

THE FUTURE OF SCOTLAND'S BIODIVERSITY: A DISCUSSION FORUM SUMMARY

Actions Captured

The discussion forum organised by the Royal Society of Edinburgh and Scottish Environment LINK highlighted a number of future actions that could help Scotland and its people to conserve their internationally important biodiversity for future generations. These were:

- *Assess and produce data necessary to track biodiversity change over time.*
- *Encourage and where necessary challenge the Scottish Government and Scotland's politicians to mainstream biodiversity in their work.*
- *Agree a shared message about biodiversity and use it to promote biodiversity and its conservation more widely.*
- *Increase public awareness of, and participation in, biodiversity conservation.*
- *Increase an understanding in the Scottish population of the value of ecosystem services.*
- *Support the 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity and its new delivery structures in order to maximise current opportunities to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2020.*

Discussion Summary

- 1 In collaboration with Scottish Environment LINK, the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) hosted a Chatham House rule discussion forum on the *Future of Scotland's Biodiversity* on 19 June 2013. This was an opportunity to discuss the value and importance of mainstreaming biodiversity in policy making; how we in Scotland deliver for biodiversity, and the opportunities and challenges this presents. The Scottish Government strategy, *The 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity*¹, provided a context in which to frame the discussion.
- 2 The 2020 Challenge is Scotland's response to the *Aichi Targets (2010)* and the EU's *Biodiversity Strategy for 2020 (2011)*. It provides an opportunity to put a healthy environment at the centre of Scottish life.

It aims to:

- Protect and restore biodiversity on land and in our seas, and to support healthier ecosystems.
 - Connect people with the natural world, for their health and wellbeing and to involve them more in decisions about their environment.
 - Maximise the benefits for Scotland of a diverse natural environment and the services it provides, contributing to sustainable economic growth.
- 3 The strategy document makes the case for the protection of ecosystems and sets out an ecosystem approach to planning and decision-making in the sustainable management of Scotland's land and seas. It acknowledges that more needs to be done to protect species and habitats and outlines indicators to measure progress. It recognises the importance of Scotland's natural assets and the health, wellbeing and education benefits provided by the natural environment.
 - 4 The following represents a summary of the key themes and points discussed at the meeting.

Trends, data, and the communication of uncertainty

- 5 It was noted that biodiversity loss in Scotland has been slowed in recent years where targeted action has been applied. However, it was acknowledged that Scotland's biodiversity indicators, the condition of notified habitats and species on protected areas, and progress towards meeting Scotland's biodiversity targets demonstrate that biodiversity loss has not yet been halted and will require renewed and sustained effort over a longer period. While the focus is on biodiversity in Scotland, it will be important to consider the global context and the contribution that Scotland can make to environmental stewardship at this level.

¹ 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity - A Strategy for the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in Scotland; Scottish Government; 19 June 2013 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/06/5538>

- 6 In relation to biodiversity trends, a question arose as to whether sufficient data are being collected to improve understanding and whether the analysis of such data is communicated as effectively as it could be. It was recognised that ecological communities are very dynamic and there is a need to recognise and plan for natural variation. There is a need to develop appropriate metrics that capture this natural variation and find better ways of communicating these patterns, and the uncertainty involved.
- 7 It was suggested that the public is not aware of the loss of biodiversity in Scotland and the implications this could have for the essential services that a healthy natural environment provides. This demonstrates the need for these issues to be communicated in ways that the public can understand. The challenges associated with conveying complex metrics and the concepts of uncertainty and probability need to be overcome.

Political commitment to biodiversity

- 8 In order to mainstream biodiversity it will be important to ensure that it is prominent within the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. The publication of the *2020 Challenge*, supported by the Scottish Cabinet, provides for leadership on biodiversity. This will be important in terms of securing buy-in from those operating at other levels who have responsibilities for delivering biodiversity-related objectives.
- 9 However, the focus on short-term imperatives as determined by parliamentary life-cycles was identified as being a barrier to embedding biodiversity considerations into long-term policy making. Against this backdrop, the expertise and knowledge that resides in government departments, its agencies, the NGOs and wider constituencies, offer a means of driving the longer-term agenda for securing Scotland's biodiversity. However, this needs to be more effectively harnessed to build greater collective advocacy that can influence biodiversity-related policy development and delivery.
- 10 In terms of the development of structures for mainstreaming biodiversity, it was recognised that at the UK level the Natural Capital Committee was established in 2012. This operates as an independent advisory body to the UK Government on how the natural environment affects the performance of the economy and individual wellbeing. It was noted that in April 2013, National Resources Wales was created out of the Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Agency Wales and Forestry Commission Wales, to integrate the stewardship of natural resources and the environment. While these represent relatively new developments, they could be monitored with a view to determining whether there are positive and/or negative lessons to consider for Scotland.

The need to develop a shared vision for the future of Scotland's biodiversity

- 11 It was commented that compared to other areas of public policy, there is not a shared vision for Scotland's biodiversity. This can act as a brake on efforts to mainstream biodiversity. Concern was expressed that entrenched positions taken up by some of those operating in the rural affairs and environment arena is not conducive to engendering public and political support – if those within the sector cannot articulate a shared view of priorities and actions required, then how can they expect to influence public and political opinion.
- 12 In order to deliver change it will be crucial to build consensus and collaboration between the sectors and resolve conflicts. Mechanisms need to be developed that make connections between the various constituencies and it should be explored whether greater use can be made of mediation services. It is essential that business and industry are brought into discussions. A new culture of enhanced co-production that includes agriculture, food & drink, forestry and other ecosystem services needs to be developed. Without an effective framework that can identify potential synergy of use, biodiversity priorities will not be realised.
- 13 The comments made in paragraphs 11 & 12 make clear the need for a shared vision for biodiversity that transcends society. To date, the perception is that the biodiversity agenda has primarily been set by those with formal responsibilities, and that it has been too narrowly drawn, particularly the focus on species and habitats. Civic society needs to be engaged if biodiversity is to be mainstreamed. Greater public awareness and crucially, participation, in this debate provides an opportunity to open up the political space required if biodiversity is to be embedded in public policy.

Delivering the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy

- 14 If a shared vision for the natural environment and biodiversity is to be developed, there is a need to communicate the principles that underpin the *2020 Challenge* strategy document. The public have to perceive biodiversity integrity as being real, visible and important to them. Processes of engagement that engender public debate and harness enthusiasm need to be developed. It will be important to ensure that the debate does not become preoccupied with matters of definition and terminology.

15 An important facet of this will be empowering people so that they can make decisions and take actions. The *2020 Challenge* sets out many laudable aspirations and a crucial next step will be to translate how they will be delivered within the frame of clear objectives. The Scottish Government has recently set out the proposed approach for delivering the *2020 Challenge*². This includes the creation of a Delivery and Monitoring Group which will be responsible for driving delivery of outcomes and key steps, and monitoring progress towards meeting these. A key element is the plan to formulate **D**elivery Agreements which commit action across Government, agencies and other bodies.

Urban populations

16 Given that the majority of the Scottish population lives in urban areas, there are opportunities to make biodiversity more visible in urban settings. This is also a way of demonstrating that biodiversity is not the preserve of rural areas and protected places, but relates to the daily lives of everyone in society.

Actions to promote biodiversity need not cost a lot as there are opportunities to draw upon existing good will. It was acknowledged that community management groups operate throughout Scotland and that these could be more imaginatively used in the stewardship of green space in urban areas. It was recognised that Scottish planning policy and the National Planning Framework provide for urban green space and green networks, while Greenspace Scotland works with a wide range of local and national partners to support the planning, development and sustainable management of green spaces and green networks in towns and cities. The Woodlands In and Around Towns Challenge Fund has helped to bring neglected urban woodland into active management and to create new woodlands.

17 There are also opportunities to integrate biodiversity priorities with those related to health and quality of life. For example, the involvement of health care professionals in the delivery of biodiversity outcomes and ensuring that biodiversity is embedded within the preventative spend agenda. This would also help provide a focus on the longer term agenda.

² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00436903.pdf>

Additional Information

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Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment organisations. Its over 30 member bodies represent a wide range of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

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