

A 50 YEAR VISION FOR THE WILDLIFE AND NATURAL HABITATS OF HERTFORDSHIRE

A Local Biodiversity Action Plan

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 WHAT IS BIODIVERSITY ?

"Biodiversity is all living things, from the tiny garden ant to the giant redwood tree. You will find biodiversity everywhere, in window boxes and wild woods, roadsides and rain forests, snow fields and sea shore"
(Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report, 1995).

Biological diversity (biodiversity) is the variety of life. Not only is it the whole range of plant and animal species but also the local variations found within these species.

Why is Biodiversity Important ?

The intricate network of ecosystems, habitats and species comprising biodiversity provides the support systems that sustain human existence. It provides many of the essentials of life - oxygen, water, food, clothing, health and relaxation. This value extends from the spiritual benefits to be gained from contact with nature, to the economic potential of wild species for new sources of food or medicines. The natural world enriches the quality of our lives through tourism, leisure and daily contact with wildlife. The wild ancestors of many of our major crops such as wheat and barley, provide genetic material which can provide resistance to crop diseases and help reduce the need for pesticides. Wetland habitats act as natural pollution filters, buffer the effects of flood and drought, and reduce soil erosion.

However, human activities continue to deplete biodiversity at an ever increasing rate. In the UK we have lost over 100 species this century, with many more in danger of disappearing, especially at the local level. This is ultimately against our own interests. Our future requirements are uncertain. If we continue to degrade what remains of our natural resources we will dangerously reduce the planet's capacity to support not only wildlife but also people. The maintenance of biodiversity is a key test of our ability to maintain a healthy natural environment and long-term sustainability.

1.2 THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

The Rio de Janeiro 'Earth Summit' in 1992 was, in part, a response to the growing awareness of the importance of the global environment and a wide recognition of the continuing loss and damage. The United Kingdom was one of over 150 countries from around the world which signed the Convention on Biological Diversity. With each country required to produce a plan of action, this now provides the basis for

international co-operation to maintain the world's biodiversity. Article 6a of the Convention requires signatory countries to:-

'develop national policies, plans or programmes for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity'.

The UK Government published a *UK Biodiversity Action Plan* in January 1994. Its stated aim is:

'to conserve and enhance biological diversity within the UK'.

At the launch of the Action Plan the Prime Minister announced that a Biodiversity Steering Group would be established. This group, with representatives drawn from key statutory and non-statutory organisations, would take the process forward. It published a detailed report, *Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report*, in December 1995. This report was subsequently endorsed by the Government and now sets the scene for future action.

The UK Steering Group Report

The report of the UK Biodiversity Steering Group sets out a detailed approach to conserving biodiversity in the United Kingdom. The report recognises that if biodiversity conservation is to be successfully implemented it requires a means of ensuring that actions are undertaken in an integrated manner. Key recommendations are as follows:

- * the production of national habitat and species action plans;
- * the establishment of a network of local records centres;
- * the production of local biodiversity action plans; and
- * the need to raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity conservation.

The Report includes draft national action plans for 14 key habitats and 116 of our most threatened species. It also proposes that a further 24 habitat action plans and 286 species action plans are prepared within 3 years. However, biodiversity action plans at the local level are seen as the means by which national targets can be transformed into effective action on the ground. Annex C of the Report, provided outline guidance of the production of Local Biodiversity Action Plans. More detailed guidance has now been produced in 4 Guidance Notes prepared by the UK Local Issues Advisory Group, on behalf of the Local Agenda 21 Steering Group and the UK Biodiversity Group.

1.3 A BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN FOR HERTFORDSHIRE

The Guidance for Local Biodiversity Action Plans - Guidance Note 1 sets out the functions of a Local Biodiversity Action Plan as:

- * To ensure that national targets for species and habitats, as specified in the UK Action Plan, are translated into effective action at the local level.
- * To identify targets for species and habitats appropriate to the local area, and reflecting the values of people locally.
- * To develop effective local partnerships to ensure that programmes for biodiversity conservation are maintained in the long-term.
- * To raise awareness of the need for biodiversity conservation in the local context.
- * To ensure that opportunities for conservation and enhancement of the whole biodiversity resource are fully considered.
- * To provide a basis for monitoring progress in biodiversity conservation, at both local and national level.

It is now necessary to put this into a Hertfordshire context. The Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust proposed the preparation of a Local Biodiversity Action Plan entitled *A 50 Year Vision for the Wildlife and Natural Habitats of Hertfordshire*. Following much discussion, this work was commissioned in early 1996 by the Hertfordshire Environmental Forum and the Hertfordshire Countryside Forum, with support from English Nature and The Environment Agency.

A “Biodiversity Focus Group” consisting of key partners from the above fora was established to oversee the production of the *50 Year Vision*, with the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust taking the leading role in writing the Plan and consulting amongst the key players.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE VISION

The process of developing a local plan involves several distinct elements. Analysis and evaluation of the nature conservation resource resulting in detailed proposals for action within a specified time-scale is clearly a major part of the process. In parallel with this is the development of an effective partnership with key players, particularly land managers, to identify appropriate delivery and funding mechanisms. A third component is monitoring of the effectiveness of the overall plan, including the extent to which targets are being achieved. **Underlying all of the above is the requirement for an adequate database at the local level, integrated with the national biodiversity database.**

A Local Biodiversity Action Plan is therefore both a product and a process. It is an ongoing process. The Guidance for Local Biodiversity Action Plans - Guidance Note 1 states “*there is no single model for production of Local Biodiversity Action Plans which has to be followed in detail,*” but the main components are included in the following agreed objectives for the *50 Year Vision*:

- a) To establish a plan partnership through identifying and consulting key partners in the process.
- b) To produce an overview of our present knowledge of the biodiversity resource in the county.
- c) To prepare a series of prioritised habitat action plans to guide work on protecting, restoring and re-creating a sustainable level of biodiversity in the county.
- d) Within each habitat action plan to identify detailed targets reflecting both national and local importance for the first ten years.
- e) To identify a list of priority species for the preparation of action plans. Concise target statements should be prepared for all chosen species.
- f) Within each habitat and species action plan to identify delivery mechanisms and sources of finance and advice.
- g) To publish the plan and implement the agreed programme of action.
- h) To establish a long term monitoring programme to measure the effectiveness of the Plan in achieving national and local targets.

1.5 RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PLANS

There are a variety of plans, programmes and strategies contributing to nature conservation in the UK. Local Biodiversity Action Plans must be integrated with these existing procedures. They offer a new approach to conservation in two major ways. Firstly, they provide a framework for long term conservation of biodiversity by identifying priorities for action with clearly defined targets, capable of being monitored. Secondly, effective implementation depends on forging new broad-based voluntary partnerships capable of delivering programmes of action and ensuring their delivery.

It is hoped that the Vision will provide a framework for all nature conservation activity within the county, in particular assisting local authorities in the preparation of their own strategies and linking with current thinking on sustainability in the County Structure Plan review. The relationship of this new approach to existing procedures is explored below.

Local Agenda 21

The conservation of biodiversity is a crucial aspect of sustainable development and therefore **Local Biodiversity Action Plans are an integral part of the Local Agenda 21 process**. The broad-based partnerships involved in developing programmes of action should be closely linked to the process of public participation, involvement and ownership developed by Agenda 21.

Statutory Development Plans

The statutory planning process requires that full account is taken of nature conservation, in accordance with the statutory framework for safeguarding habitats and species under domestic and international law. The requirements are set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note 9 (PPG9) on nature conservation.

Statutory development plans have a vital role to play in the protection and safeguard of important habitats and species. Planning authorities are required to identify all areas designated under relevant legislation (e.g. Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the Birds Directive (79/409/EEC), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the Habitats and Species Directive (92/43/EC) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981). Locally important non-statutory Wildlife Sites are also identified in Local Plans and policies relating to legally protected species also included.

Statutory development plans should also take a broader view of nature conservation than merely protecting important sites. Other land of conservation value and the provision of new habitats are also important. PPG9 states *“statutory and non-statutory sites, together with countryside features which provide wildlife corridors, links or stepping stones from one habitat to another, all help to form a network necessary to ensure the maintenance of the current range and diversity of our flora and fauna”*.

The development control process can secure management of conservation features through planning conditions and agreements. Government guidance makes it clear that nature conservation should be included in the surveys of local authority areas required under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. The Hertfordshire Habitat Survey fulfils this requirement.

Local Biodiversity Action Plans link to the statutory planning process in two ways. Information generated by the local biodiversity plans can provide detailed information for revision of development plans, for example, the identification of High Biodiversity Areas. In addition, the statutory planning process can make a major contribution to achievement of the Local Biodiversity Action Plan targets, through the mechanisms outlined above, and in particular through policies for site protection and enhancement and the creation of new habitats in appropriate locations.

Nature Conservation Strategies

Some local authorities have produced non-statutory Nature Conservation strategies which address a range of issues additional to those included in development plans, though sometimes they also serve as supplementary planning guidance.

Existing strategies include a description and evaluation of the wildlife resource, usually with a schedule of important wildlife sites. They also include policies for the protection and management of sites; policies to promote good practice, environmental education and community involvement and policies for the local authority itself to encourage beneficial management of its own land and “greening” of the activities of different departments.

There is therefore potential overlap between Local Biodiversity Action Plans and Nature Conservation Strategies. However, the target-led approach of the biodiversity plans results in more detailed analysis of the resource and so can improve existing strategies, as well as involving a wider range of partners which should benefit the long term effectiveness of the plan.

The Guidance for Local Biodiversity Action Plans - Guidance Note 3, recommends that *“future nature conservation strategies should be closely integrated with, and thereby benefit from, the Local Biodiversity Plan process and it may be, given time, that the latter process will supersede the more traditional nature conservation strategy approach in some areas. It will, however, be important for local authorities to include the range of policies currently included in Nature Conservation Strategies as part of such a combined approach.”*

County Strategies

The *50 Year Vision*, forms one component of a suite of strategies being developed for Hertfordshire, through the umbrella Hertfordshire Countryside Strategy. As such, all these strategies must fully integrate with each other, including the Landscape Strategy, Geology Strategy, Woodlands Strategy and Archaeology Strategy.

1.6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have contributed comments and ideas to this Action Plan, in particular colleagues in the Hertfordshire Environmental Records Centre, local authorities, nature conservation organisations, English Nature and the Environmental Agency, as well as a large number of individuals. A document such as this could not be put together without a great deal of co-operation and constructive criticism. The Trust wishes to thank everyone who has contributed and hopes that those involved are as enthusiastic in implementing the Action Plan.