

Northern Ireland

Biodiversity Strategy



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August 2002



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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

Northern Ireland's natural heritage is at the core of what makes this part of the world distinct and special to us. The rich diversity of rocks, soils, water, plants, birds and animals which we enjoy is something of intrinsic value and beauty. It is also of real and immediate importance to the well-being and health of our society. A rich biodiversity can provide recreational facilities and an important counter-balance to the pressures of modern living; it also provides a positive link with our past. The importance of our biodiversity in attracting visitors and providing economic benefit must also be recognised.

Some have worked tirelessly to protect this heritage, but in many ways as a society we have taken the natural wealth of our biodiversity for granted. In doing so we have failed to realise how easily it can be lost- and lost irretrievably.

The Northern Ireland Executive shares the belief that our natural heritage is at the core of what makes Northern Ireland special and is committed to protecting this common wealth in a way that reflects the interests of those who use it and who live in it. That is why we are publishing this document. It explains how we plan to safeguard our biodiversity in the present and over the next decade and beyond.

Implementation of our biodiversity strategy means more than just government action. All sectors of our society must become involved. This is an issue in which every one of us has a vested interest and which lies at the heart of the quality of life for people in Northern Ireland, now and for the generations to come. I therefore look forward to our wider society engaging fully in making the Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy a successful reality.



DERMOT NESBITT MLA

Minister of the Environment





INTRODUCTION

1. Biodiversity - the variety of all living things - is under threat in Northern Ireland as much as in any other part of the world. The Executive recognises the importance of taking action to protect and conserve our landscape, wildlife habitats and species and is fully committed to taking steps to protect and enhance biodiversity in Northern Ireland. Our first Programme for Government included a commitment to publish a Biodiversity Strategy. The purpose of this document is to meet that commitment and to set out how the Executive plans to protect and enhance biodiversity in Northern Ireland over the period up to 2016.
2. The term "biodiversity" came to the fore at the Earth Summit of 1992, an unprecedented gathering of world leaders at Rio de Janeiro. Over 150 countries, the United Kingdom included, committed themselves to developing strategies for biodiversity conservation. In Northern Ireland a Biodiversity Group (NIBG) was set up in 1996 to oversee the development of a strategy to be followed. NIBG presented its recommendations for a strategy¹ to Environment Minister, Sam Foster, in October 2000. The Executive accepts the recommendations contained within the NIBG Report as Northern Ireland's framework for biodiversity action, against which progress will be made as quickly as resources and the other priorities of the Executive and Departments allow.

1 "Recommendations to Government for a Biodiversity Strategy". Posted on the internet www.ehsni.gov.uk and can be purchased from HMSO (ISBN 0-337-08391-6) Price £20.00.

BIODIVERSITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

3. Biodiversity in Northern Ireland includes all the 20,000 or so different species of living things that are found here on land, in the soil, in the air and in our waters. But this is not the only way of looking at it. Northern Ireland's biodiversity and general environmental quality is of paramount importance for the health of its wildlife, its people and its economy. Biodiversity itself is part of our inheritance and our culture. Its future is bound up with our future. Because of the way we live, this variety of life is deteriorating. We accept that this is a sign of an unsustainable relationship between humanity and the natural world. And we believe this is true of Northern Ireland, just as it is of the world as a whole. We also believe it need not be so.
4. In its comprehensive report NIBG explains the importance of conserving biological diversity. It describes the main features of biodiversity in Northern Ireland, identifies the main factors affecting it and proposes 76 measures to support biodiversity conservation over the period up to 2016. We agree that NIBG's recommendations provide us with the framework for arresting and reversing the present trends in biodiversity reduction and losses.
5. We are indebted to the NIBG for the enormous task which it has undertaken. We are most appreciative of the Group's scholarly, inclusive and holistic approach, which has done so much to advance the publication of this strategy. NIBG is also commended for the extensive public consultation exercise which it carried out on its proposals. We would also like to acknowledge the work of the many enthusiastic naturalists across Northern Ireland whose efforts contribute to the important process of capturing data about species and habitats.





THE THREATS

6. Northern Ireland is losing its biodiversity at an alarming rate and Chapter 5 of the NIBG Recommendations examines the many factors at play. The impact of agriculture is an important example. Changes in agricultural practices in response to European, and before that national, policies have changed the face of the agricultural landscape. The replacement of traditional and more sustainable land management practices with more intensive systems has led to a loss of habitats where a great variety of plants and animals could live. Ninety percent of our lowland raised bogs have been lost or altered due to peat extraction, forestry and drainage. Few of our once common hay meadows survive. Our freshwaters suffer from nutrient enrichment to a greater or lesser degree and a significant factor in this has been agricultural run off from the increasing use of inorganic fertilisers and slurry application. These are examples of environmental degradation from only one sector of the economy. The environmental impact of tourism, the construction industry, manufacturing, retailing, commercial fishing and other sectors across the range of economic activity has added to the damage. The environmental challenge which faces Northern Ireland cannot be overstated. But it is matched by our determination to arrest and reverse the decline.



ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUES

7. The Executive agrees with the analysis set out in the NIBG report. It represents a milestone document in terms of making information on biodiversity, and particularly Northern Ireland's biodiversity, accessible to a wide audience. It also identifies the important issues for the future of biodiversity and provides a framework of protection measures. Even more importantly it will be the starting point against which the results of our remedial efforts will be measured.
8. Taken as a whole, the recommendations represent a series of measures that are both well thought out and comprehensive in coverage. We are confident that they provide a framework for a proper response in Northern Ireland to a world-wide challenge. We also agree with NIBG that they represent a strategy for action not by the Executive alone but by the community as a whole.
9. The Executive, however, must take the lead. Some of the recommendations have already been adopted and a start made on putting them into effect. Others will be progressively implemented. The resources required in some cases are clear and they are currently available. In other cases, the costs cannot yet be accurately forecast or may be dependent on changing circumstances. The need for, and benefits of, any additional resources required would have to be clearly identified in due course and be considered at the appropriate time against other competing priorities and redirection of resources.





OUR LONG TERM GOAL

10. In our first Programme for Government we stated that sustainable development would be a key theme running through our work and priorities. Proposals for a Sustainable Development Strategy were published for public consultation on 29 May 2002 and we aim to publish the final Strategy by the end of this year. Sustainable development means social progress for everyone, high and stable levels of economic growth and employment, effective protection of the environment and prudent use of natural resources. Effective protection of the environment means setting ourselves exemplary standards in this area and our goal must therefore be to have the highest quality environment in the United Kingdom. In order to help achieve this goal, conservation of biological diversity needs to be fully integrated into our policy making. Only in this way can we be sure of having an environment which supports the health of its citizens, its wildlife and its economy and which is fit for bequeathing to future generations.
11. The Northern Ireland Countryside Survey 2000 repeated an earlier survey of biodiversity resources in the Northern Ireland Countryside. It allows us to reassess the stock and quantify the changes that have taken place. Northern Ireland still has many areas of natural habitat and has a high density of hedgerows and drystone walls. These are important habitats for our wildlife and are highly prized for their biodiversity but have declined in area since the baseline survey. One of our chief broad goals is to arrest biodiversity decline and we will be able to measure the extent to which we are achieving this by repeating Countryside Surveys at regular intervals.



MECHANISMS

12. We recognised earlier that responsibility for action to conserve our biodiversity is not confined to the Executive; mechanisms are needed therefore to engage the widest possible participation in this work. We envisage two key mechanisms. The first is a Steering Group which will be the successor to NIBG; the second will involve an inter-departmental approach to taking forward the implementation work within departments.
13. By December 2002 we will reconstitute the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group. When reconstituting the Group we will revise its membership in order to strengthen representation from certain sectors including business, education and the fishing industry. Its role will be to :
 - co-ordinate and monitor implementation of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy including progress towards agreed species and habitats targets
 - co-ordinate and monitor the development and implementation of Northern Ireland Action Plans
 - promote public and business awareness of, and involvement in, biodiversity conservation
 - explore mechanisms for promoting biodiversity conservation on an all-island basis
 - participate in any UK biodiversity partnership and the development of UK Action Plans which relate to Northern Ireland.
 - Submit reports to the Executive every three years on progress with implementation of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy





14. The NIBG report makes it clear that all departments have responsibilities in relation to the strategy's implementation and we will, therefore, establish an inter-departmental mechanism to coordinate the actions of the Executive in the strategy's implementation. The purpose will be to examine the impact of departments' policies on biodiversity, and to ensure that departments achieve increased co-ordination, extend the application of the ecosystem approach to environmental management and promote biodiversity on their land and water through their activities (recommendations 1, 2, 3 & 41 of the NIBG Report). Another important function will be to oversee the implementation of those NIBG recommendations which relate to knowledge, understanding and participation (recommendations 68-76). While it may be decided that lead responsibility for action on certain of these recommendations should be assumed by an organisation other than that proposed by NIBG, this will in no way diminish the commitment to implementation.

ALL IRELAND DIMENSION

15. Implementation of the strategy will include actions which take account of the all-island dimension of our biodiversity. We share, for example, waterways, water- tables and cross-border conservation sites with the Republic of Ireland. Close co-operation already exists on a number of issues and this co-operation will be developed further.

NORTHERN IRELAND DEPARTMENTS WORKING TOGETHER

16. DOE and its agencies, with advice from the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, has the primary responsibility for biodiversity action within Northern Ireland. However, given the fact that some 80% of Northern Ireland's land area is either in agriculture or forestry, DARD and its agencies will also have responsibility for a large number of actions designed to restore the biological integrity of the wider countryside. Likewise DCAL will play a key role in conserving and restoring freshwater fish stocks including salmon. These Departments share DOE's commitment to biodiversity conservation and are determined that environmental improvement will be at the heart of all their policies and actions. Biodiversity conservation does not of course stop at the coastline and the departments will be working together to safeguard our coastal and marine biodiversity.





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

17. Resources are of course a key issue and we are all aware of the pressing and competing demands on Northern Ireland funds. We acknowledge the need to take actions, which represent value for money, as early as possible and we will ensure that this is taken into account and reflected as far as possible within the Executive's priorities.
18. As a first step, the Executive has increased DOE's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) budget by £2.5million annually, mainly to further conservation of biodiversity and to assist the effective management of designated sites. Twelve additional staff have already been appointed, ten more staff are presently being recruited, and further posts are planned. DOE's Environmental Policy Division has been strengthened to transpose a number of EU Directives on environmental matters, many of which will, directly or indirectly, benefit biodiversity conservation. For example, work is in hand to meet the target set in our first Programme for Government to eliminate progressively the backlog in transposing and implementing EC Directives on air, land and water quality.
19. There has been a doubling of DARD's agri-environment scheme expenditure to £88 million in the period 2000-2006. DARD has also recently been allocated £8.5million from the Executive Programme Funds to support work on Farm Waste Management, Nutrient Management and Conversion of Animal Housing in support of Organic Farming. The first two of these Schemes are aimed at reducing the adverse impact of agriculture sourced pollution on some of the worst affected rivers in Northern Ireland. If successful, these schemes have the potential for wider application.
20. The Executive's Programme for Government already contains targets for enhancing the role of farming in helping to protect the environment. For example, by March 2003 we aim to have over 6500 participants in agri-environment schemes, which should rise to 10000 participants by 2006. We also plan to provide 12000 additional places for environmental training for farmers by March 2005. Our plans



for the marine environment include, for example, targets for participation at European level in efforts to ensure the recovery of Irish Sea Cod. These and other steps, including anticipated CAP reform, will together assist greatly in the delivery of conservation of our biodiversity.

21. DCAL has been allocated resources from the Executive Programme Funds to buy out commercial salmon nets as a conservation measure. Additional resources to prepare innovative plans for the identification of salmon habitat and for the protection and restoration of that habitat as required by the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation will be considered.
22. It is important to remember that we can expect to derive economic benefits from any investment in biodiversity. For example, we can expect increased numbers of visitors attracted by a rich and diverse countryside. Furthermore, rebuilding our biodiversity need not always involve additional expenditure. Co-operation between departments can provide a cost-effective approach to many biodiversity issues, and much can be achieved by refocusing existing budgets. In some cases the pursuit of biodiversity conservation can actually save money. For example, emphasis on soft coast engineering, which is important in conserving coastal habitats, can obviate the need for more expensive hard coast engineering solutions which often exacerbate erosion effects elsewhere. Ways in which departments can adopt a cost-effective approach to biodiversity conservation will be examined via the inter-departmental mechanism.
23. Biodiversity conservation will also be greatly assisted by DRD's Regional Development Strategy (RDS) which contains strategic planning guidelines on sustaining and enhancing biodiversity and related matters. The need to encourage the wise use and management of environmental resources lies at the heart of the RDS and DRD will be following up with further guidance on a number of topic areas all of which will take account of biodiversity matters. In particular, a policy statement on the Countryside will contain detailed policy guidance on matters affecting biodiversity.





DOE RESPONSIBILITIES

24. EHS will very shortly be publishing its 2002/2005 Biodiversity Strategy Implementation Plan. This will contain detailed and challenging targets in respect of the NIBG recommendations for which it has lead responsibility. A key element of the Plan will be the protection and restoration of habitats and species.
25. Another fundamentally important aspect of DOE's responsibilities is planning control and the Planning Service will have regard to biodiversity conservation when exercising its responsibilities. This will be particularly important in bringing forward policies and proposals in development plans and in the review and preparation of Planning Policy Statements (PPSs). PPSs of particular importance to biodiversity conservation include Nature Conservation, Waste Management, Minerals and The Coast.
26. Other aspects of DOE's work will include:
 - the publication of Habitat Action Plans and Species Action Plans .
 - the provision of advice to other departments and agencies on the development of a better understanding of biodiversity issues and the implementation of training and awareness programmes.
 - the development of effective local eutrophication control management schemes.
 - improved protection and management for Areas of Special Scientific Interest.

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- consideration of the establishment, subject to resources, of a Coastal Forum to assist in the process of managing coastal areas.
- development of a biodiversity website.
- greater emphasis on biodiversity objectives within EHS natural heritage grant schemes.

As the actions of other departments and agencies impact on many of DOE's responsibilities, co-operation between departments will be of paramount importance. This will be addressed via the inter-departmental mechanism.



DARD RESPONSIBILITIES

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27. The NIBG emphasised the major impact agricultural policy has on biodiversity and made recommendations on this and on the forestry and sea fishing industries (recommendations 4-13, 14-20 and 21-26 refer).
28. Reference to biodiversity commitments will feature in DARD's forward Business Plans as well as those for its Forest Service and Fisheries Division. Also, DARD is reviewing its Countryside Management Strategy and this will include specific actions concerned with biodiversity. The Report of the Vision Group, established to make recommendations on the future development of the Northern Ireland Agri-food Sector, recognised that the biodiversity strategy would have important implications for the industry and these will be taken into account as action on the report is taken forward.
29. DARD is conducting a review of forest policy which focuses on options for development of the wood processing industry, tourism, recreation and environmental improvement. This will include issues such as the protection of native woodlands, prevention of the loss of woodlands of biodiversity value and increasing appropriate woodland cover.
30. DARD will assist the sea fishing industry to operate on as sustainable a basis as possible, which is compatible with the industry's long-term future. It will also ensure that aquaculture develops in a way which minimises impacts on biodiversity. DARD will also assist and support the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission in relation to its responsibilities for the conservation and protection of salmon and inland fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

DCAL RESPONSIBILITIES

31. The conservation and protection of fish habitats and species is central to DCAL policies and strategies and to those of the Fisheries Conservancy Board . DCAL will actively advise on all activities with the potential to impact on freshwater fish and salmon biodiversity and will survey fish populations and construct databases to inform this work.





KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND PARTICIPATION

32. We said earlier that a biodiversity strategy had implications not only for all departments and agencies but for other sectors and the wider society in Northern Ireland. A broad measure of public understanding and participation is therefore required and it will be an important part of the Steering Group's role to develop a plan to achieve this.
33. It is important that our children and young people understand and experience biodiversity as part of their learning experience, whether in the formal or informal sectors of education. We are aware that the Northern Ireland Curriculum is currently being reviewed and that a new statutory curriculum will be implemented from 2004.
34. This review has provided an important opportunity to define how all subjects and particularly the key areas of Geography and Science can provide opportunities to develop young people as responsible contributors to the environment; and to explore how teaching can be enhanced by the immediacy of links to the local environment which involve pupils as citizens of their community, and through relevant fieldwork outside the classroom.
35. In this context, we will seek to establish and maintain links between the key agencies such as CCEA, the education and library boards and schools, environmental organisations and others who support biodiversity and environmental issues. We will also consider ways in which better information about learning resources can be disseminated to assist advisers and teachers in their work on biodiversity and environmental issues.

BUSINESS AND TOURISM

36. The private sector also has a part to play in contributing to biodiversity. While the move towards Environmental Management Systems is producing benefits for biodiversity such as more efficient use of resources, waste minimisation and the introduction of cleaner industrial practices, there remains much to be done in this area. The business world still tends to regard biodiversity as a peripheral issue. There is a need to integrate biodiversity into Environmental Management Systems and to get the message across to business generally that biodiversity is much wider than saving species and habitats and includes issues such as genetic resources, value for recreation and tourism and sustainable harvests of wild species. There is also scope to encourage industrial concerns to foster biodiversity on lands under their control. These are issues which the Steering Group will be addressing.
37. We recognise the complex relationship between the quality of our environment and tourism. Maintaining and enhancing Northern Ireland's unique landscape characteristics and biological identity is of paramount importance if we want tourists to continue to visit us. Sustainable tourism will therefore be our goal.





POLICY BACKGROUND AGAINST WHICH THE BIODIVERSITY FRAMEWORK WILL BE ACTIONED

38. Action on biodiversity will be taking place in the context of other actions which are being taken at European and international levels to protect the environment.
39. Following the Convention on Biological Diversity the UK government launched the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, the aim of which is to conserve and enhance biological diversity within the UK and to contribute to the conservation of global biodiversity through all appropriate mechanisms.
40. Within the European Community efforts are being made on a number of fronts to improve environmental protection. Amongst the numerous Directives there are several which are particularly relevant to biodiversity conservation, including the Habitats and Birds Directives, the Water Framework Directive and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive. These are very significant measures which will make an important contribution to biodiversity conservation throughout our countryside.
41. The issue of climate change is now accepted as one of the world's greatest environmental challenges. In Northern Ireland the annual rainfall is predicted to increase by 3-5% by the 2050s and temperatures increase by 0.7 - 2.6 degrees centigrade. A potential area of concern is the prediction of the loss or gain of certain species, the threat to protected habitats in estuaries and unsustainable beach and dune erosion. Developed countries have agreed emission reduction targets for the greenhouse gases which are affecting the earth's climate. Meanwhile research has been undertaken

into the effects of climate change on biodiversity and UK species and habitat conservation policy. In Northern Ireland work has recently been completed on a study into the potential impacts of climate change based on scenarios for 2020, 2050 and 2080. This study provides a basis for more detailed sectoral work by the parties most likely to be affected by the impacts of climate change.

42. A Review of Marine Nature Conservation has been initiated by the UK Government. As part of this review it has been decided to explore a regional seas initiative and the Irish Sea has been chosen as the demonstration site because of the number of authorities and issues involved. As part of this work, the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will investigate the development of a comprehensive UK marine landscape classification and propose marine landscapes targeted for conservation action.





TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

43. We believe that that the NIBG recommendations provide a framework to tackle the main issues affecting biodiversity in Northern Ireland. Ultimately success will depend on the involvement of all sectors of our society and action at local community level. It is increasingly being recognised that loss of biodiversity is associated with gradual ecological failure and degradation that will not be recovered. Biodiversity conservation is therefore vital for our future quality of life.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.
DARD	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
DCAL	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
DOE	Department of the Environment
DRD	Department for Regional Development
EHS	Environment and Heritage Service
NIBG	Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group
RDS	Regional Development Strategy
UK	United Kingdom





