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Review of the Coverage of Urban Habitats and Species within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan

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Introduction

There is a growing awareness of the nature conservation value of urban habitats and the importance of these to local people for educational, recreational, cultural, health and spiritual reasons. However, despite this and increasing threats to such habitats (eg from residential, commercial and infrastructure related developments), urban habitats and species have received little attention in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP) process.

To address this issue, English Nature commissioned this independent review of the treatment of characteristic urban habitats and species in the UKBAP. The aim of the study is to improve their representation by identifying the most obvious and significant omissions.

What was done

The study involved a review of available literature and data on urban nature conservation in the UK, development of a typology for urban habitats, identification of Species of Conservation Concern (SoCCs) associated with urban habitats, an assessment of the treatment of urban species in Local Biodiversity Actions Plans (LBAPs), and identification of potential new UKBAP Priority Habitats and Priority Species associated with urban habitats.

Results and conclusions

The key conclusions from the study are:

- The overall number of Priority UKBAP Species associated with urban habitats has been previously underestimated, although the dependence of some well known Priority Species on urban areas has been overestimated.
- The majority of urban habitats are of moderate or high overall conservation importance, often in terms of both biodiversity and social value. The most important in biodiversity terms are probably some post-industrial sites. These habitats are particularly threatened and few new sites are being created that can replace such habitats.
- All urban sites which support accessible, visible wildlife should be given higher conservation priority than is currently often the case.

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- The species with the strongest cases for revised listing as Priority Species, are house sparrow and starling, which have both clearly undergone rapid declines in urban and suburban areas. Priority status should also be considered for the micro-moth *Nemophora fasciella*, which appears to be declining as a consequence of direct conflicts between its ecological requirements and human desire for tidiness.
- This study supports the recognition of a "Rock Outcrops and Mine Spoil Rich in Heavy Metals" Priority Habitat (which includes the EU Habitats Directive listed Calaminarian grasslands), as previously proposed by JNCC. However, this habitat is relatively narrowly defined and we consider that there is a strong case for the separate recognition of a group of habitats under a combined category of "Post-industrial sites of High Ecological Quality" as a Priority Habitat (irrespective of whether they are in an urban setting). These habitats are both ecologically valuable and are threatened.
- There should be further research to consider the status urban commons (ie demolition sites with more fertile and/or wetter substrates), urban rock habitats (ie walls, roofs, paths, cemeteries and churchyards), gardens, and urban scrub.
- Conservation efforts should not solely focus on Priority Habitats and Priority Species, but should also aim to maintain all remaining semi-natural habitats in urban landscapes and strive to enhance their ecological quality and connectivity.
- Further information is required to enable more reliable assessments of the biodiversity value of many urban habitats, especially with regard to their importance for fungi, lichens, lower plants and many invertebrate groups. In particular much more information is required on the distribution of many species and the extent to which they rely on habitats that are characteristic of urban areas and created by industrial or other human activities.
- Further monitoring is also required of many urban habitats to establish population trends within urban areas, as many current schemes omit these or under-represent them.

English Nature's viewpoint

The importance of urban areas for biodiversity has received little attention in UK BAP. Greater recognition should be given to the number of Priority UKBAP Species associated with urban habitats and there is a strong case for house sparrow, starling and the micro-moth *Nemophora fasciella* being given Priority Species status. Two new Priority Habitats for 'Rock Outcrops and Mine Spoil Rich in Heavy Metals' and 'Post-industrial sites of High Ecological Quality' should be recognised. Further research work is needed to be able to properly consider the status of a number of other urban habitats, including urban commons, gardens and urban scrub. Conservation efforts should not solely focus on Priority Habitats and Priority Species, but should better reflect the biodiversity and social importance of all urban sites which support accessible, visible wildlife.

Selected references

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Further information

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