

**Response to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee  
The Natural Environment White Paper**

**The British Ecological Society**

“advancing ecology and making it count”

**June 2011**

**About the British Ecological Society**

The British Ecological Society (BES) is the oldest learned ecological society in the world, due to celebrate its centenary in 2013. Our members, numbering close to 4,000, are drawn from the full spectrum of ecological research; reflected in the specialist groups within the Society on a variety of ecological research streams, including forest, freshwater, tropical, agricultural, aquatic and conservation ecology. For further information about the Society’s work, visit our website, at [www.britishecologicalsociety.org](http://www.britishecologicalsociety.org).

**Response (498 words)**

**1 The BES welcomes:**

- 1.1 The stated aims, outlined in the introduction, to create a resilient ecological network across England; to move from ‘net loss’ of biodiversity to ‘net gain’; to support healthy, well-functioning ecosystems and coherent ecological networks.
- 1.2 The announcement to establish 12 Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs), building on the recommendations of the Lawton Review of England’s protected area network, along with funding of £7.5 million to support a national competition to select sites.
- 1.3 Plans to establish Local Nature Partnerships, working across administrative boundaries to take landscape-scale action for issues including biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services, supported by an initial fund of £1 million.
- 1.4 Plans for the full inclusion of natural capital in national accounts, and the establishment of a Natural Capital Committee, reporting to the Economic Affairs Cabinet Committee in HM Treasury. This should include ecologists alongside economists.
- 1.5 Establishment of the Ecosystems Knowledge Network, run by an independent organisation and sharing learning and good practice with respect to ecosystem management. The BES is a partner in a similar project: the Natural Capital Initiative<sup>1</sup>.

**2 The following should be improved:**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.naturalcapitalinitiative.org.uk>.

2.1 Detail about how the Government's planning reforms will 'enable development to enhance natural networks' (p3). The National Planning Policy Framework must show how the planning system will deliver on the commitments outlined in the Paper. We remain concerned that the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies and the emphasis on neighbourhood-level decisions will prevent landscape-scale planning, whilst the presumption towards sustainable development (p21) will result in the environment receiving little attention.

3 Omissions to be rectified are:

3.1 The 12 NIAs will be 'initial' sites: additional information is needed regarding the Government's longer-term ambitions for the development and roll-out of NIAs across England. A long-term strategy to leverage the £0.6 – 1.1 billion annual costs of establishing a coherent and resilient ecological network, estimated by the Lawton Review, is also needed.

3.2 The management objectives for NIAs are not detailed in the White Paper. Clarity is needed on whether these will be as envisaged in the Lawton Review for Ecological Restoration Zones; areas where significant enhancement of the ecological network over a large scale would be achieved by enlarging and enhancing existing wildlife sites, improving the ecological connectivity between sites and/or creating new wildlife sites. Underpinning ecosystem services would be restored and pressure upon wildlife sites reduced by better integrating the surrounding land-use with the management of the ecological network.

3.3 Recognition of the importance of soils more broadly, not just peatlands, which make up a small percentage of England's landscape. Greater soil science research is needed to provide the data necessary to underpin catchment-level decision-making.

3.4 The current review of all 278 environmental regulations as part of the Red Tape Challenge seems incompatible with the Government's ambition to protect and improve the natural environment. We would welcome assurance from Government that a proportionate and evidence-based approach will be taken to reviewing environmental regulation, alongside a formal period of consultation with relevant stakeholders.

**Suggestions for inclusion within the terms of reference of a future inquiry**

- 1 The Natural Environment White Paper focuses on England only. How will the Government work with counterparts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to ensure a joined-up approach to management of the natural environment? This should include consideration of how England can benefit from lessons learned in the devolved administrations – for example, the implementation of the Natural Environment Framework in Wales.
- 2 A survey by the Association of Local Government Ecologists (ALGE) suggests that 46% of 'Green Space' departments in Local Authorities, responsible for biodiversity, will face budget reductions proportionately greater than that for the organisation as a whole. This will affect Local Environment Record Centres, Local Biodiversity Partnerships, management of Local Nature Reserves and wildlife sites, and local biodiversity opportunity mapping (vital for strategic mapping with respect to biodiversity offsetting). Compounded by budget reductions at Natural England, how will local authorities and local citizens have access to relevant expertise to enable the environment to be taken into account in planning decisions?
- 3 How will the results of the UK National Ecosystem Assessment be communicated to local authorities and civil society to enable decisions to be taken with regard to the value of natural capital?