

Vision for Hampshire 2050 – Natural Environment

Submission from Ecological Planning & Research Ltd (EPR)

Ecological Planning & Research Ltd

EPR Ltd is one of the senior Ecological Consultancies in the UK. The Company's Chairman, Phil Colebourn MA MSc MRTPI MCIEEM, was Hampshire County Planning Ecologist between 1975 and 1989. He has over 50 years experience of nature conservation and planning, and has been closely involved with the development of the Chartered Institute of Ecology & Environmental Management (CIEEM), and on CIEEM Governing Board for 5 years.

EPR greatly welcomes this opportunity to contribute some thoughts to the Commission of Inquiry.

This Submission

This submission concerns the natural environment, and considers:

- the trends that have affected Hampshire over the last 30 years, and those that will affect Hampshire's environment over the next 30 years
- the critical requirements for maintaining a healthy and species-rich environment
- potential interventions that Hampshire County Council could stimulate

Hampshire's Environment

Hampshire's vigorous economic development takes place within what is probably the most plant and animal species-rich environment in Britain: the Hampshire Basin, the central chalklands, the Thames Basin heathlands, and the Hangers of the East Hampshire Weald. The County is extraordinarily rich in ancient woods, chalk grasslands, streams and wetlands, neutral and acid meadows, and heathlands, many in former royal forests. Elements of this richness are under threat; particularly neutral grasslands and peatlands.

Past Approach by HCC

Hampshire County Council has pioneered many initiatives to regulate or influence the protection of these natural resources from unplanned growth, from the original South Hampshire Plan, through the Structure Plans and Regional Planning Area studies of the 1970's, to the County's specific Local Plan initiatives at Fareham Western Wards and Chineham, and the nationally-renowned Countryside Heritage programme.

These initiatives have all been characterised by:

- specialist knowledge,
- extensive research, and
- a willingness to invest to facilitate benign change

Through the 1980s the County Council pioneered the identification of critically important environmental features, mainly through the Countryside Heritage Policy, which enjoyed considerable favour and attracted investment for managing privately owned sites of high Nature conservation importance.

National Patterns and Trends in Nature Conservation

The Countryside Heritage project identified specific Countryside Heritage Sites of very high value –often of SSSI quality - and sought their better management. It also identified Countryside Heritage Areas, parts of the County where there was an abundance of highly bio-diverse features – combinations of old woods and meadows, heaths and mires, and so on, reflecting ancient patterns of land holding and the intrinsic nature of soils and geology. More than 200 CHS were identified, their owners notified of the interest, and in many instances assistance with management was offered, part funded by the then Countryside Commission.

In the 1990s the trend shifted away from what was perceived as an over-focus on sites, towards a broader countryside approach with Biodiversity Action Plans aimed at promoting targets for better management, restoration or where possible creation of valued habitats. The targets were more or less based on geological opportunities but critically retained a clear awareness of the depth of diversity we are trying to conserve.

Over the last 5-10 years, BAPS have themselves been down-played in favour of a “Bio-diversity Net Gain” concept. Whilst Net Gain is clearly a necessary criterion for judging success, it is not sufficient in itself, and indeed the means of validating such gains have been questioned by many professional ecologists: the apparent gain being measured by various designs of “metric”, some promoted privately and others by Government Departments.

More recently, national initiatives such as Nature Improvement Areas, and Nature Recovery Networks, have again focused on what might be termed ‘sample’ areas of countryside; but such pilot projects are seldom if ever expanded to allow conservation to be supported nation-wide.

Conclusions from the Past

First, there is a fundamental difference between HCC’s former Countryside Heritage programme and the recent ‘metric’ approaches to assessing ecological gain. The research approach adopted by HCC in the 1980’s was based on specialist knowledge and detailed advice on what were the most distinctive, the most complex, and therefore the most irreplaceable, habitats and features.

The ‘metrics’ system, in contrast is an abstraction that pays little regard to the depth of species-richness of any specific site. Whilst explicitly not intended to be used to calculate replacement areas for what cannot actually be replicated, the temptation appears to be to use it in this way, and one needs to be sure how replaceable the habitat to be lost really is.

An example from the South Downs will illustrate the benefits of knowledge and evidence in securing better conservation outcomes. In the 1980s the Countryside Section of Hampshire Planning Department undertook research on surviving chalk grassland sites in Hampshire. Many were surveyed, and additional detail was added by surveys commissioned from my own Company EPR in the 1990s.

Recently, a review project undertaken for the South Downs National Park showed that the relict chalk grassland sites in Hampshire were in far better condition than

those in other parts of the Park. We submit that this state of grace, so to speak, was founded on the work done in Hampshire by the County Council 30 years ago.

Second, it is abundantly clear that the rapid changes in national approaches are of no help in achieving a consistent and well-founded evidence-based approach to making conservation decisions. As fast as the administrative arrangements are finalised and implemented for one scheme, a new scheme emerges.

Third, therefore what we need for a nature-rich Hampshire 2050 is a consistent system of research-based conservation that works county-wide.

Future Trends and Pressures on the Natural Environment

During the past quarter century in Hampshire as elsewhere, sites of high diversity, rich in species, have become more isolated and fragmented. Many have been adversely affected by physical development, and many more have become less well-managed.

It would be imprudent to claim prescience on the state of the country or its natural environment 30 years – a generation - hence. Climate change, evolution in the energy and transport industries, changes in patterns of work, and in food consumption, such as the proportion of meat in the general diet, are all likely components.

Even in political terms there is uncertainty. Local Government re-organisation in 1974 created a tier of District Councils that have acted independently as planning authorities. In some counties, there has been a re-amalgamation to form a Unitary authority, harking back to the old counties. Elsewhere, Unitary bodies are smaller than counties. It is clear however, that many Districts have operated at the limits of what can be achieved with a population of 100 – 150,000. Greater integration will suit the implementation of broad scale conservation measures, whatever the specific arrangements.

It appears highly likely that Development pressure will continue, and more intelligent spatial strategies will be required if development is not to dominate and render coherent conservation impossible.

Trends in farming practices, with over-use of chemicals and the expansion of fields to facilitate mechanised farming, have caused the neglect of left-over areas on slopes and in corners and wet hollows that could not be ploughed.

All of these trends in farming have serious impacts on the overall health of nature in Hampshire, and will continue unless action is taken to manage them better. Farming is only one element of land management. There are many initiatives that the County Council has taken in the past, and could take in the future, fostering good relations between landowners and planning authorities.

Paradoxically, better technology may also bring environmental benefits, such as reductions in chemical application, direct drilling of seed, increasing markets for organic produce, and so on.

There is already increasing interest in restoring commons through grazing, in organic meat, and in pasture-feeding livestock. Over the next 30 years it will be for future markets for produce to influence, if not determine, the intensity and shape of future farms.

The Test for Future Environmental Planning in Hampshire

Navigating future planning, both of physical development and of land management for conservation, needs two things - a Chart, and a Pilot.

The Chart is provided by The Lawton Report "The State of Nature", which demonstrated the critical need for:

- sites of high diversity to be **expanded with buffer areas**,
- sites to be **linked together**, to restore connected ecosystems, and
- sites to be **actively managed for nature conservation**.

This is summed up by the well-known Lawton aphorism: "Bigger, Better and Better-connected".

The Pilot

For successful Natural environment conservation, we need a Pilot who can interpret the Chart, and confidently navigate the many physical and political shoals and reefs within the highly complex historical ecological environment of Hampshire.

The cores of future expanded nature areas must be the key sites that are irreplaceable, because they depend on long periods of time and complex geological, soil, and hydrological conditions. They are the reservoirs for rare species with highly specific needs.

This is not an issue that can be left to the statutory bodies Natural England and the Environment Agency, which are under severe pressure from Government. Natural England has lost most of its experienced staff and has suffered budget cuts of 90% over the last few years. NE cannot currently be reckoned a force for conservation good in the context of implementing Lawton.

The Wildlife Trust has many conservation sites and is a participant in some co-operative projects, but as a membership body it lacks the gravitas to act as the anchor for a programme of implementing Lawton that requires strategic planning policies as well as good relations with a wide range of landowners.

The County Council, through its Environment and other Departments, and through the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre, is the repository of much of the knowledge, and a good proportion of the skills, needed to ensure that these factors are fully accounted for. Through its relations with National Parks, infrastructure projects, and Local Authorities, and with its in-built environmental ambitions, the County Council is in a unique position.

It is our view that the **County Council is the body best placed to be the Pilot**, to initiate and co-ordinate actions by itself and others.

Vision of the Future

If Lawton's Chart is to inform our successful navigation to the 2050 future, what must that future look like in Hampshire?

We consider the following to be critical:

1. The New Forest

The New Forest is unique in Europe and is of worldwide significance. Its complexity is vastly greater than that of any other lowland area in England. It must be protected from anthropogenic changes. It should be better managed to accommodate additional recreation pressure and climate change. Programmes such as LIFE should be continued in any future political arena. Management must be based on a deep knowledge of the species and species-communities in the Forest, and the historical and natural processes that have created them.

2. Major Development Strategy

The development strategy for Hampshire should be adapted to reflect a greater awareness of the natural areas of the County. Rather than simply accepting development around areas that are already developed, such as South Hampshire and the Thames Basin Heaths, it should generate growth in areas of lower biodiversity, perhaps with new settlements. There are elements of these changes in place, such as Whitehill-Bordon, and the expansion of Basingstoke, but greater effort is needed to identify areas of lower biodiversity and generate a spatial development strategy to reflect these.

Politically, HCC policy over the last decades has, in conformity with the old Mid-Hampshire Planning Area, favoured keeping the chalklands relatively undeveloped. However, the resultant losses in South Hampshire of old grassland/woodland complexes, and changes in their development and recreation context, have been serious impacts on the tertiary soils and habitats of South Hampshire – such as in Whiteley. Whilst there is much to be careful to conserve in the chalk belt, its overall biodiversity does not compare with the intricate systems of small fields, meadows and hedges of South Hampshire and North East Hampshire, where much more care about the pattern of development is essential.

3. Spatial Strategy for Nature

We need a conscious reversal of the pattern of planning that leads nature in the wider countryside to be confined to what used to be called 'SLOP' – 'Space Left Over in Planning'.

Examination of any 1810 First edition 1" Ordnance Map – or better still the Surveyor's Drawings - will show that at that time, before the end of the Parliamentary Inclosures, and before the Victorian re-organisation of parishes, the ancient landscape was an interconnected system of droveways and common 'wastes' (i.e. unenclosed lands), within which farmland enclosure was isolated cells, gradually expanding.

Today, the position has become reversed; farmland has coalesced and it is habitats that are now the isolated cells within a sea of farmland and development. It is critical that the Lawson approach that great efforts are made to make reconnections between remaining habitats.

It is now high time to make conscious decisions to create major conservation Nodes and Links, to form a firm pattern to help guide future development areas.

4. Piloting the restoration of connectivity and robustness of habitats

Of particular difficulty is creating new habitats of high diversity. In practice the main opportunities, other than in the case of wetlands, remains that of identifying the core of existing biodiversity so that it can be protected, conserved and expanded.

We consider there are three critical spatial planning elements to the 2050 natural environment Vision;

- i) Acquisition and Use of ecological data. Apart from the usual species records and integrated recording, a critical activity is the identification of ecosystems dependent on undisturbed soils, often these are strongly related to historic landscape features such as meadows, droveways, valley floors, recent (19th/20th century) enclosures of common land, ancient woods and their ghosts, medieval parks, etc. Restoration cannot be confined to or depend entirely upon these soils, but such soils are important to its success.
- ii) Planned expansion of the buffer zones around critical sites, to expand habitat and reduce edge effects and other adverse impacts, and enhance productivity of species-rich communities.
- iii) Creating planned relationships between landowners and communities to support re-connections and facilitate management planning.

5. Exemplar Major Habitat Restorations

The framework for a number of significant example habitat restorations and management plans was identified in the 1980s. Implementation of major restoration plans for fragmented former royal forests in Hampshire would be possible provided there is co-operative working with bodies such as Ministry of Defence and Forestry Commission. The clearest potential lies in the Forest of Eversley and the Forest of Bere. The former contains many fragmented and under-managed heaths, and was the subject of a conscious attempt by HCC and others to raise its profile locally.

The Forest of Bere is a mix of public woodlands, private farmland with small fields and meadows, and species-rich ancient woods. The previous HCC publication on the Forest focused on recreational opportunities and failed to promote conservation management. Close to major populations the area is under major pressure.

Away from Forests, the valley floors of the Itchen and Test provide major opportunities for an element of rewilding. The Itchen valley peatland fen meadows remain species-rich but could be much better managed to integrate water supply, grazing, fishing. The Test valley floor has fewer fens and much agriculture but could be radically improved by changes in land management.

Implementation

We consider that it is highly desirable that if the County Council is to become the Pilot for natural environment restoration, it should:

1. Employ sufficient specialist ecologists to allow an understanding of the resource – both actual and potential
2. Set out an implementation strategy that involves; District Councils, National Park Authorities, Natural England, The Environment Agency, Forestry Authority, Non-governmental bodies
3. Be prepared to intervene in the market for, and use of, land of actual nature conservation value, or which could contribute to Lawson objectives.

Location of Specialisms

Hampshire, by comparison with some other County authorities has employed relatively high number of ecological specialists. The creation of the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre, and its subsequent work of survey and data collation, has been a highly positive step. Concurrently, however, and as far as we can tell, the role of other county ecological staff has become more one of dealing with development control issues.

In the past there has been a division between recreational management of sites – often important SSSIs – and management of advice on the wider countryside through development control and other initiatives. Whilst we do not suggest that there has been inappropriate management of these sites, it is clear that the focus has not consistently been conservation. The ‘Snowdonia Principle’ is clear that recreational use is acceptable to the extent that it does not damage the resource.

We believe these functions of data management, development control, and strategic environmental planning, and site management, should be integrated and should form a unit that can advise and indeed promote, the implementation of Lawton principles through management both of County land, and of private land. In view of the critical importance of strategic planning, we believe these functions should be central within an Environment Department, where they are also accessible to infrastructure teams.

Summary

1. Without strategic environmental planning, nature conservation values will continue to decline.
2. Strategic planning for nature conservation requires;
 - application of the Lawton principles; Bigger, Better, Better connected
 - centralised nature conservation advice using HBIC and a range of ecologists expert in landscape history, soils, and species groups
 - conscious review of past priorities and focuses for physical development
3. **The County Council had a high reputation for these matters 20 years ago, and should make great efforts to maintain that role and reputation.**