

# MAKING SPACE FOR GRASSLANDS AT LANDSCAPE SCALE

A meeting of the UK Grasslands Forum & NIA representatives at  
Bude, Devon 18-19 September 2012.

## The First NIA Best Practice Event

### 1. Background and aims

1.1 The UK Grasslands Forum brings together those organisations with an interest in the conservation of grasslands that have wildlife, cultural heritage and community value in the UK, in order to make grassland conservation in the UK more effective. In September 2011, it convened a very successful two-day conference on 'Grassland Values' hosted by the National Trust at Dinewr, in Llandeilo, Carmarthen-shire. This year, we proposed holding a joint meeting with representatives of the 12 Nature Improvement Areas to consider 'Making Space for Grasslands at Landscape Scale'.



1.2 Hosted by the Devon Wildlife Trust and the Northern Devon NIA, we aimed to look at grasslands from an ecosystem services perspective and to consider how a landscape-scale approach might provide a vision for grassland sustainability. Though the field visits were to be focused on the renowned Culm Grasslands, we wished our discussions to pursue questions of generic significance for best practice referring to examples from a wide range of grassland habitats within and beyond the NIAs, whether in lowland limestone landscapes, floodplains, the uplands or elsewhere.

1.3 Of the Grasslands Forum 14 people attended with 14 NIA representatives (from 8 NIAs) together with Brian McDonald NIA Project Manager, Judith Milne NIA Project Support and Professor Val Brown, a panel Member of the 'Making Space for Nature' report. Field excursions on 18 September were to Dunsdon NNR, Dunsdon Farm, Puckland Farm and Bursdon Moor and discussions and business meetings were held on 19 September at the Falcon Hotel in Bude.

1.4 The following points were made in discussions among all participants throughout the two days and are unattributed here to particular contributors.



## 2. What different does it make, working at landscape scale?

2.1 Some have felt a new level of excitement and focus with the advent of the NIA projects, though it is important to remember that larger NT estates, AONBs and e.g. RSPB Futurescapes all have been operating at landscape scale.

2.2 Working at landscape scale does not simply mean tackling a set of separate projects on a larger canvas. It ought to raise some questions of strategic organisation, delivery and benefits related to interconnectedness – links between sites and species populations and between different habitats, fragments of which are often outside protection or the prospect of restoration.

2.3 A related benefit concerns the perception of what is 'fair game' for nature conservation - whether it is an activity only for designated areas of one sort or another or something that can play a part in the management and sustainability of the wider countryside. This is a question of perception for nature conservation professionals as well as for the wider publics.

2.4 Wider benefits ought also to be conceived within the framework of green infrastructure and its relatedness to social and economic functionality within a landscape. Working at a larger than designated site scale offers the possibility of demonstrating environmental benefits to business and residents living across a wider area and with quite other priorities.

2.5 We also have an opportunity to develop collective ambitions among people or groups who previously would not have thought about cooperating. Existing experience of the NT with its tenant farmers could be informative.

2.6 We might then even make others jealous of our approach – of our imagination, ingenuity and ability to deliver – others not generally encountering what nature conservation is about, because they 'do not go there'.



2.7 The Lawton Report stressed the need to raise awareness among local communities of the importance of the landscape in which they lived. Nature plays an important part in connecting people with place and enriching a sense of what belonging is about. Working at landscape scale means that there can be more opportunity for people to find themselves in nature.

2.8 Such an approach begins to breach the gap between nature and culture which is often seen by people as narrowly defined in arts

events or scheduled buildings, and which realms are administered through separate organisations. Arts projects are often outside the comfort zone of conservation professionals. Including cultural services within the NIA delivery brief is a real step forward.

2.9 We need to remember that the NIAs are quite varied in character. For some sites, the general ambition to restore is less applicable. The urban sites also have a strikingly different social structure to the rural and post-industrial places can lack confidence. Environmental organisations do not always make good partners in such situations.

### 3. Are our targets realistic?

3.1 In ambitious and competitive programmes, funded over relatively short periods of time, it can be easy to succumb to a fashionable conservation lexicon with unrealistic targets. We should be concerned with long-term and sustainable change, with building value and resilience that is beyond the restoration of individual habitats in particular places through particular programmes, with reinforcing a lasting connection of people with nature. Short-term targets are essential but we have to promote these as being stepping stones to ... rather than the immediate creation of ...

3.2 Realistic targets should be attuned to our audience, whether this is the public, fellow professionals or civil servants, and use non-technical language where necessary, being conceived as part of a comprehensive programme of communicating widely the importance of sustainable landscapes.

3.3 A slick devotion to quantitative targets may be ultimately unrealistic for all the benefits we expect from sustainable landscapes. The National Ecosystem Assessment acknowledges that some values of nature are qualitative so how might we set targets for achieving such objectives?

3.4 In setting targets for the restoration of particular kinds of vegetation like culm grassland or meadows, the National Vegetation Classification can be a valuable descriptive tool for defining start and possible end points and can provide informative and readily measurable indicators of attainment. However, it is not a



prescriptive and all-inclusive framework and using it in too rigid a fashion can create unrealistic expectations and disappointment.

3.5 Nature conservation has too often been about managing pattern rather than process, but managing on a landscape scale may better

accommodate dynamic change than confining our activities to smaller sites. How might targets for achieving a desired speed, intensity or success of an ecological or landscape process differ from spatially-defined targets?

3.6 Ecological processes are often not fully understood. How can we have the confidence to relinquish control over our immediate understanding so as to accommodate dynamic change without undue risk? How might we best apply the results of ecological research within conservation management and disseminate best practice in managing process?



3.7 Sustainable landscapes should be multi-functional and we have often had one kind of objective for National Parks (more preoccupied with recreation) and another kind for SSSIs and NNRs (more concerned with species numbers or extent of habitat). Devising realistic targets for multiple objectives can be more challenging but ecosystem services provides one kind of integrative framework.



#### 4. Are our monitoring and reporting frames adequate?

4.1 The Appendix to the NIA bidding documentation makes very clear that the objectives of the programme are about making connections: between separate tracts of habitat that are in good condition, between such areas and those tracts of landscape in poorer condition, between people and nature, and between partners in the projects. Monitoring should therefore enable us to see clearly whether these simple objectives are being met.

4.2 The Monitoring & Evaluation Framework devised for the programme applies the concept of ecosystem services and provides for some universal indicators of particular outcomes with an opportunity for the NIAs to develop some indicators of their own. Each NIA may excel in a particular strand of the work, the demonstrable results of which can be disseminated among the others.

4.3 We need to be clear about the difference between an action-reporting framework like BARS and a project management system like CMS. Both kinds of system are essential for the successful delivery of programmes like the NIAs and there should be some commitment to interfacing the software between these particular examples.

4.4 Any monitoring programme needs baseline data and a clear understanding of the existing trajectory of any change that is in train. Too often, monitoring proceeds without a clear record of the starting point.

4.5 Indicators often tell us about something obvious about what has already happened, lacking predictive power to inform us of likely changes we might expect or must accommodate in future.

4.6 The measurement of the resilience of habitats and species populations and demonstration of improved resilience are problematic.

4.7 Monitoring and reporting frames must accommodate what the NEA acknowledges to be rather fugitive or elusive aesthetic and spiritual benefits of sustainable landscapes that are in good ecological condition. Our approach must be elastic enough to allow people to use their own words in appreciation of the benefits of nature and wildlife. Sometimes quotes and stories may communicate very vividly experiences of fascination and wonder.

4.8 Within what wider European framework might the results of our landscape-scale wildlife management be conceived and promoted? There is real perplexity at the moment about even basic policy-related definitions such as 'semi-natural grasslands' and 'permanent pasture' and an absence of national statistics about the extent of these resources.

## 5. Further reflections from the UK Grasslands Forum business meeting

5.1 In the UKGF Business Meeting, we considered that this kind of event was an excellent contrast to our more formal seminar style, providing opportunity for valuable discussions with a different spread of participants in the field as well as the indoor sessions.

5.2 In particular, we welcomed the opportunity to consider grasslands (and other vegetation types) at landscape-scale, whether within NIAs, AONBs, on larger NT estates.

5.3 We wondered also how often the NIA teams would meet as a group in this kind of seminar or conference style and within what wider framework their work and outcomes would be scrutinised, beyond the NIAs themselves. How might their best practice be exported?

## 6. Issues and Reflections from NIAs

Landscape scale ambition is dependent on agri-environment funding. Threat exists as RDPE scheme ends 2013 and no guarantee of funds in transition period and no definite new scheme. Opportunity exists to make case for transition and also to shape new RDPE and CAP. Action: For NIAs to identify dependency on agri environment funding; to indicate what they need over a transition period; and to identify what they need for the future if NIAs could shape future RDPE/CAP to support their objectives.

Relationship with M&E and future research – connectivity, for example, is key to the NIA ambitions yet no clear approach established as yet, NIAs will be able to focus R&D in establishing baselines and a common approach for NIAs and others.

Be good to establish a stronger bond between the NIAs and the Making Space for Nature collaborators.

**John Rodwell and additional notes/photos: Brian McDonald**