A Joint Statement on Improving the Approach to Protected Areas in the UK

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Introduction

JNCC, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, NatureScot and Northern Ireland Environment Agency are putting substantial effort into considering how Protected Areas can be more effective in addressing the biodiversity and climate crises. Whilst nature conservation policy in the UK is devolved – with the different nations tailoring their approaches to meet their priorities – the nature conservation agencies across the UK are keen to articulate their shared thinking and take joint action where more impactful.

Building on the recommendations made in the Nature Positive publication[1], the purpose of this document is to set out their shared understanding of the principles for an improved Protected Areas network across the UK and to summarise the direction that all nations of the UK wish to take in this area. It recognises the burgeoning interest in Protected Areas and the commitments to improve Protected Areas in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and national biodiversity strategies. The statement applies to Protected Areas in terrestrial, freshwater and marine environments, some of which focus on protecting biodiversity, geoheritage and ecosystems, whilst also serving a range of additional purposes including amenity and landscape protection. They include *inter alia* Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), National Parks, National Scenic Areas, Sites/Areas of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs/ASSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar Sites[2].

Context

The nature conservation agencies across the UK strongly support the role of Protected Areas as a key conservation tool in halting and reversing nature's decline. However, challenges remain around the extent of protection, how effectively they are managed, and the overall effectiveness of the Protected Areas network. The impetus now is to ensure the Protected Areas approach is as effective as possible to help address the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change and the corresponding commitments of the UK and its constituent nations. In particular, the Biodiversity Targets agreed under the GBF that reflect a global re-commitment for effective Protected Areas, including a dedicated target to effectively conserve and manage 30% of land, inland water and sea by 2030[3].

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[1] Brotherton P., Anderson, H., Galbraith, C., Isaac, D., Lawton, J., Lewis, M., Mainwaring-Evans, T., McGuckin, S., Ormerod, S., Osowska, F., Sizeland, P., Stuart, E., Walmsley, C., Waters, R. & Wilkinson, S. (2021) Nature Positive 2030 – Evidence Report. JNCC, Peterborough. ISBN: 978-1- 86107-635-9. https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/6de7bf27-055e-4407-ad29-4814e1613d90#nature-positive-2030-evidence-report.pdf.

[2] For further information see https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/uk-protected-areas/.

[3] Convention on Biological Diversity, Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Target 3. https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets/3/.

In the UK, around 11% of terrestrial land and 38% of the marine environment currently fall within areas designated for the protection of biodiversity[4]. To meet the extent aspect of the GBF target in the terrestrial environment, the existing Protected Areas network will need to be expanded and/or Other Effective area-based Conservations Measures (OECMs) identified.

Effectiveness is an issue for both terrestrial and marine Protected Areas. The latest assessment for terrestrial Protected Areas shows around half are not in favourable condition[5]. Moreover, only 15% of UK Marine Protected Areas are reported to be achieving all of their conservation objectives[6]. This highlights the priority needed to put in place appropriate conservation management measures and detect conservation outcomes in a meaningful way.

In recent decades environmental pressures have increased (e.g. changes in land and sea use; direct exploitation of organisms; climate change; pollution; disruption to natural processes; and invasion of alien species[7]), with many impacting both Protected Areas and the wider environment. This has resulted in Protected Areas effectively becoming isolated in increasingly inhospitable surroundings. In the terrestrial environment, protected sites were originally set up to protect a representative sample of habitats, species, and geological and geomorphological features, including all of our most important natural heritage sites. However, environmental pressures such as climate change are increasingly making it harder for sites to maintain or restore their designated features and for small, isolated sites to remain effective. Building ecological resilience through the development of robust, functioning ecological networks is key. This should build off the current network of Protected Areas, improve the resilience of existing sites (e.g. by increasing their size and reducing threats), increase ecological connectivity between sites (e.g. by increasing conservation measures in the wider countryside), and consider anticipated changes in the distribution and abundance of designated features[8]. It is worth noting that in the marine environment, Protected Areas have been designated

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[4] UK Biodiversity Indicator C1 Protected Areas, Tables C1i and C1ii, March 2023. https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/ukbi-c1-protected-areas (NB: figures exclude areas covered by wider landscape designations).

[5] UK Biodiversity Indicator C1 Protected Areas, Figure C1ii, March 2023. https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/ukbi-c1-protected-areas (figure is for the area within ASSIs and SSSIs).

[6] Chaniotis, P., Cioffi, B., Farmer, R., Cornthwaite, A., Flavell, B. & Carr, H. 2018. Developing an ecologically-coherent and well-managed Marine Protected Area network in the United Kingdom: 10 years of reflection from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. Biodiversity, 19:1-2, 140-147. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14888386.2018.1467791.

[7] IPBES 2019. Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. E. S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (editors). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3831673.

[8] Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hilborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J., Tew, T.E., Varley, J., & Wynne, G.R. 2010. Making Space for Nature: A Review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network. Report to Defra.

more recently than in the terrestrial environment and are already generally much more extensive and considered in a network context. Across environments there is a strong desire to work together and share knowledge between the marine and terrestrial sectors.

There is already much valuable work ongoing across the UK. In the terrestrial environment, all four nations have started developing or implementing plans for nature networks as a key response to climate change adaptation. In the marine environment, the four nations are considering ways in which greater benefits can be delivered by the MPA network (e.g. evidence underpinning the role of MPAs as nature-based solutions in mitigating against the impacts of climate change). Additionally, the UK Government have designated three Highly Protected Marine Areas.

The nations of the UK have devolved responsibility for most aspects of the environment. However, they acknowledge that nature and pressures impacting on nature operate across national boundaries, and that working together and learning from each other is often both more efficient and effective than working alone. JNCC, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, NatureScot and Northern Ireland Environment Agency have agreed to the following common principles for how they wish to develop their approach to Protected Areas, to work towards their shared objective of addressing the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change.

Principles

The UK approach to Protected Areas should be:

1. Forward looking and adaptable

The UK approach to Protected Areas needs to reflect future challenges and opportunities. Adaptability will be key to ensuring Protected Areas deliver multiple benefits in addition to protecting nature. This may include careful consideration of different ways of responding to threats and pressures affecting Protected Areas, such as 'resist-accept-facilitate'[9] approaches, and the accompanying legal and policy framework.

2. Ecologically effective

To ensure ecological effectiveness of Protected Areas and the network as a whole attention should be given to multiple factors, including appropriate management, condition, connectivity, diversity, extent/scale, function, natural processes, restoration of degraded areas, and the need for long term protection.

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[9] Thomas, C.D., Hill, J.K., Ward, C. and Hatfield, J.H. 2022. Facilitating dynamic and inclusive biodiversity conservation in Britain: An Anthropocene perspective. Natural England Commissioned Report 413, Natural England. https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5480664618237952.

3. Evidence-based

The approach to Protected Areas should be underpinned by a strong evidence base. This should include making the most of existing data and obtaining new evidence. In seeking new evidence, the most should be made of opportunities, such as embracing technological developments that could better inform the management, monitoring and design of protected areas.

4. Valued and resourced

Sufficient well-directed resource is required to ensure a well-functioning, adequately monitored and managed Protected Areas network, recognising the high value afforded by Protected Areas through their multiple societal and environmental benefits. The role that Protected Areas play in sustaining our environment, economy and quality of life should be understood and appreciated across society, transcending political, geographic and cultural divisions. Investment in Protected Areas will require innovative financing solutions in addition to public finance.

5. Developed collaboratively

Collaboration is needed to develop the approach to protected areas in both terrestrial and marine environments. This includes sharing knowledge, experience, perspectives and (where appropriate) joint working. Collaboration is needed across the UK and internationally; it should involve a range of stakeholders, including industry, communities and NGOs, as well as nature conservation agencies.

6. Integrated across policy areas

Action to support the Protected Areas network needs to be integrated with wider policies and legislation, environmental targets and conservation mechanisms in the wider environment, for example restoration and land use initiatives. To maximise benefits in an efficient manner, it is important that Protected Areas deliver for climate change, people and nature, and that the impact of other policy areas (e.g. economic, social, climate change) on Protected Areas and nature is taken on board.

7. Globally responsible

Action to improve the UK Protected Area network should meet international commitments and consider wider international implications, such as indirect impacts linked to land use change and ‘offshoring’ production of commodities.