cited as key challenges. In this context there were many references to the ‘perfect storm’ of energy, food availability and security which was frequently linked to the issue of resource depletion.

“One of the hardest things for any government to address I feel is...our need for the newest gadget, car, clothes etc etc. Unless this is addressed then the planet will continue to be over burdened.” (Individual)

Several other discrete challenges were identified. Most notable were the risk and impact of invasive non-native species, recognition of the importance of geodiversity and pollution, and the challenge of delivering our existing commitments under international agreements. Ensuring the environmental sensitivity of global economics and trading patterns was also identified as an important challenge.

A large number of respondents commented on the barriers to delivering on the ambitions that may be outlined in the forthcoming White Paper. One of the key issues was the perceived lack of engagement with, and understanding of, natural environment issues by both society and decision makers. There was a feeling that this was exacerbated by a perceived disconnect between people and the natural environment which meant there was an unwillingness to make the decisions and behavioural changes necessary to make significant progress in the way we protect and enhance our natural environment.

“There appears to be an increasing disconnect in a growing proportion of society between lifestyle choices and the environment upon which we rely. One of the best mechanisms for stimulating a positive attitude to nature is to increase understanding of it and its true value to the community.” (A County Council)

Many respondents also felt that there was a lack of coherence in the way that current environmental policies were delivered, with views given about the fragmented nature of current structures. A considerable number of responses highlighted concerns about funding and challenges related to short-term thinking and policy making.

Achieving Change

Overall, respondents were keen to see a strategic approach which was long-term and holistic, and that dealt with the causes rather than symptoms of the problems facing the natural environment. Many responses indicated that the strategy should be underpinned by a roadmap or plan of action that would include a set of measurable outcomes or targets.

“A strong framework is needed that provides a consistent message across different geographic levels... visions and plans, would provide the evidence base and measurable outcomes against which to assess progress and success.” (A national Biodiversity NGO)

To complement the ambitions, a range of delivery mechanisms and levers were identified in the responses. A large number of respondents felt that regulation was an important tool in achieving change. This was particularly so in the sphere of biodiversity protection and designations. There were also a large number of comments regarding the spatial planning system. There were calls for a national strategic and spatial planning framework, together with improved guidance and direction, in particular to ensure that biodiversity was given a higher priority within the planning process.

The use of incentives and funding to support the natural environment received significant comment. Many respondents commented on how change could best be achieved with public funding and there was support for continued funding of agri-environment schemes. There was a widespread feeling that there needed to be better valuation of the ecosystem services that the natural environment provides and that this value should be properly reflected in the cost of goods, services and activities. Mechanisms such as Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and the Polluter Pays Principle were often cited as being important, as were green taxation and the establishment of environmental markets, including offsetting, to address areas of market failure.

“Until society is ‘charged’ with the true ecological cost of our activities on the planet people as individual ‘consumers’ will continue to give the health of the planet a lower priority than their own well being and status when making their individual purchasing choices; until companies are ‘charged’ with the true cost of the environmental impacts of their businesses’ they will continue to prioritise dividends to shareholders and profit to owners.” (Individual)

The importance of having a firm and complete evidence base was highlighted by many. Respondents were also keen on having better and more effective communication on natural environment issues. The latter was particularly seen as important in relation to concerns that there needed to be a greater emphasis on educating and informing society about the natural environment, and ensuring people had sufficient access and exposure to it. It was recognised that this was crucial if there was to be greater involvement of volunteers in delivering objectives for the natural environment. Whilst there was support for greater voluntary and community involvement, concern was also aired about how much additional work the voluntary sector would need to pick up and how this might be funded, and supported with appropriate advice and guidance. Responses also highlighted the breadth of work already undertaken by volunteers and expressed enthusiasm for the expansion of volunteering.

“Voluntary input and engagement requires investment in time and money, and can only be properly achieved by recognising that volunteers are more than unsalaried workers and that their commitment adds significantly to the quality of work we are able to deliver. There is a strong case for strengthening and supporting the NGO and charity sector to enable us to do this even more and even better.”(A local wildlife charity)

Finally, respondents commented on the way we should work. The need for improved partnership working across Government at central and local levels, and with communities, was highlighted by many. Respondents were concerned that partnerships should involve all the relevant actors and that action should take place at the best scale to achieve the desired outcome – whether this was at a landscape or catchment scale or at local or community level.

“Partnerships are also key in developing and promoting best practice, avoiding duplication, co-ordinating priority delivery from national to local levels, and increasing efficacy.” (A county-level Biodiversity Partnership)

Defining Success and Monitoring Progress

The Discussion Document asked respondents how we could best define success and track progress. It became clear from the responses that there was no single

approach or idea that stood out for agreeing and measuring common goals. This was due to the complexity and uniqueness of different situations and the diverse cross-section of stakeholders that replied. However, there were calls for an overarching strategy and measurable targets where appropriate. To support this, there were calls for a consistent framework of approaches and techniques, which had some measure of flexibility at a local level. Additionally, there was recognition that there were many targets which came from European and international obligations, but respondents thought there was merit in interpreting such targets at a regional or local level where feasible.

Doing things better or differently

A number of questions in the Discussion Document invited views on what currently worked well and what could be done better or differently. The existing suite of agri-environment schemes was widely commented on as good practice and respondents were keen on seeing these developed further. The issue of designations was also frequently mentioned and the majority of responses which mentioned this issue took the view that although the existing designation framework has protected key sites reasonably well, there was widespread concurrence with the findings and recommendations contained in the review *Making Space for Nature*.

“When agri-environment schemes work properly i.e. when they ensure the right land management options are taken up in the right places and at the right scale they constitute one of the most effective tools for delivering environmental benefits” (A national NGO)

“The Lawton Report contains many recommendations and appropriate recognition of this valuable piece of work should be made in the white paper” (A County Council)

On the issues of regulation and planning controls, there was widespread agreement that a process of consolidation and simplification was necessary. Views were expressed that the range of differing regulations needed to be aligned to make it easier to deliver goals and to ensure that duplication of effort did not take place. On the planning system, a substantial number of respondents argued that it needed to deliver more for the natural environment.

Respondents recognised the role of the Big Society in policy making and that this played an important role in how we might do things differently in the future. It was noted that the voluntary sector already played a significant role in supporting communities and in delivering key natural environment objectives. The use of green spaces and green infrastructure were seen as issues which might appeal to the Big Society and enable a wide variety of people to engage with natural environment issues. Concerns were raised about ensuring appropriate funding for Big Society actions and ensuring people had the right skills to play an effective role.

“Community groups, volunteers and other types of local engagement already play a vital role in recording, monitoring and looking after the natural environment. Many people contribute significant chunks of their time each year, either through local ‘friends’ groups, national charities or volunteering and membership organisations. This must be encouraged and supported with the best use made of local talents and skills.” (A County Council)

There were views which highlighted the importance of working at the right scale and establishing the right partnerships. There was recognition that there were good examples of stakeholders working together to deliver on objectives. Respondents stressed that there needed to be effective coordination across administrative boundaries and the involvement of relevant stakeholders. Many respondents indicated that whilst Government should set the overarching strategic direction, those on the ground were best placed to deliver. It was felt there was a need for greater join-up between central government, local government and local communities and also greater cooperation between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

“Government should therefore consider placing a duty on local authorities to work in partnership with neighbouring authorities and other partners and organisations, and incentivising land managers to work together to delivery across their boundaries.” (A national Wildlife charity)

“The natural environment must form an integral part of a broader, long term vision of our way of life. Local groups need to work together with local councils to provide a healthy, natural environment as the basis of a sustainable future world.” (Individual)

The International Dimension

The Discussion Document recognised that the actions and behaviours we take in England often have a footprint overseas. At the same time, many policies and targets are set at an International or European level. Those that responded to these questions argued for substantial reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy. There was clear agreement that the decline in global biodiversity must be reversed and one campaign referred to the special responsibility that the UK has for its overseas territories and the wealth of habitats and species found there. A large number of respondents put emphasis on the role of the UK as a leader on the environmental agenda. Many saw the UK's efforts on climate change as an example of good practice that should be maintained and extended into a number of other areas. In terms of reducing our impact overseas, there were strong messages about changing consumption patterns, reducing waste and adopting a more sustainable lifestyle, with many suggesting an emphasis on domestic production.

“The UK does have a host of good practice that it needs to disseminate at the EU and international level. We need to be a facilitator for joint research programmes...”
(Individual)

Priorities

The Discussion Document asked respondents to indicate what their number one priority for the environment would be. There was a vast range of ideas, however over a quarter of respondents recommended some form of action in relation to biodiversity. The majority of the remaining responses addressed specific mechanisms, in particular giving their ideas on agri-environment schemes, improving environmental awareness and education, enforcing aspects of environmental law, and developing new supporting legislation.

Campaigns

In response to the Discussion Document, a number of organisations launched email and letter-writing campaigns to encourage their members to share their views with us – largely on single issues of key concern. In total, over 5000 responses were received. The main issues that emerged in these campaigns were:

- A doubling of the size of England’s native woodland by 2050.
- A vision and roadmap to meet the EU target to halt the loss of biodiversity.
- Highlighting the value and importance of geodiversity in underpinning the natural environment
- Improved countryside access for horse riders

Conclusion

Defra would like to reiterate its appreciation for the responses received and the time so many took to contribute their views and opinions in response to the Discussion Document *An Invitation to Shape the Nature of England*.

Responses have identified a range of challenges facing the natural environment and identified a number of ideas on how to achieve the ambitions that people and organisations have.

We look forward to publishing a Natural Environment White Paper in spring 2011.