

Accounting for nature: assessing habitats in the UK countryside



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Foreword by the Minister for the Environment, Rt. Hon. Michael Meacher



This Government is committed to the practical achievement of sustainable development and to the conservation of biodiversity in the UK. In our White Paper 'A Better Quality of Life' we set out our sustainable development strategy which includes social, economic and environmental objectives. Our strategy recognises that the special character of our countryside is highly valued and must be retained and that the decline in wildlife and habitats must be reversed. But these objectives do not mean that the landscape should be frozen in time. The countryside has always changed and will continue to do so. Some change is inevitable and desirable as we seek to balance the social, economic and environmental demands. But change should be well managed, and good management requires reliable information to measure progress, stimulate debate and inform decisions. This report on the results of the Countryside Survey is one such source of information.

I therefore welcome and endorse this report as an important contribution to the debate about the future of our countryside. It is highly fitting that we should mark the end of one Millennium and the start of another with such a comprehensive audit. Only when we take stock of what we have now, and how much we have lost and gained, can we begin to assess what we are handing on to future generations – a key principle of sustainable development. The updates of the two core Quality of Life Counts indicators, on landscape features and plant diversity, are one means to help us to assess the progress that we are making.

Whilst building on the experience and foundations laid by previous surveys, this report is very much a first. The new focus on the assessment of the condition of broad habitats will make an important contribution to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) and the Government's requirement to report on progress after the first five years. The BAP broad habitats provide a useful framework to draw together the way in which we manage the countryside – in woods, fields or moors – with an assessment of the biodiversity that the countryside supports. We can thereby begin to create a balance sheet or an 'account for nature' which can inform the priorities for action.

The project is also important because it has brought together the policy and scientific communities in a very productive partnership. Co-funding with the Natural Environment Research Council and other sponsors has helped us take a more comprehensive and strategic view of changes in countryside and their longer term implications.

I particularly wish to acknowledge the support of the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the preparation of this report. This first UK overview has been achieved by combining results from the Countryside Survey in Great Britain with the separately funded Northern Ireland Countryside Survey. I hope that the Devolved Administrations will take this opportunity to reflect on the findings of these studies in relation to their own priorities and concerns for the countryside.

Finally, I would wish to offer my congratulations to all those involved in the conduct of this study – the surveyors, data analysts, authors, editors and commentators – it is a timely, relevant and accessible assessment of habitats in the UK countryside at the start of a new Millennium.

Michael Meacher

Foreword by Prof. John Lawton, Chief Executive, Natural Environment Research Council



During the next decade the UK is likely to see some of the greatest changes in rural land use policies since the Second World War. The UK faces a number of critical policy decisions if it is to deliver sustainable development with the current and expected pressures on land use, and against a background of major changes to the agricultural industry.

The Countryside Surveys in Great Britain and Northern Ireland provide a unique way of studying the biophysical resources of the UK countryside. They offer an assessment of the landscape, land use and biodiversity of the countryside to a level of detail that is quite remarkable. Even better, we are now getting a clear vision of how the countryside has changed in the last 20 years, providing vital information for policy makers and all those with interests in the land.

The surveys also provide the basis for addressing a host of important scientific issues. The formal statistical basis for the work ensures that we can use the data to ask questions about why changes have happened. We can also consider how future change can be managed so that the countryside is sustained in environmental, social and economic terms. The next, and perhaps hardest step, is addressing questions about cause and effect, pattern and process.

This document is only the first step in reporting the results. By the time the process is completed, we will know much more about the inter-relationships between people, land use, landscape features and biodiversity than we do at present. We will understand much more clearly the process of landscape change and the capacity of ecosystems to cope with change. The links between small scale and large scale will be clearer – how alterations to individual patches of vegetation impact on the wider landscape. The Countryside Surveys are a major step in addressing the challenges of sustainable land use in the UK.

NERC is proud of its support of this major scientific initiative.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'John Lawton'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line above the first few letters.

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