

BIODIVERSITY

Biodiversity - the variety of life on earth - is being lost at an alarming rate throughout the world. The Government has established a programme for conserving biodiversity in the UK. A key element is the preparation of local biodiversity action plans.

chapter 1

What is Biodiversity? Why does it Matter?

Biodiversity includes all species of plants and animals, their habitats, and the complex ecosystems that sustain them. Biodiversity includes all living things - from sparrows on city streets to rare creatures found in remote places.

Plants and animals are essential to our lives. It is our responsibility and in our self-interest to look after biodiversity now and for future generations. There are many compelling reasons for doing this: some are moral, others are aesthetic or economic.

Biodiversity provides food, medicines, water, and even the oxygen in the air that we breathe.



2. Silver-washed fritillary

REASONS FOR CONSERVING BIODIVERSITY

Biodiversity supports life itself - Most species have a precise role to play in the Earth's well-being. Many plants and animals are dependent upon each other in a complex web of life, with each species relying on others for survival.

Biodiversity provides essential goods - Plants and animals provide food, medicines, clothing and some of the raw materials for building and industry. It is vital to conserve biodiversity to maintain a wide range of species for future use.

Biodiversity helps to maintain the environment - Natural processes assist with flood control, prevent soil erosion, help to filter waste water, clean pollutants from the air, and mitigate noise and the visual intrusion of development. Biodiversity also acts as an indicator of the health of the environment and is a key test of sustainability.

Biodiversity has aesthetic and spiritual value - People benefit greatly from contact with the natural world. Quality of life is intimately linked with the health of the environment. Many people value the very existence of species and habitats even if they have no direct contact with them.

Biodiversity is valuable for recreation - Many people enjoy recreation in the countryside and urban nature areas. Attractive landscapes and wildlife are a focus for tourism and very valuable to local economies.

The loss of biodiversity is important to everyone. During the past 50 years, there has been an unprecedented rate of loss of wild plants and animals across the UK. More than 100 species are thought to have become extinct here in this century. If the pollution of the air, land and sea, and the destruction of habitats continues, people are ultimately the losers. Action to reverse the current trends is needed now. As individuals or organisations, everyone can assist with the conservation of biodiversity.

The Global Challenge

The Convention on Biological Diversity was signed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The United Kingdom was one of 150 countries that pledged to develop a national strategy for 'the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity'. The Convention signalled global concern that habitats and natural ecosystems were being lost at an alarming rate. Each country recognised that it had a responsibility to halt the decline of biodiversity within its boundaries.

UK Strategy

The UK Government was one of the first signatories to the Convention to produce a biodiversity strategy and action plan in January 1994 - *Biodiversity: The UK Action Plan*¹. The report outlines the broad strategy for conserving and enhancing biodiversity in the UK for a 20 year period.

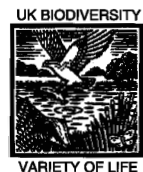
Although the Plan set broad goals and objectives, it was recognised that implementation would require detailed targets. The UK Biodiversity Steering Group was established with the task of preparing a detailed programme of action. This group had a wide membership including representatives from national agencies such as English Nature and the Environment Agency, local government, farming and land management, voluntary conservation bodies and industry.

*Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report*², published in two volumes in December 1995 and endorsed by the Government in May 1996, advocates four key elements to achieve biodiversity objectives:

- development of action plans with costed targets for key species and habitats
- improving the handling of information and data
- raising awareness and involvement
- the production of Local Biodiversity Action Plans

Each of these topic areas is now being addressed under the UK Biodiversity Programme. Central to this is the preparation of national action plans for habitats and species of particular conservation concern: 38 habitat action plans and over 400 species action plans will be produced during the next few years. Many have already been written. The plans will have clear objectives and quantified and costed targets, enabling progress to be monitored in the long-term. This is a new and much more disciplined approach to nature conservation in the UK.

The UK Biodiversity Programme is being steered by the UK Biodiversity Group which has replaced the former UK Steering Group. The various elements of the Programme are being overseen by a range of sub-groups. Also reporting to the UK Biodiversity Group are groups for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland which help provide information and support biodiversity action within each area.



4. Ancient woodland

Local Biodiversity Action Plans

The Government has taken a lead in setting the approach for biodiversity conservation. But to succeed, action needs to be taken at all levels and in all sectors of the community. One of the essential means of achieving national objectives for biodiversity is through the preparation of Local Biodiversity Action Plans. *Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report* has clearly advocated the preparation of Local Biodiversity Action Plans and sees them as a fundamental contribution to Local Agenda 21 programmes. Local Biodiversity Action Plans have two broad functions:

- to ensure that national action plans are translated into effective action at the local level
- to establish targets and action for species and habitats characteristic of each local area

Local Biodiversity Action Plans differ from previous approaches to nature conservation in two important ways: they are prepared by a wide partnership of interested individuals and organisations, and they follow a very disciplined approach to auditing and target setting. The Plans form the framework from which individual members of biodiversity partnerships can develop strategies for delivering relevant parts of the Plan.



FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLANS

To ensure that national targets for species and habitats, as specified in the UK Action Plan, are translated into effective action at the local level. National priority species and habitats occurring in the local area must be identified; targets should be linked to national priorities.

To identify targets for species and habitats appropriate to the local area, and reflect the values of people locally. Local Biodiversity Action Plans can highlight important local features and provide an opportunity for people to express their views about what is important in their area.

To develop effective local partnerships to ensure that programmes for biodiversity conservation are maintained in the long term. The Local Biodiversity Action Plan must be built by consensus. The Plan should be owned by all parties that have a key role in delivering action.

To raise awareness of the need for biodiversity conservation in the local context. Increasing public awareness and involvement in biodiversity conservation is crucial for success.

To ensure that opportunities for conservation and enhancement of the whole biodiversity resource are fully considered. Plans need to consider appropriate action for different localities within the plan area. Opportunities for habitat enhancement and restoration should be pursued in addition to conservation of the existing resource.

To identify the resources available for implementing the objectives of the Plan.

To provide a basis for monitoring progress in biodiversity conservation, at both local and national level. A periodic review of whether targets have been achieved will assess the effectiveness of the plan and contribute to national monitoring.

(adapted from: Guidance for Local Biodiversity Action Plans: An Introduction)³