

Site protection policy for A Living Landscape



Protected wildlife sites are the foundations of A Living Landscape



Woodwalton Fen, Cambridgeshire. A SSSI, National Nature Reserve and now part of the Great Fen Project which is reconnecting fragments of ancient fenland. (photo: David Rose)

How can site protection help create A Living Landscape?

For over fifty years we have been building up a suite of areas protected for wildlife – some with legal backing. These areas protect rare habitats like heaths, fens, raised bogs and ancient woodland, or internationally rare species, such as the bittern and the barbastelle bat. These are the ‘core’ areas for creating A Living Landscape.

The legal framework for protected sites began with the creation of National and Local Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)¹. The aim of SSSIs is to protect representative samples of our protected plants, animals and habitats. There are also 40,000 Local Wildlife Sites² across the UK. These have no direct legal protection but can still influence policies, such as planning and agricultural support. Some sites are also protected through European legislation such as the Habitats Directive, which requires Government to improve the ‘ecological coherence’ of protected sites. This can be achieved through managing landscape features which can connect them - including strategic networks of Local Wildlife Sites that provide corridors and ‘stepping stones’ for wildlife.

Oases for wildlife

Many protected areas were designated before the large-scale intensification of agriculture began. They now contain rare pockets of uncontaminated unfertilized soils harbouring rare and sensitive plants. (Nutrient rich soils favour a limited number of fast-growing plants which out-compete other species – see Fig 1) For example Woodwalton Fen in Cambridgeshire, a National Nature Reserve and SSSI, is home to around 6,000 species.

What do we propose?

- * **Maintain and value our current system** Maintain the integrity of the protected site system overall – it needs to be valued and safeguarded now more than ever with the onset of climate change.
- * **Better recognition and support for Local Sites** Governments should give greater recognition and value to Local Wildlife Sites by ensuring local authorities take a lead in identifying and selecting them and protecting them properly in local development plans. Their valuable range of functions needs to be better recognised. Ensure that financial resources for land management, including agricultural support, recognise the importance of Local Wildlife Sites in identifying where support (especially Pillar 2 payments) should be directed.
- * **Deliver ‘ecological coherence’** The Government should transpose Article 10 of the Habitats Directive and develop a suite of measures to deliver ecological coherence in the wider UK landscape.

An equivalent area of intensively farmed land might contain around 500 species. These areas receive protection, but remain vulnerable to threats such as climate change. They are the core areas from which plants and animals can recolonise other areas.

Local Wildlife Sites

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) can protect wildlife in both town and country but are still not sufficiently recognised by Government. Often as ecologically important as SSSIs, Local Wildlife Sites are

a key part of A Living Landscape and some may provide valuable access to greenspace for local communities.

In recent years, Governments in England, Scotland and Wales have demonstrated a growing appreciation of the value and significance of LWS. Common standards for their selection and management have been introduced and they now have greater recognition in planning guidance. In England, Local Sites have also been recognised as a measure of ‘improved local biodiversity’ in one of the 198 national indicators against which local authorities report to Government. Many authorities have enlisted help from local Wildlife Trusts. For example Essex Wildlife Trust has a service level agreement with Basildon District Council to monitor and assess the condition of Local Wildlife Sites (see Fig 2).

Their sheer number means Local Wildlife Sites have a vital strategic role to play within climate change adaptation and in delivering A Living Landscape. Collectively, they cover at least 2.5 per cent of the UK’s land area – roughly the size of Norfolk. This national network of stepping stones and corridors allows animals and plants to move through our towns and countryside.

1 In Northern Ireland, SSSIs are known as Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs)
2 Local Sites is the nationally recognised term in England, across the rest of the UK these sites are described as Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance (Northern Ireland), Local Biodiversity Sites (Scotland), Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (Wales) and Manx Wildlife Sites (Isle of Man).
3 State of The Natural Environment Report, Natural England, (2008)
4 The State of Norfolk’s Magical Meadows, Norfolk Wildlife Trust (2008)
5 established under Article 10 of the EU Habitats Directive

What are the barriers to Site Protection Policy delivering A Living Landscape?

Range of threats

In a recent report, Natural England³ stated that ‘Many of the surviving wildlife-rich sites form a small, isolated and fragmented resource’ with some species being ‘..more or less confined to protected sites, for example late spider and burnt orchids’. Over the last sixty years our natural environment and wildlife has been devastated by a wide range of sources including the intensification of land management, pollution, water abstraction infrastructure and built development.

Damage to our natural environment does not stop at the boundaries of our protected sites. For example, recent surveys in Norfolk showed that 69% of Local Wildlife Sites assessed were in poor or declining condition and only 5% of those visited were judged to be in good or excellent condition⁴.

Protection of these core sites is more important than ever, as wildlife needs to adapt and move in response to climate change. Management of protected sites may need to change, and their biodiversity may also change. To safeguard them, they may need enlarging, buffering and linking to other sites. The Habitats Directive concept of ‘ecological coherence’⁵ is a potentially important tool, but it has never been adequately transposed and implemented through UK law. Now is the time for this to happen.

Case studies



(photo: Les Binns)

Fig 1. Burnt orchid –

Burnt orchid is now largely confined to the unenriched soils of nature reserves.



(photo: Philip Precey)

Fig 2. Protecting Local Wildlife Sites in Essex –

Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT) run the Essex Wildlife Sites Project (EWSP). EWT maintain a register of all Local Wildlife Sites in Essex, liaise with landowners over their management and provide planning guidance to Local Authorities. Protecting this network of Local Wildlife Sites also maintains the links between fully protected sites such as SSSIs and nature reserves. For example the network of Local Wildlife Sites and SSSI’s around Canvey Wick support an important population of water voles.