



# Conservation 21

Natural England's Conservation Strategy  
for the 21st Century

[www.gov.uk/natural-england](http://www.gov.uk/natural-england)



As the Government's statutory adviser for the natural environment in England, Conservation 21 sets out how we will work to protect England's nature and landscapes for people to enjoy and for the services they provide, in support of Defra's ambitions for the environment.

**Front cover: Common Kingfisher with fish**  
© Natural England/Julian Dowse

In order to reverse biodiversity loss, sustain distinctive landscapes and enhance engagement with nature, we need a new approach. We need an approach that fits within the context of constrained public sector funding, and uses the post EU Referendum opportunities we now have to shape a path that will work best in our country.



**Bee orchid**  
© Natural England/Peter Wakely



Brown Hares © Natural England/Allan Drewitt

## Our conservation story

Environmental conservation in the UK has achieved much over the past 60 years. We have built up a vast body of knowledge about habitats, species and landscapes, through the combined efforts of conservation scientists, land managers and fishermen, and an army of conservation volunteers engaged by the world's most active group of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Our comprehensive legislative framework protects what is rare and special; we have developed incentives to support the management of important areas; and designated the 'jewels in the crown', a scatter of sites protected from damage through planning and management. The achievements have been significant, and essential to a sustainable future.

However, there is much more to do, and much about the current regime that can be improved.

Research shows that wildlife continues to decline and landscapes continue to be degraded. Surveys reveal people are less connected or involved with their local environment than ever before, and the environment is often presented as a constraint on economic development.

This is not an inevitable consequence of effective conservation practice. It reflects, in part, an *insular* approach to conservation – one based foremost on protection, and on conservation being separate to rather than integrated with other land uses. Conservation processes and practices, conceived to protect the environment, often no longer represent the most effective means of achieving real and lasting environmental outcomes. Instead, they can frequently alienate the very people we need to engage.



We need a new approach - a more useful way of looking at our relationship with nature.

Government's ambition, set out in Defra's strategy to 2020, is for England to be a great place to live, with a healthy natural environment on land and at sea that benefits people and the economy. It is committed to developing a long term plan for the environment. The EU Referendum decision provides an opportunity to consider a fresh long-term environmental vision, with effective tools and mechanisms tailored to the needs of our country designed to achieve it.

Conservation 21 sets out our thinking about what we need to do differently and how we need to work with others, to better deliver this shared ambition.

It brings together our own and others' experiences of what works and the latest science and evidence, with innovative approaches, new partnerships and different ways of thinking about nature and the vast array of benefits it provides.

Our strategy is based on three guiding principles:

- creating resilient landscapes and seas
- putting people at the heart of the environment
- growing natural capital

It is underpinned by our focus on the **outcomes approach** – delivering better long term outcomes for the environment by understanding people's interests and needs, and working towards a shared vision.

We will use our strategy to encourage a new conversation with partners. In a time of changed expectations about the role of the state and reduced public finances, we want to explore how we can work better together, to understand where further thinking and innovation is required, what long term policy and legislative framework is needed to underpin our work, and where there are opportunities to put better ways of working into practice.

We want to demonstrate that 21st century conservation is not about holding things back, but about moving things forward. We want conservation practice which reconnects people with their environment; restores and recovers ecosystems; and where a thriving economy with a rich and resilient natural environment is integral to everyday life, rather than fenced-off from it.

We will continue to develop our strategy through discussions with stakeholders and joint work to test and implement its recommendations, helping us contribute more to delivering government's long term ambition for the environment.



Embleton beach © Natural England/Steve Pullan

# Rethinking how we work

## 1. Creating resilient landscapes and seas

For all our achievements, the post war strategy of segmenting, ring fencing and protecting individual species and habitats has not done enough. We know that conservation of small 'islands' of habitat leads to long-term species loss. It's time for a new plan.

The first and most fundamental aspect of our strategy is to shift our focus to work at a much larger scale across land and sea.

Building on the Lawton report, Nature Improvement Areas and the approach taken in the marine sector, we will focus on long-term resilience. We need to understand the attributes of healthy, resilient landscapes and marine ecosystems - what is special and characteristic; what habitat diversity, patch size and connectivity is needed to build resilience; what are the likely long term impacts of climate change; what essential services does the environment provide; how are local communities engaged and what do they most value? Landscape scale conservation requires us to think, plan and deliver more broadly than at the site level.

**An ecosystems approach** – involving people, understanding how landscapes and seas work, and the goods and services they provide, in an integrated way - is vital.

We need to work with people and stakeholders to explore the best options to achieve resilient and healthy landscapes and seas. There will always be a range of perspectives and options, our aim should be to find the best one, not define the right one.



Working at a landscape scale involves taking a bold step away from trying to ‘achieve everything in every place’, and prioritising, both between areas and within areas. Our advisory effort will focus on enabling the big picture – the macro plan - not on delivering many micro plans. Our smaller-scale objectives will need to be considered within the context of our landscape-scale ambition - will they substantially contribute to a rich, healthy and resilient landscape / marine ecosystem, or are they more marginal?

Natural England’s role will be to ensure that plans are coherent and add up to a richer, more resilient environment. We will need to use all our existing delivery tools in a more *integrated* way to advise and enable local delivery of these plans. We can’t allow siloed pursuit of single objectives. This is a very significant change in the way we operate and our frame of reference.

High quality designated areas will be central to resilient landscape and ecosystems. They are a key component in establishing the large core area and networks that are the building blocks for resilience - providing refugia and stepping stones supporting adaptation to climate change, and for delivering wider ecosystem benefits. Our finest landscapes and the National Nature Reserves series already offer test beds for large scale integrated delivery, and provide diverse opportunities for public enjoyment and engagement with the natural environment.

Designation celebrates some of our most iconic, important and characteristic areas of land and sea. It is an important tool, but only one means of achieving environmental outcomes. Alongside looking afresh at how existing and new designations can deliver more for the environment, we want to modernise our approaches for gathering and using science and data; to remove unhelpful processes and “site –based” - rather than landscape scale - approaches that constrain us; and over time look at how we move away from the post war separation of areas for ecological study and conservation from areas for landscape and people to enjoy.

We want to ensure our actions help achieve diverse, abundant, accessible nature, not just focus on the rare and special. As part of this, we need to look again at how we can work better with farmers and the land management industry, building on examples of what works.

Tees England Coastal Path, nr Tees Transporter Bridge © Natural England



## 2. People at the heart of the environment

However hard we work, however intelligently we apply our insights, however efficiently we allocate our resources, we know we can't achieve our ambition by simply imposing and policing rules and regulations. We have to inspire people to create change - helping people recognise the relevance of the natural environment to their day to day lives and the choices they make, and inspiring them to be more imaginative and ambitious for the natural world around them.

Conservation 21 seeks to drive a fundamental change in mind-set, to make a healthy natural environment a central part of health, wealth and prosperity.

This starts with listening. We need to listen more to people's views, experiences and ambitions for their environment, recognising that these views have their own validity and are sometimes the solution to a conservation conundrum. We need to understand better what environmental features and services people want for *their* purposes, not just those that we think would be beneficial for them; and how people wish to access the natural environment. We need to understand how to align statutory conservation ambitions with the wider objectives of the people we depend on to achieve them in any given place. We need to become more fluent in other people's language.

**Putting people at the heart of the environment** applies at all levels. We will continue to build evidence and insight, build support with traditional and new key sectors and improve understanding amongst those who develop policy at a national level, informed by demonstration projects delivered at the local level. By understanding the future drivers for change in a place, we will be smarter at identifying and prioritising the partnerships and relationships we need to invest in, and the new tools and mechanisms required, so that the contribution of the natural environment is built into plans from the outset, not as an add-on down the line.

We will also challenge ourselves to see how we can increase the impact and relevance of our work in and around towns, cities and along the coast, where the majority of people live, work and visit.

Britain's environmental NGOs are skilled in inspiring people to be imaginative and ambitious for their natural environment. We need to support that interest, passing more power and responsibility to people on the ground. We believe environmental solutions should be developed and owned by the communities benefiting from and impacted by them. Instead of top down process, we will support innovation and the co-creation of ideas, encouraging local ownership and governance. Where this change will be most apparent within Natural England will be around our visible engagement in local partnerships, with our people working to co-create **shared plans for places**, rather than simply advocating our needs within them.

"Shared plans for places" reflects a combination of landscape scale working, co-creating solutions with other people, making the environment relevant to people's lives, and looking over the longer term. We will be creative in partnerships, on land and at sea, to identify opportunities, build agreement around large scale outcomes, collaborate over funds and funding mechanisms, and apply an ecosystem approach to work together to achieve landscape-scale environmental outcomes. The shift towards working at a landscape scale is ultimately dependent on our having the skills to be effective at this scale.

Change will also be evident in our customer relationships on the ground, where our ambition for securing environmental enhancement will move at a pace that endeavours to bring people with us through sustainable, long-term solutions, rather than imposing prescriptions to meet arbitrary delivery timelines.

To co-create shared plans we need to use our delivery levers in new ways - as conveners and enablers rather than enforcers. Better regulation will help others help themselves, and be focused on supporting



healthy local species populations and habitat networks, rather than on procedural compliance. Our work to develop a new strategic approach to Great Crested Newt licensing in Woking is a prime example, where our regulation is aligned with local ambitions, and serves to conserve species whilst enabling development.

### 3. Growing Natural Capital

The concept of natural capital is a powerful new tool that can help us all understand what we get from the natural world. It offers the potential to make environmental planning central to local and national decision-making: Local strategic plans can reflect investment in enhancing the natural capital of a place; investment that compromises natural capital may need to deliver suitable compensation, whilst investment that enhances it could benefit from different forms of incentive.

Our work and the language we use needs to engage with this new agenda. Rather than reflecting primarily on risk, we will look at how investment can *enhance* the environment and the benefits it provides to local communities. We will be working with change and looking for opportunities that come from it, rather than seeking to prevent it. We will demonstrate how landscape scale plans can serve economic and community needs through enhancing natural capital.

We will work with Government and others to develop the appropriate national policy framework, monitoring approaches and delivery tools to put the concept of natural capital into practice. We will also invest in more strategic schemes and work with national stakeholders and local planners to demonstrate the benefits – and limitations - of this approach, to the environment and to wider society. *Demonstration of added value* from a healthy natural environment will be core aspects of national evidence development and local focus area efforts.

Too often conservation practice has been based on ‘renting’ outcomes, rather than securing long term stewardship of our environmental assets. We will advise on how to better align long term investment decisions with regulatory standards, and secure public benefits through voluntary mechanisms such as conservation covenants. Getting the regulatory framework right, alongside inspiring, motivating and encouraging people to think long term, will help secure voluntary agreements, and incentivise investment.

**Great-crested newt** © Natural England/Peter Wakely







Boardwalk construction Tony's Patch LNR © Natural England/Peter Wakely

## Showing the way

We cannot deliver Conservation 21 alone. To achieve our ambition we need to work with people across the country; enabling, role-modelling, inspiring positive change and helping to coordinate activities at different levels. It requires a cultural change in how we work.

- We will embrace and drive change to secure positive environmental outcomes. This requires always exploring how change can add value, always looking to improve long term resilience, always using the outcomes approach. We will take ownership of shaping the future, and not be fixated on, or constrained by, the past.
- Culturally, we need to shift our minds to focus on creating and delivering against big opportunities, and move away from the routine of managing small risks. We will think long term and about the big picture, focusing on making places more resilient.
- We will encourage people to be more imaginative and ambitious for the natural world around them. By taking an approach based on trust and exploring solutions, we wish to change attitudes to environmental conservation that are at best negative and at worst positively damaging (such as developers frustrated by newts and bats or farmers who distrust designations). This starts with understanding people's motivations, recognising and rewarding positive action, exploring self-monitoring and reporting arrangements and using our knowledge to help develop shared outcomes.

- We will focus on where our work adds the greatest value. We will work with a wider range of organisations and sectors. We will consider where we can deliver better through others, where we can step back entirely, where we need to lead, advise and guide, bringing the best science and insight to bear. We will help organisations and individuals to work together and focus on shared plans and outcomes.
- Our focus on *places* means we, for the first time, are compelled to join up our delivery levers and really think about the best tools and mechanisms to use, to achieve multiple objectives.

Conservation 21 represents fundamental change in how our teams will be organised and what they will do. We already organise our local delivery work around the most important landscapes, or focus areas. We will set our objectives in these areas at a level and scale that enables and drives creativity and integration of our delivery work. We will use our regulatory levers more strategically, and therefore more sparingly at the site or scheme level. Our operational principles will mean we start from a position of trust in our partners. Our people will provide expertise and evidence, and rather than focus on enforcement, be skilled in working with partners, operating credibly at a senior level with business and planning sectors.

By focusing on a landscape scale, listening to people and taking them with us, and enhancing natural capital, we believe we can play our part in reversing the declines in biodiversity, and in 25 years, enjoy a healthier environment that delivers more for people and the economy.



**Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.**

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