



Commission of Inquiry: A Vision for Hampshire in 2050

The Importance of Natural Capital – submission from the New Forest National Park and South Downs National Park on behalf of the Green Halo Partnership

Hampshire's Environment

Our natural environment is one of Hampshire's great assets. Around 85% of the County is rural, over a third lies within a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are 4,000 hectares of unenclosed ancient oak-beech woodland, with 20% of our area wooded.ⁱ

However, that environment is under threat from the demands for growth: more housing or infrastructure, more space for business. That pressure is causing small but noticeable annual declines in our most notable priority habitats, with particular pressure on mixed deciduous woodland. The majority of the County's Sites of Special Scientific Interest are classed as being in "unfavourable" condition, albeit deemed to be "recovering", and 35% of our top 50 notable species are in decline.ⁱⁱ

Hampshire's environment is central to the County's identity, it is part of what residents and visitors value about our place, and helps attract business to a place where quality of life complements connectivity and a highly skilled population. As we face future growth in population and our economy, so we need to find a way of protecting and improving our environment.

Natural Capital

The UK's developing policy towards the natural environment policy recognises the value of the environment to our communities and economy, and suggests we can use that value to make the case for protecting and enhancing nature, biodiversity and habitats. Defra's 25 Year Environment Plan, published in January 2018,ⁱⁱⁱ is built on the idea of 'natural capital'. This concept recognises that the environment provides a variety of goods and services to our communities and our country: so-called 'ecosystem services'.

Ecosystem services take a variety of forms, from the contribution trees make to reducing the amount of pollutants in the atmosphere through to the way in which properly managed habitats in the upper reaches of rivers can hold water, and so prevent flooding downstream. As well as the direct services offered, the natural environment also provides a place for recreation and leisure, which improves our mental and physical health.

These ecosystem services have a monetary value. An audit preparing an ecosystem account for the New Forest National Park suggests that the services provided by the Park's natural environment are worth over £65m, £45m of that accounted for by the contribution it makes to removing atmospheric pollution^{iv} - in other words if that environment vanished we would have to spend £45m in finding other ways of cleaning up air pollution. A similar ecosystem account for Hampshire as a whole would no doubt find a value significantly greater

Those figures are certainly an understatement. Ecosystems service accounting is a developing science, and it remains hard to value in monetary terms the contribution our natural environment makes in many areas, in particular how it helps individuals' health and wellbeing. Yet the value of 'social prescribing' for mental and physical health is recognised,^v and the Health Secretary recently encouraged GPs to prescribe physical activity for those with mental health conditions.^{vi}

Recognising the value of our natural capital encourages society to value our natural environment because of the contribution it can make on many fronts. It helps make the case for protecting and improving the natural environment not simply because of its aesthetic value, but because our society depends on the services it provides.

Informing Decision-making

A natural capital perspective allows decision-making by public and private organisation to be informed by a fresh perspective on the contribution our environment makes. In doing so, it offers a way in which Hampshire can protect and enhance its precious countryside and wildlife which contributes so much to our identity and sense of place. In the words of the Chair of the Government's Natural Capital Committee, it offers a way of "ending the apartheid between economic growth and protecting the environment".

This approach will help us to achieve a better balance between nature and development, capturing the contribution our environment makes and so ensure protecting and enhancing our natural capital is integral to policy and decision-making, rather than an afterthought. In doing so it will help Hampshire, its businesses and its communities in tackling some of the future challenges we face, for example by:

- Making a case for protecting and enhancing our distinctive habitats and wildlife by acknowledging their contribution;
- Tackling the threat of pollution from traffic and other sources, which is causing higher death rates in several of our more urban areas.^{vii} Natural vegetation can reduce that pollution;
- Managing land to prevent costly downstream flooding of our urban and coastal communities;
- Using access to nature to tackle a variety of physical and mental health challenges our community faces;
- Planning development to include nature, helping us build better places to live and make existing communities more willing to accept growth. The Green Halo Partnership is working with Government to develop new policies on how

the planning system can improve natural capital as part of the development process;

- Recognising the economic opportunities our natural environment offers, through sectors ranging from the visitor economy to energy generation and use of natural materials.

Most importantly, it will help us retain our sense of place by protecting and enhancing the natural assets which make the County what it is.

Net Environmental Gain

The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan signals Ministers' intention to try to find ways of reconciling development with protecting our natural environment. It commits to introducing a new way of planning and delivering new homes, business space and infrastructure which seeks to recognise and add to natural capital by requiring on-site improvements which will enhance bio-diversity, help remove air pollution, protect against flooding and achieve other wider benefits through ecosystem services. In essence, this approach encourages net environmental gain from development.

The Green Halo Partnership have brought together Hampshire and Isle of Wight councils with our National Parks, Natural England and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust to explore how this can work in practice in our area, and to work with Government in shaping national policy on net environmental gain. Our aim is to help Hampshire deliver growth in a way which protects and enhances our natural environment.

The Green Halo Partnership

The Green Halo Partnership was launched in November 2017. It brings together over 70 organisations from the business, environment, local government and third sectors. The Partnership brings together those who want to explore how they can use a natural capital perspective to make a practical difference to the local economy, environment and communities.

Founded by the New Forest National Park Authority and supported by the South Downs National Park Authority, the Partnership includes organisations from across Hampshire, Dorset and Wiltshire.

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ⁱ State of Hampshire's Biodiversity. Hampshire County Council (2006)

ⁱⁱ Monitoring change in priority habitats, priority species and designated sites. Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (2016)

ⁱⁱⁱ 'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment', sets out what the Government plan to do to improve the environment, within a generation. Defra (2018)

^{iv} Developing ecosystem accounts for protected areas in England and Scotland: New Forest National Park summary report. Defra/AECOM (2015)

^v Good practice in social prescribing for mental health: the role of nature-based interventions. Natural England (2017)

^{vi} <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/06/nhs-should-expand-social-prescribing-says-health-secretary>

^{vii} Deaths attributed to air pollution are above the England average in Basingstoke & Deane, Southampton, Portsmouth, Eastleigh and Fareham - Estimating local mortality burdens associated with particulate air pollution. Public Health England (2014)