

# 'Help Shape the Nature of England'

Executive Summary of Responses to the Short Online Survey

January 2011

## Executive Summary

On 26<sup>th</sup> July 2010, the Secretary of State for Defra, Caroline Spelman, announced a programme of stakeholder engagement which was to feed into the policy development process for the Natural Environment White Paper, due to be published in Spring 2011. The programme was designed to involve a large number, and range, of interested individuals and organisations in the development of the first environmental White Paper in 20 years. The key components of this programme were a discussion document *An Invitation to Shape the Nature of England*<sup>1</sup>, to which formal responses were requested, and a short online survey, aimed at the general public. This executive summary presents the key findings from the short online survey and is complemented by longer, more detailed, analyses of both the short online survey and the longer discussion document available on the Defra website.

The short survey was accessible via the Defra website and was hosted by Survey Monkey<sup>2</sup>. It consisted of four questions, with free text boxes for responses. The four questions were:

1. **Which parts of the natural environment matter most to you?** (From plants in your town centre to the local beach, and from fish in our rivers to the quality of the air we breathe - what is important to you?)
2. **How do you feel you benefit from the natural environment?** (You could talk about the enjoyment of hearing birds in your street, or wider benefits like having fresh food to eat and a variety of plants and animals.)
3. **How do you think we could improve the natural environment?** (For example, should we create more green spaces in towns, give greater protection to plants and animals, or work to reduce pollution?)
4. **What would encourage you to get involved in protecting the natural environment?** (Are there any barriers stopping you get involved, like lack of time or money, or not hearing about local projects?)

We received a total of 8,629 responses, the majority of which were submitted electronically via the survey website, but we also received a large number of hard copy responses via Kent Wildlife Trust.

The survey was designed to provide an understanding of, and insights into, the range and depth of attitudes, values and ideas on this particular topic. The respondents were self selecting and involvement was driven by an interest in the issues raised so the views included in this report are not necessarily representative of the wider population in a statistical sense.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ww2.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)

## Key findings from Question 1: Which parts of the natural environment matter most to you?

The main themes in responses to Question 1 were:

- Many parts or all of it - everything is interconnected
- Wildlife and nature in general, and particular kinds of animals, birds, plants or flowers
- The countryside and landscapes
- Rivers and water
- Trees and woodland
- Wild places
- Natural environment in towns and cities, including parks and gardens
- Climate change

Overall, respondents covered a broad range of different parts of the environment that mattered most to them, as is demonstrated by the themes above.

Approximately half of all respondents to this question cited many aspects of the environment in their answer and around a quarter explicitly stated that the entire natural environment matters, or that they were unable to select a single part. These respondents highlighted that the environment functions as a system, where all aspects are inter-linked, hence their inability to select the part that mattered most. Some of these respondents also suggested that the prioritisation of specific parts of the environment, as requested by Question 1, was part of a wider problem with environmental policy.

*“For me all parts are important, from the small patch of waste ground that has glowed all summer with wild flowers; the fields and meadows that provide homes for birds and hares; the rivers and ponds where kingfishers feed and the skies above my house that are filled with insects, swifts, swallows and martins each summer - I cannot isolate just one part because as a whole the natural environment is interlinked”*

Of those that selected specific parts of the environment, many mentioned specific types of habitat (woodland, beaches etc), specific places (National Parks, nature reserves etc) or specific fauna (e.g. foxes, owls, butterflies etc).

In relation to specific types of habitat, woodland, rivers, beaches, green spaces in urban areas, and the countryside more generally, were among the places that mattered most to respondents.

*“When in tightly packed urbania, the greatest pleasure comes from native trees lining our streets. They provide a welcome visual alternative to brick, concrete and steel”*

Of those that discussed the importance of particular places that have special meaning for them, National Parks, local conservation areas, and familiar places in the county or area they live were popular selections.

A smaller number of responses highlighted a specific problem facing the natural environment in answer to Question 1, and invasive species, such as the Himalayan Balsam plant, the decline in farmland birds and climate change were all mentioned by a number of respondents.

Of the small number of respondents that mentioned climate change, almost all felt that it was a key issue which needs to be tackled if efforts in other areas of environmental policy are to succeed. This was a cross-cutting issue, mentioned in response to all four questions.

Overall, responses to Question 1 demonstrated that the natural environment is important to respondents for many reasons - habitats and biodiversity, a place for exercise and leisure and, for many people, a place to escape from the pressures of modern life - to relax and connect with nature. Many respondents wrote with great passion and eloquence about the parts of the environment that they most enjoy.

### **Key findings from Question 2: How do you feel you benefit from the natural environment?**

The responses to Question 2 were often very personal and passionate about the benefits respondents felt they received from nature. The main themes were:

- A wide range of benefits, with emphasis on the range rather than one singled out
- Benefits from seeing and hearing wildlife and nature
- Enjoyment and love of being in nature
- Importance of local natural environments
- Food, clean air and water
- Walking and exercise in the natural environment
- Health, well-being and relaxation
- Benefits from volunteering
- Benefits from engaging with the natural environment with others
- The economic or monetary value of the natural environment
- But also a sense that there aren't as many benefits as there were and concern for the future

Overall, around two-thirds of respondents to Question 2 explicitly stated that they received multiple benefits from the natural environment, and some pointed out the impossibility of providing a comprehensive answer.

*"The benefits that I get from the natural environment is a list that would take me years to complete ..."*

Of those that did discuss specific benefits, the experience of hearing birds was mentioned by 13% of all respondents and a similar proportion mentioned seeing or watching birds. 27.9% of all responses mentioned birds in some capacity.

Further, the experience of seeing many types of mammals, insects, reptiles and amphibians was discussed by a significant number of respondents, with butterflies, foxes and bees being the top fauna named specifically.

It was clear from many responses that a large number of people are passionate about the natural environment and the benefits it brings. Around a third of respondents explicitly indicated their enjoyment or love of being in the natural environment.

In terms of specific benefits provided by the environment, many respondents discussed how the environment provides the basics for life such as clean air, clean water and food. A strong theme in relation to food was 'local food', which was mentioned in around 3% of all responses.

In addition, many respondents also mentioned specific environments that provided them with benefits. Gardens were the environment mentioned by the largest number of respondents (11% of all respondents); followed by woods/woodland (5%). Parks were mentioned by 3% of all respondents, with many stressing the importance of urban managed habitats more generally.

Of those respondents that discussed beneficial activities that can be undertaken in the natural environment, walking was by far the most popular with 25.6% of responses including a reference. A large number of respondents also reported cycling and volunteering in the natural environment. Good physical health was a widely recognised benefit from these activities. Further, a large number of respondents reported mental health benefits, with references to peace, de-stressing and sanity all featuring. These responses demonstrated that a significant number of people depend on the natural environment to improve and maintain their health and well-being.

*“Being able to find relief from the pressure, noise and crowding of urban sprawl keeps me and many others sane in an otherwise hectic world. There are few places in this overcrowded isle where you can see the sky clear of light pollution or not hear the noise of modern life. Just being able to see the environment is enough to put the problems life gives us in the proper perspective”*

A small proportion of respondents put forward their views on valuing the benefits from the natural environment in economic or monetary terms. For example, a number of respondents emphasised that the natural environment underpins the economy, or provides a range of direct benefits to the economy. Some respondents explicitly advocated monetary valuation as a way of ensuring the natural environment is fully accounted for in decision-making. However, others were concerned about monetary approaches, arguing, for example, that the value of the natural environment cannot be fully represented in financial terms.

Lastly, a number of respondents felt that the number of benefits provided by the natural environment has declined during their lifetimes. For example, some highlighted a reduction in the numbers and/or varieties of wildlife that they had personally observed. Some respondents also emphasised their concern for their children’s/grandchildren’s future, and other future generations, who may not have the opportunities to experience the benefits of the natural world to the same extent as current generations.

Overall, responses to Question Two demonstrated that respondents are aware of, and passionate about, the wide range of benefits that the natural environment provides. These benefits were wide ranging, and respondents suggested that the natural environment not only sustained life, but provided other well-being, health and spiritual benefits. Further, many were concerned about protecting these benefits, showing the strength of enthusiasm for restoring and enhancing our natural environment.

### **Key findings from Question 3: How do you think we could improve the natural environment?**

Responses to this question were focused around a comparatively smaller number of key themes, including the importance to respondents of protecting wildlife and biodiversity, enhancing environmental education, establishing and enhancing green space in urban areas and making planning policy and farming more environmentally friendly.

Approximately half of respondents to Question 3 made a single suggestion for how the natural environment could be improved. The remaining half made two or more suggestions.

Overall, the suggestions made were focussed around the following themes:

- Strengthen protection for wildlife, species and habitats
- Lots of support for linking protected areas
- Improve the natural environment in urban areas
- Break down the barriers between urban areas/wider society and the natural environment
- Education and encouragement
- Development control and planning
- Farming and food issues
- Population

Around two fifths of respondents indicated that the natural environment could be improved by strengthening protection for wildlife, species and habitats.

In relation to achieving this protection and enhancing biodiversity, just under one fifth expressed support for the linking of existing wildlife sites to create 'green corridors' or 'wildlife networks'. It was felt these corridors would enable wildlife to move around freely, making species more robust through diversifying gene pools.

*“Our natural environment should be treated as a whole, not as a multitude of separate sites. Our nature reserves should be regarded as ‘Jewels in the Crown’ not ‘Oases in the Desert’: so linking them together with wildlife corridors to allow movement of wildlife is very important”*

Wildlife protection and corridors were discussed in relation to both rural and urban areas, and there were also many comments focussing on how the urban environment could be improved. A quarter of all respondents to Question 3 highlighted the importance of the natural environment in urban areas. Of those, over half suggested there should be more green spaces in urban areas. Many also suggested that existing urban green space should be protected and improved.

Continuing the urban theme, some respondents indicated that barriers between wider society and the natural environment need to be broken down, for example, by increasing opportunities to experience nature. For many respondents, one of the reasons to improve green space in urban areas is to enhance engagement with it, and understanding of it, as well as to provide benefits to people living in urban areas.

There were also strong links between the need to break down barriers and the theme of education, mentioned by around one in twelve respondents in some form. Some respondents saw education as crucial to improving the natural environment in the long term. Many of these specifically emphasised the importance of improving education for children and young people and emphasised the value of teaching about the natural environment in schools.

*“We have a duty to the world, the living organisms which inhabit it and ultimately to each other, to protect, conserve and enhance the natural environment. This starts with education. How are future, and current, generations supposed to help conserve a natural environment that they know little or nothing about? Re-establishing a link between people and the natural environment is the first step to teaching people to care for and respect nature”*

Around a quarter of all respondents to Question 3 highlighted planning issues in their response and recognised the importance of planning and development activity/control in protecting the natural environment. Approximately two thirds of those who highlighted

planning issues explicitly called for greater protection of the green belt, with limits on new development at such sites. In addition, there were many specific suggestions for how planning policy could be made more environmentally friendly.

In addition, farming was discussed by a significant number of respondents (approximately 20% of all those that responded to Question 3). There was significant support for an increase in local, small scale food production, as it was felt to have fewer environmental impacts. Further, around 40% of those who discussed farming emphasised the need for farmers to receive support and encouragement to farm in an environmentally sensitive way. Many respondents felt that farming could make an important contribution to the protection and enhancement of the environment and wildlife.

Lastly, a theme that was mentioned by a smaller number of respondents, but that had a clear and consistent message, was population growth. Of those who discussed this topic, many felt it was the key challenge facing the natural environment.

Overall, responses to Question 3 showed that respondents have a good knowledge of the natural environment and the pressures it faces, and have a large number of suggestions for how these could be addressed.

#### **Key findings from Question 4: What would encourage you to get involved in protecting the natural environment?**

The responses to Question 4 were focussed around the following themes:

- More time and money
- Support and information about local projects and opportunities
- Lots of people say they're already involved
- Ideas for extending and supporting the Big Society
- But also concern about the limits of the Big Society approach
- Government action and political will

Approximately a quarter of respondents to Question 4 indicated that lack of time was the main reason or one of the main reasons preventing them getting more involved in protecting the natural environment.

*"I would love to do more locally in terms of growing my own food or developing a city farm but working full time and raising a family tends to fill the available hours"*

Further, some people mentioned that a mismatch between their abilities and the time they have available was the reason for not becoming more involved. For example, even though they had time to take part in activities, they believed that the available opportunities would require a level of physical fitness or stamina that was beyond their abilities.

In addition, about a fifth of all respondents highlighted a lack of information about local projects and opportunities to get involved. Having access to local projects, close to home, was frequently mentioned as important. Some respondents found it difficult to travel to existing opportunities due to lack of transport, physical disability, illness or old age.

Respondents also suggested that receiving some recognition that the work they do is worthwhile encourages them to get more involved, as does seeing the difference that one's

efforts make. Some suggested ways of encouraging others, such as young people, to do more for the natural environment.

In addition to these suggestions for how to encourage involvement, many respondents said that they are already involved in helping to protect and enhance the natural environment. Around one sixth of respondents stated that they either support environmental charities financially, or are members of natural environment related charities or similar organisations.

Approximately a quarter of respondents stated that they are already involved in a variety of other ways, or stated that they are involved but did not indicate how. A significant number of respondents, around 10%, indicated that they volunteer at present for an environment charity or other environmental organisation, demonstrating the dedication of many people to our natural environment.

Further, a small number of respondents mentioned the Big Society explicitly. Some respondents suggested ways to foster the Big Society through making it easier for people to take part, such as through employer support, financial incentives and better information. Others expressed worries and scepticism about the limits of the Big Society approach.

*“In short a lot will need to be done in order to facilitate a shift to a ‘Big Society’ where the citizens participate: a culture of volunteering needs to be promoted, time needs to be made available, opportunities for citizens to get involved need to be ‘out in the open’, and community structures/NGOs need to be supported to coordinate these efforts (people’s time is valuable and they don’t want to have it wasted, or feel like their contribution was invaluable. Good coordination of these projects is essential)”*

Overall, respondents to Question 4 were keen to see leadership and increased commitment for protecting and enhancing the natural environment from central government, and many were keen to see increased government action. Respondents also emphasised the need for support and encouragement for local projects, and expressed worries about funding and impending spending cuts. Some respondents suggested that society should encourage and value volunteering to a greater extent.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, respondents to this survey submitted a wide range of views, comments and ideas illustrating how and why the natural environment is important to them, how they benefit from it, how we could improve our management of it, and what would encourage them and other people to get more involved.

Responses have shown the depth of enjoyment that people get from the natural environment, as well as the wide range of benefits people recognise and appreciate, from small things, to fundamental benefits that underpin quality of life. It is also clear that many respondents are deeply concerned about current management of the natural environment.

However, although there are numerous challenges, people offered a wide range of ideas for how these could be overcome to protect wildlife and the natural environment more effectively, and safeguard the natural world and its benefits for future generations.

Many respondents to the survey are already involved in helping to protect and enhance the natural environment. Although the survey has highlighted barriers to greater involvement such as lack of time, it is also evident that there are large numbers of people who would like to be involved or involved to a greater extent.

We have been surprised and pleased at the number of responses to the survey and would like to thank everyone who took the time to submit their comments and views. Responses to this survey and the longer discussion document are feeding into the policy development process for the Natural Environment White Paper, which we look forward to sharing with you in Spring 2011.