

In Depth – Conserving Biodiversity

Background

The concept of Biodiversity was first introduced at the United Nations conference on environment and development (also known as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992. Its aim was to address global concerns about the environment and the loss of wild species and habitats. Subsequently, over 150 nations, including the UK, signed the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), making a commitment to conserve their nation's biodiversity and take action to maintain and enhance it.

The UK was one of the first to act on this, and produced Biodiversity: The UK Action Plan in 1994. It brought together existing work for, and expertise on, biodiversity to set out a partnership approach. The plan focused delivery on agreed actions and targets for priority species and habitats identified by the UK Biodiversity Steering Group. Their report in 2005 identified 1,250 species of conservation concern in the UK, of which 391 were considered to have priority status, together with 45 priority habitats. The action plans drawn up to conserve and enhance these can be viewed at the UK Biodiversity Action Plan website www.ukbap.org.uk.

The UK BAP also went further to set out how the conservation community should engage with other sectors and bring in new partners in order to meet the objectives of the CBD. It brought biodiversity into the public and political domain more than ever before and was endorsed by government, as well as the private and voluntary sectors.

Following devolution in 1997 and the development of country strategies for delivery of biodiversity, the UK BAP was reviewed in 2007. The priority species and habitats were reviewed with 65 priority habitats and 1,149 priority species identified. The majority of the previous list was reselected, though a small few were not. The review also suggested a country approach for the delivery of actions would be more effective.

Overall responsibility for ensuring that Wales delivers BAP will be undertaken by the Wales Biodiversity Partnership (WBP), originally set up in 1996 to steer the coordination and implementation of the UK BAP in Wales. They provide support, advice and guidance on BAP delivery through policy, ecosystem and species expert groups, encourage other sectors to develop practices that embrace biodiversity protection and enhancement and hold others accountable for delivering and reporting on their commitments. As part of this process, species and habitats of principal importance for nature conservation in Wales have also been identified under Section 42 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. Whilst these are very similar to the UK priorities, they include additional non-UK priority species, recognising that there are certain species that are not a UK priority, but are of conservation importance in Wales. This list can be accessed from the WBP website.

For more information on the WBP, its roles and responsibilities and the delivery of BAP in Wales, visit the website at www.biodiversitywales.org.uk.

Beyond Rio

Nearly two decades after the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the recognition of biodiversity loss has gained high political profile at global, national and regional levels. In 2001 at the spring summit in Gothenburg, EU heads of state and governments agreed to an ambitious target to halt the decline of biodiversity in the EU by 2010. This was adopted into their Sixth Environment Action Programme in 2002, which established the environmental priorities for the European Union for the next ten years. The objective given for biodiversity was *“to protect and restore the structure and functioning of natural systems and halt the loss of biodiversity both in the European Union and on a global scale by 2010.”* This commitment was further confirmed in 2004 at the Stakeholder Conference “Sustaining Livelihoods and Biodiversity: Attaining the 2010 Target in the European Biodiversity Strategy” in Malahide, which resulted in a ‘Message from Malahide’ setting out the next steps needed to achieve the 2010 target. This target was now the subject of several key international agreements. Each recognised the rapid degradation of ecosystems and habitats, the increasing threat to many species populations and the urgent need to take action – requiring unprecedented efforts in adapting our actions to the needs of natural systems.

In 2002 the CBD adopted its strategic plan which included an overall target to significantly reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. This was subsequently endorsed by the world’s heads of state and governments at the world summit on sustainable development (2002) with nineteen actions agreed as a means of achieving this objective.

It was now fully integrated into the framework of the Millennium Development Goals and the international community declared 2010 the international year for biological diversity. The United Nations has also declared this to be the Decade on Biodiversity.



The Wales Environment Strategy sets out the Welsh Government’s commitment to halting biodiversity loss and to see a definite recovery from the losses that have already occurred. Key actions to help achieve this aim by 2010 have been set and are detailed in the strategy and underpin the Welsh Government’s UK and international commitments to halting biodiversity loss.

All national biodiversity strategies and action plans can be found at www.biodiv.org/reports

Missed targets and the future of biodiversity conservation

But, as you may have realised already, we wouldn't still be talking about biodiversity conservation in this way if we had met the 2010 targets. Although there have been some conservation successes in recent years, little progress has been made towards halting biodiversity loss.

A report in the journal *Science* in May 2010 was the first assessment of how the targets made through the 2002 CBD have been missed¹. It found no evidence for a significant reduction in the rate of declines of biodiversity and that pressures facing biodiversity continue to increase. Governments have failed to deliver on promises made in 2002. Although there are examples of local and national conservation successes, these are not enough and overall the situation is getting worse.

In October 2010 officials from 193 countries met in Nagoya, Japan for the tenth Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. This was an opportunity to discuss the failure of the 2010 targets and for governments to sign up to a new framework for achieving a reduction in biodiversity loss. A new strategic plan has been developed with targets for 2020. It is essential that these new targets will be achievable and measurable, but still be ambitious.

In Wales a new approach to biodiversity conservation has recently been launched by the Welsh Government. The Natural Environment Framework – A Living Wales² has recently been out for public consultation. It encompasses all aspects of the environment – not just biodiversity – and emphasises sustainable land and marine management. The final outcome of the work is due for 2011-12 and has the potential to change our approach to biodiversity conservation in Wales.

1 – Butchart, S. et al. (2010) Global Biodiversity: Indicators of Recent Declines. *Science* **328**: 1164 – 1168.

2 – Welsh Assembly Government (2010) Consultation Document: A Living Wales – a new framework for our environment, our countryside and our seas.