



Executive Summary for the ‘UK Headline Messages’ and ‘UK Results from 2007’

Countryside Survey is a unique study of the natural resources of the UK countryside involving a detailed field survey of habitats, vegetation, freshwater and soils across England, Scotland and Wales. A separate study of habitats is undertaken in Northern Ireland and where possible results are brought together to report for the UK. The findings are used in scientific research and to inform policy development for the management of the countryside.

The first Countryside Survey was in 1978 and it has been developed and expanded every time it was repeated in 1984, 1990, 1998 and 2007. Data is collected using rigorous scientific methods so that the results from successive surveys can be compared with those from previous years. The collection of data over time enables the gradual and subtle changes in the UK countryside to be detected, studied and related to possible causes. In 2007, the survey teams collected data from 591 sample squares (1.0km x 1.0km) in Great Britain and 288 sample squares (0.5km x 0.5km) in Northern Ireland. This field data was recorded electronically using new, specially developed digital data capture technology.

The UK level findings of the latest survey are being published in two reports:

- Countryside Survey - UK Headline Messages from 2007
- Countryside Survey - UK Results from 2007

A limited number of the ‘UK Headline Messages from 2007’ reports are available as a printed hardcopy (contact: countrysidesurvey@ceh.ac.uk) and both are available for download from the Countryside Survey website at www.countrysidesurvey.org.uk

The ‘UK Headline Messages’ used the results from 2007 to answer a series of questions that have arisen from previous Countryside Surveys or have been prompted by recent policy developments. They are not intended to cover all of the results from Countryside Survey, but present key findings as an introduction to the results. The questions addressed include:

- Has botanical diversity in the countryside changed?
- Has the area and condition of Broad Habitats changed?
- Have there been effects of air pollution and nutrient inputs on plants and soils?
- Has carbon concentration in soils (0-15cm) changed?
- Have climate change impacts been detected?

The ‘UK Results from 2007’ presents a more systematic summary of the findings from 2007 by habitat types and includes an overview of the National Picture and the Methodology. The report gives the results behind the Headlines and more detail. Each chapter starts with a summary of the key results followed by the estimated: areas and changes of habitats; conversions between habitats, changes in vegetation condition and changes in soil characteristics. The report includes some interpretation of the results, but is not intended to provide explanations of the changes detected. The interpretation of the drivers and pressures that caused the changes is the task of future research. The selected findings presented here serve to illustrate the breadth and depth of coverage in the UK Results.

- The area of Broad Habitats: Broadleaved Woodland, Improved Grassland, Neutral Grassland, Acid Grassland and Standing Waters Broad Habitats increased, whilst Arable and Bracken Broad Habitats decreased. The area of the Built-up and Gardens Broad Habitat in the rural environment did not increase [UK results 1998-2007].
- Improved Grassland covered an estimated area of 5.1 million ha, an increase of 6% [UK results 1998-2007]. This increase contrasted with a decrease from 1984 to 1998.
- The length of previously managed hedgerows decreased by 6%. Many of these became lines of trees and relict hedges [GB results 1998-2007].
- There was no change in plant species richness in fields, woods, heaths and moors [GB results 1998-2007].
- No change was detected in plant species richness in Broadleaved Woodland [GB results for 1998-2007], but there was a longer term decrease of 9.3% [GB results 1990-2007].
- Competitive plant species increased in fields, woods, heaths and moors, whilst ruderal species decreased [GB results 1978-2007].
- The frequency of occurrence of plant species preferring wetter conditions increased in all types of vegetation sampled [GB results 1998-2007].
- Collectively, non-native plant species account for nearly 2% of the vegetation cover in the countryside [GB results 2007].
- Plant species richness in streams increased [GB results 1998-2007].
- The physical characteristics of streams improved [GB results 1998-2007].
- The pH of the soils (0-15cm) increased in less acidic habitats [GB results 1978-2007].
- There was no overall change in soil carbon concentration (0-15 cm) [GB results 1978-2007].

Further information

A comprehensive collection of summary results used to inform the UK level reports is available from the Countryside Survey website in graphical format. The data used to prepare the reports will be accessible under licence following the launch of the three Country-level reports for England, Scotland and Wales. Analysis is continuing and further outputs to be published include reports on soils, freshwater and an integrated assessment, and a new UK Land Cover Map.

For further information on Countryside Survey see www.countrysidesurvey.org.uk

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