

MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE 6 NOVEMBER 2020

A NATURE RECOVERY PLAN FOR THE MALVERN HILLS AONB

Recommendation

The Committee is recommended to:

- a) Note the report;**
- b) Raise and discuss any issues arising.**

Background

1. The overarching ambition of the UK Government's 25-Year Environment Plan (YEP) is to 'leave our environment in a better state than we found it and to pass on to the next generation a natural environment protected and enhanced for the future' (Defra 2018). The plan highlights six key areas for action, one of which is to establish a Nature Recovery Network (NRN) for England, motivated by the now clear and obvious fact that our natural environment is in decline. The aim of an NRN is to protect and restore our ecology (wildlife), as well as providing greater public enjoyment of the countryside; increased carbon capture; and improvements in water quality and flood management etc.
2. Natural England has produced guidance which aims to help the designers of 'Nature Networks' by identifying the principles of network design and describing the evidence that underpins the desirable features of these networks. The Nature Networks guidance from Natural England stresses very clearly that nature recovery is about benefiting people as well as wildlife.
3. It is clear that delivery of an NRN for the country will be dependent on local activity and that there will be many different bodies involved and many different drivers for change. For example, accountable bodies (probably Local Authorities) look set to be given new legal duties to develop Local Nature Recovery Strategies under the Environment Bill (expected to become law in Spring 2021). In addition, local planning authorities will be required by law to deliver biodiversity net gain through the planning process.
4. All AONB Partnerships in England are committed to producing Nature Recovery Plans (NRPs) for their designated landscapes. This commitment is one of a series of pledges made by the AONB network in the Colchester Declaration (see Appendix 1) designed to help Government deliver its 25 Year Environment Plan (YEP). It should be noted that the Colchester Declaration also contains a commitment to embed an

ecosystems services¹ approach into all AONB Management Plans by 2024. Therefore, it may be helpful to think about a Nature Recovery Plan as also being a central core of the next Malvern Hills AONB Management Plan.

Summary

5. In very crude terms there are two key phases to producing a Nature Recovery Plan for the AONB.
 - Phase 1 - data gathering to establish a spatial baseline and a series of theoretical opportunities which will promote nature recovery, followed by
 - Phase 2 - stakeholder engagement to discuss and agree a way forward, culminating in the production of the Plan itself.
6. It is intended that the final plan will be spatial, setting out key aspirations for the management of different parts of the AONB in the future.
7. The Malvern Hills AONB straddles the three counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. Since there will be many different partner bodies working towards nature recovery in the area it would seem highly desirable if not imperative that a NRP for the AONB works seamlessly across local authority areas within the AONB as well as providing a seamless transition across the AONB boundary to the countryside beyond. It is imperative that all those involved in and with an interest in promoting nature recovery across the 3 counties can work towards the delivery of agreed and shared objectives and targets. No one wants to see a NRP for the AONB prescribing actions that are at odds with, for example, a Nature Recovery Strategy for Worcestershire or Herefordshire. With this in mind, the MH AONB Unit has been liaising closely with key partners over recent months in relation to this work, including local authorities, Local Nature Partnerships, other AONBs and Natural England.
8. It is clear that different partners and different geographical areas are at different stages with nature recovery planning work. Work to assess and map nature recovery opportunities in Gloucestershire is very well advanced whilst both Herefordshire and Worcestershire are at relatively early stages in the process. Pleasingly, discussions indicate that key partners all seem to accept:
 - I. the desirability of adopting a consistent (or at least a compatible) approach to this work across the 3 Counties and
 - II. the need for a broad-based approach to nature recovery based on Natural Capital rather than ecological criteria alone.

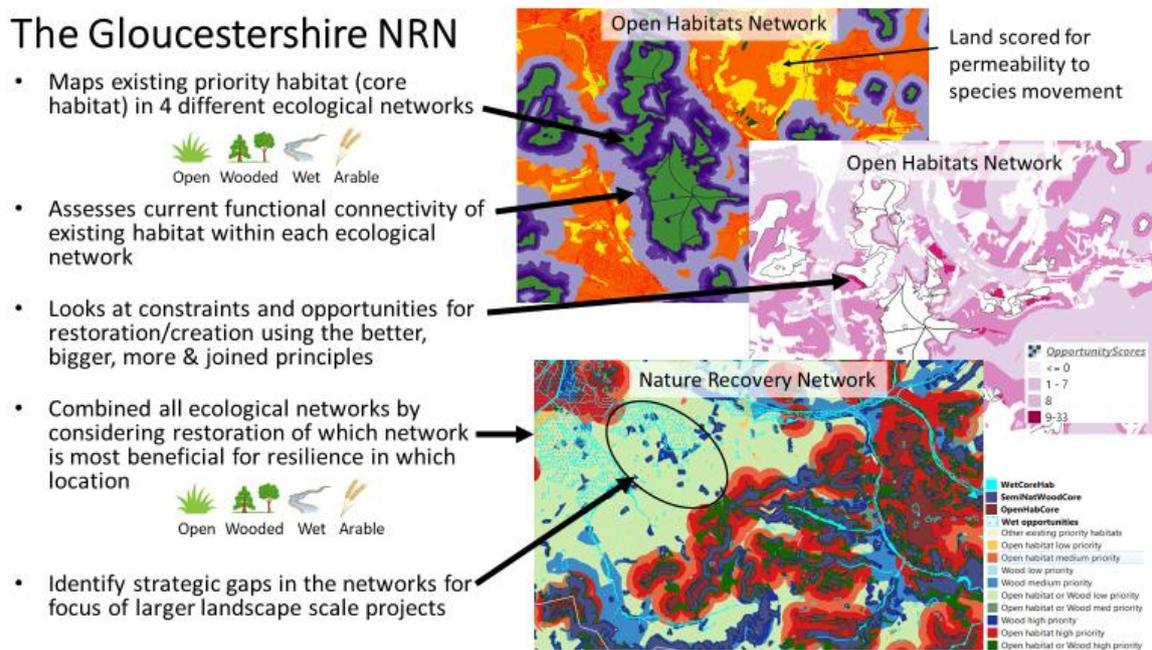
¹ Natural Capital is the stock of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. The benefits people obtain from this Natural Capital stock such as food and timber, recreational opportunities, aesthetic values, health benefits, flood risk regulation, air and water quality regulation, and many more, are called ecosystem services.

Methodology

9. Following on from the work that has been carried out in Gloucestershire (which itself is adapted from work in South West England) it is expected that there will be two parts to data gathering to establish a spatial baseline and a series of theoretical opportunities (phase 1 of the Nature Recovery Plan).

1. Ecological mapping – all existing habitats (woodlands, orchards, grassland etc) are mapped. Opportunities for expanding these habitats are then scored using least cost distance analysis². This approach is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1



2. Natural Capital mapping – all existing habitats are assigned a theoretical score for each ecosystem service they provide (for example, flood mitigation or carbon storage). These scores are then modified based on the spatial, relational aspect or condition of the habitat. For instance, woodland may be good at removing air pollution, but if it is not in an area of poor air quality, it will not be performing that particular service.

Missing links?

10. The development of a Nature Recovery Plan for the AONB, based on a broad, natural capital approach (as outlined above) seems to reflect a more integrated approach to informing the future management of the area and dovetails with the direction of travel being taken in government with respect to the next generation of financial assistance for land owners and managers (ELMS). However, the approach

² Least cost path analysis is a distance analysis tool within GIS that uses the least cost path or the path between two locations that costs the least to those travelling along it to determine the most cost-effective route between a source and destination.

to NC mapping in Gloucestershire described above appears to lack a way of integrating and scoring **landscape character**, **historic landscape character** and **geodiversity**. These are critical to the special character of the AONB and a piece of work may be needed to ensure that these elements are factored into the above model. Conversations with Historic England, local authorities and the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Earth Heritage Trust are taking place on this subject.

The current state of play

11. The overall picture of who is doing what towards producing nature recovery plans across the 3 counties is rather complex but it is hoped that the first phase of works to establish a spatial baseline and a series of theoretical opportunities for the Malvern Hills AONB will be completed by April 2021. Following that, phase 2 can begin with an expectation that a draft Nature Recovery Plan for the AONB may be in place by October 2021.

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Appendix 1 – The Colchester Declaration 2019

Set against a backdrop of unprecedented concern for the future of the natural world, and intergovernmental reports that the current global response to the effects of human impact on nature is insufficient – the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty believes that now is the time to significantly increase the scale and pace of nature conservation activity in AONBs. Using our unique network and partnership model, we are making a collective Declaration on Nature in AONBs, setting out our strategy for change. With many AONB host authorities having taken the step of declaring a Climate Emergency we are demonstrating our readiness to act to redress declines in species and habitats within the context of a wider response to climate change.

We believe

1. Natural Beauty has intrinsic value and means so much to people
2. AONBs should be places of rich, diverse and abundant wildlife
3. Nature recovery is central to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty
4. Climate change is the biggest threat to humanity and one of the greatest threats to biodiversity. Designated landscapes offer some of the most powerful solutions to the challenges of climate change
5. The network of AONBs and National Parks, their teams, partnerships, authorities and stakeholders offer a unique solution to tackling environmental challenges

We pledge

By July 2020

1. To enable an approach that creates opportunities within AONBs for people to make an emotional connection with nature.
2. To prepare a Nature Recovery Plan for each AONB

By 2024

1. To embed an ecosystems services approach into all AONB Management Plans
2. To ensure all AONB management plans include meaningful measures around climate change mitigation and adaptation, including clear, measurable targets to support Net Zero

By 2030

1. That at least 200,000 ha of SSSIs in AONBs will be in favourable condition
2. That at least 100,000 ha of wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected sites will have been created/ restored in AONBs to further support the natural movement of plants and animals
3. That at least 36,000 ha of new woodland will have been planted or allowed to regenerate in AONBs following the principle of the right tree in the right place
4. That, by each AONB immediately adopting a species on the threatened list and by preparing and delivering a Species Action Plan, at least thirty species relevant to AONBs will be taken off the list by 2030. We call on Westminster and Welsh Governments to provide the power and resources to make these targets achievable