

Scotland's biodiversity: finding a way forward

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To read the Scottish Government's Scotland's 2020 Challenge for Biodiversity, approved by the whole cabinet, gives a welcome sense of the government rising to the challenge of stemming the loss of biodiversity. But to analyse the figures of the NGOs biodiversity report *State of Nature* gives a situation report on the real world of continuing losses with only a few bright spots. So can the situation be turned around? All BRISC readers, like me, will surely hope so. But how is this to be achieved and what is likely to get in the way of progressing to the target?

Trends of Scottish Biodiversity Indicators

Indicator	Long-term trend
Wintering water birds	Decrease in abundance or diversity
Breeding seabirds	Decrease in abundance or diversity
Terrestrial breeding birds	Increase in abundance or diversity
Butterflies	Little change
Flowering plant diversity	Decrease in abundance or diversity
Freshwater invertebrate diversity	Increase in abundance or diversity
Moths	Little change

Source: State of Nature Scotland, 2013, page 3

We have a number of helpful approaches and specific mechanisms. For years, we have relied on protected areas as the backbone of biodiversity conservation. Our recent IUCN UK National Committee report on *Putting Nature on the Map* suggests that we are well ahead of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Aichi target of 17% of the land area protected already. Monitoring of the state of conservation by SNH of SSSIs and Natura sites suggests that there are more positives in the trends than negatives. But biodiversity still declines. Does this suggest that protected areas alone are not adequate or the features that are monitored are not accurate indicators of biodiversity? And, if so, why are improvements not being suggested? I hear that SNH is reviewing protected areas but the emphasis appears to be on the people element rather than the reason they were established in the first place - to protect biotic and abiotic nature in a naturally healthy state. Surely, the focus has shifted too far from the origins of the mechanism: what I call "nature for its own sake" That is why in our IUCN UK study we have tested all of Scotland's (and the UK's) protected areas against the new 2008 IUCN definition which is now accepted as the global standard. Whilst more informal approaches to protection, such as SWT's Listed Wildlife Sites and Plantlife's Important Plant Areas, have a very valuable role to play, alongside the fundamental role played by those and many other NGOs as owners of land and water for nature, there is no substitute for formal protection through both domestic and international designations.

Another mechanism which has been talked about for years is the 'whole landscape approach'. I applaud the science behind this, as it has been proved to secure biodiversity. But, where are we in taking up the challenge, given some years ago by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, of adopting this approach? That is, in part, what we intended to do in my SNH days when we established *Natural Heritage Futures*. So let's get on with this nationally and with all of the local councils. And let's force the Scottish Government to review its National Planning Framework so that it is not just about the shibboleth of 'sustainable economic growth'. And, let's ensure that the Land Use Strategy adopts this whole landscape approach meaningfully for nature's features and processes, rather than being a means of finding space for renewable energy installation and non-native coniferisation.

We have learnt a lot about restoration ecology theory and practice which we should applaud. The trail-blazing projects on our blanket mires are excellent examples of what can be achieved. But we need to extend this to the extensive moorland areas which are only slowly recovering from over-grazing by sheep following the last round of CAP reform but are still plagued, yes that is the correct word, by red deer, which nobody seems to have a grip on. We must learn lessons from the expensive long-term experiments on grouse moors seeking to gain a balance between protected raptor species and sport shooting, if this is possible, on which I have profound doubts. Let's adopt restoration ecology in practice on all of Scotland's key habitat types, including meadows (well done Plantlife for driving this forward).

If you think I am being negative, the worst is yet to come. Have you studied what is going to happen to the CAP Pillars 1 and 2 as a result of the agreements by the European Parliament? We will be going backwards with dilution of the Good Agricultural and Environmental Code, lack of policing of cross compliance and increasing demands for Pillar 1 resources to stay the same or increased for production subsidies! And the environmental component of Pillar 2 looks as though it will be reduced to cater for increasing demands for rural development, despite the fact that other bodies can provide these resources. What's this got to do with biodiversity? Well one of the key indicators of loss is the decline in farmland and ground nesting birds because of the type of cultivation regimes now practiced, the continuing removal of buffer strips and hedgerows, and the loss of winter food by autumn ploughing and sowing. On the other hand, there has been a welcome recognition of the importance of High Nature Value farming systems practiced in the hills and islands, but the funding for these areas is still minuscule compared with that available for the intensive arable, livestock and mixed farming in the lowlands, with the adoption of area-based payments delayed until 2018. So NGOs please again take up the arguments about the balance of resource disposition between the two pillars and the balance within the Scottish Rural Development Programme to give greater support to farmers as the stewards of our environment, as well as providers of fine quality food. And, ensure that Scottish Ministers and MSPs make some environmentally wise decisions and get Brussels on side.

I had hoped that the land use strategy, originally proposed by the Royal Society of Edinburgh in our report on *The Future of the Hills and Islands of Scotland*, would make a difference. But I note that the silos in the Scottish Government are alive and well and that the officials leading on the strategy are facing huge blockages to the more integrated approach which the LUS espouses. And despite the warning from many of us, the Woodland Expansion Strategy and the Renewable Energy Policy will continue to have profound negative effects on our biodiversity by removing habitats and their dependent species. I heard recently the argument that biodiversity on wind farms was going up because of the protection afforded to these sites. What arrant nonsense when one sees the construction of many kilometres of roads for each farm and the deep excavations required for each tower. The amount of habitat lost, not to mention carbon released, as a result means that biodiversity starts from a very low base.

We have successfully reintroduced some species and safeguarded some that were in decline. These are good results for biodiversity, as well as gaining public interest, and for the most part public support. For example, the White-tailed eagle, the osprey, the red kite, and the European beaver are now on a biologically sound footing. But there remain problems of persecution by lawless people. Yes that is the accurate way of stating the position as the law approved by the UK and Scottish Parliaments is flouted by those wishing to make money from sporting activities, by those who have a misguided belief that too many raptors are threatening the future of the countryside and those who remain blissfully ignorant of natural food chains and the type of prey that is the natural feed of these birds. The public and political outcry earlier this year about poisoning of red kites on the Black Isle, the worst example compared with all of the successful red kite re-introductions at other sites around the UK, gives a clear signal of lawlessness in action and the inadequacy of both the present law and

the way that it is being policed. If totemic species, such as the golden eagle, and highly persecuted species like the hen harrier, are to develop into biologically viable populations things have to change, otherwise biodiversity will suffer and international obligations will not be met. The evidence being gathered from radio tracking of eagles, and other raptor species, a very welcome addition to our knowledge, enables the death spots to be identified where action needs to be focused to halt the lawless behaviour. The law needs to be changed to place a vicarious liability of protecting wildlife on the owners of land. Pressure needs to be put on the Scottish Gamekeepers Association and Scottish Land and Estates to act responsibly in private rather than just mouthing compliance with the law in public. The policing role should be given to a body, such as SNH, with responsibility for nature and ensuring that The Crown Office and the Procurator Fiscal Service improve their performance in prosecuting miscreants.

We also need to seriously consider the biological viability of those species at the edge of their natural ranges. Looking at the distribution map of the corncrake from the inter-war period compared with the present day, for example, illustrates that the birds have been pushed to the western edge of their geographical range largely as a result of the intensification of agriculture in the post War II period. Can we really claim success with the increases in the number of calling males when they are not in the centre of their natural UK range? I fear not. Surely we should be considering not the mere existence of the species but its viability by developing appropriate habitat under the Pillar 2 of the CAP in the north east of Scotland for example. And will the capercaillie ever be biologically viable? Clearly there has been improvement of the Caledonian pine forest ecosystem, but still the population is not viable. Are we fighting a losing battle and do we give up? I realise this will be read as a negative standpoint, but at times we do have to be realistic when nature is not providing the positive solution despite human intervention.

And what about the European beaver? There is a view that the beavers were introduced into the Tay catchment because of irritation with the intransigence of certain Scottish Government officials and the vested interests of some fisherman to the well researched and sound conservation case put forward by SNH. It was really rather laughable that the Scottish Government asked SNH to develop a plan for the removal of the beavers from the Tay catchment. Hopefully, sense is now prevailing on that front and also on the review of the end of the so-called trial re-introduction in Knapdale. Why should there ever have been an exit strategy? Maybe because vested interests wanted that! Well the excitement of locals and visitors alike, even if they do not see a beaver, is palpable to me, so let's make sure that they remain there and are allowed to expand.

Have you ever walked into some of Scotland's ancient woods? Well I suggest that you do. They are not pristine nature as you find the Bialowieski forest of Poland or the Sitka spruce forests of the Olympic National Park in Washington State USA, but they demonstrate that humans and nature can live in harmony for centuries in a symbiotic relationship. The trees were intensively used for fibre, for dye stuffs, for shelter, and for building. But, the fact that they are still there demonstrates a truly sustainable relationship. It might mean intervention management to sustain the system, such as the grazing of pigs in the Old Wood of Dalkeith SSSI, but that is a practice developed successfully over centuries to ensure natural regeneration. A nice story!

So to conclude, we need to make a good number of changes in our attitudes and approach and in the mechanisms we use if biodiversity is to become one of the bedrocks of our society and our public policy and meet our obligations. We should make our protected areas work effectively for biodiversity. We should make sure that they are linked by corridors to allow migration of plants and animals, all developed within a whole landscape scale approach by owners and managers, and by national and local government authorities. This means stopping the single objective land use planning system and plan with 'nature in mind' and provide 'space for nature'. This will mean fundamentally changing the CAP support regime, improving the effectiveness of stewardship codes, and develop-

ing positive stewardship schemes. It means improvements in the laws to halt illegal activities. And, it means perhaps most of all a change in the mind set of all that biodiversity is indeed the basis for our survival.

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