

# UK Biodiversity Partnership Standing Committee

UKBSC/03/06

Report from Biodiversity Reporting and Information Group  
Review of HAPs and SAPs

29 September 2003

## Species and Habitat Review Working Group

### **Introduction**

BRIG has been asked by the Standing Committee to consider what needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of the SAPs and HAPs process. This paper provides a summary of the issues identified by a Working Group established by BRIG and makes some recommendations in terms of defining the scope and supporting processes to undertake the review. (The record of the Species and Habitat Review Working Group meeting is in Appendix 1.)

Since 1995, work has been undertaken or is still underway, which will contribute to and inform a UK review of the priority species and habitats. The Working Group agreed the need to maintain and take account of this previous work.

### **Guiding principles for the review of priorities**

The Review Working Group identified a number of over-arching guiding principles for the review of priorities. These were considered to be based on such issues as practicability and should serve to clarify the process and ensure that lessons are learned from previous reviews and actions.

- The list of priorities should remain dynamic, responding to conservation need
- The reasons for selection should be robust, transparent and reflect genuine conservation priorities
- There is a continued commitment to the action plan process, identifying priorities and the target-led approach
- Incorporation of valuable lessons learnt in previous work
- Action plans should be costed.

### **Emerging issues for species and habitat priorities**

The role of the UK and country groups in reviewing and adopting the list of priority species and habitats requires clarification in the light of the new UK Biodiversity Partnership arrangements established by the Government response to the MBR. Additional issues to be dealt with are included below.

#### *Key issues for the review of priority habitats and species:*

- Clarifying and redefining the existing selection criteria and, if necessary, identifying additional criteria
- Considering how to deal with information gaps
- Ensuring sufficient information is available to support future reviews and to address data gaps
- Integrating the review of species with that of the Species Status Assessment Project
- Exploring with habitat specialists and seeking recommendations for improvements if the classification and definition of priority habitats is causing implementation difficulties
- Considering additional conservation options (for example, assessment of action plans compared to other measures of effective action)

- Establishing a list of Habitats of Conservation Concern and a Species of Conservation Concern list
- Agreeing a process for ratifying recommendations and adoption for habitat and species plans that recognises the key roles of country groups
- Maintaining 'master file' for species criteria to support audit trail.

### **Further thinking**

The Working Group recognised that the process outlined above would generate a list of species and habitats of conservation concern based on best knowledge and objective criteria. However, it is likely that this list would be large and it would be impossible for all these listed species and habitats to be considered priorities. Therefore the idea of prioritising from within this list was mooted.

One approach may be to review the species and habitats on the list using new criteria to generate a graded list of importance for inclusion into the priority status list. These criteria may include the ability of the species or habitat to benefit from a targeted-action plan, an assessment of our ability to save the species or habitat and the cost of an action plan.

### **Recommendations:**

The Standing Committee is invited to endorse the approach taken by the working group to scope the scale of the review and supporting process.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### Biodiversity Reporting and Information Group

#### Species and Habitat Review Working Group meeting 8 September 2002

##### **Introduction**

The working group (for composition see Annex B) has been charged with scoping a review of BAP priority species and habitats, on behalf of the Biodiversity Reporting and Information Group and presenting potential options to the Standing Committee. This paper provides a summary of the issues identified by the Review Working Group and makes some recommendations in terms of defining the scope and supporting processes to undertake the review.

Since 1995, a number of areas of work have been undertaken, or are still underway which will contribute to, and/or inform a UK review of the priority species and habitats:

- Development of the Species of Conservation Concern list;
- Work of the JNCC-led Species Status Assessment Project to develop red lists for species based on IUCN criteria;
- A pilot review of vascular plant priorities based on the published selection criteria using recent atlas data;
- Partial reviews of the coastal, marine, freshwater and terrestrial priority habitat types between 1998 and 1999 which identified a number of gaps in the series in 2001;
- Refined guiding principles for the selection of priority habitats (e.g. improved definitions).

To support and inform the work and deliberations of the Review Working Group, the JNCC held an internal meeting (with members of the Biodiversity Information Service and Species Status Assessment project staff) to consider the issues relating a review of the priority species. Ant Maddock presented a paper summarising the issues of selection and deselection, clarifying and refining the selection criteria (using the outcome of Stuart Ball's pilot review of vascular plants), the work of the SSA project and their potential role in the review process.

##### **Emerging issues for species and habitat priorities**

The Working Group considered the current UK list and the role of the UK and country groups in ratifying changes to the list of priority species and habitats. The process for selection of and recommendations for new priority habitats and species is no longer clear following devolution. Although the review will precede the 2005 reporting round, the Group agreed that the outcomes of 2002 reporting should be used. The assessment of trend, status, distribution and threats as reported in 2005 should help confirm or support the selection of priorities.

##### ***Habitats***

Three partial reviews, (principally focussing on the gaps) of the list of priority habitats have been undertaken since 1995. First, the coastal and marine

types were reviewed in 1998 and some revised plans subsequently published. In 1999, the freshwater and terrestrial types were reviewed to identify gaps in the series. 46 new habitat types were proposed which were refined (in part through amalgamation) to 7 habitats. The UK Targets Group considered this gap analysis and supported adoption of seven habitat types in 2001. It is worth noting that the work was mostly carried out in 2000-01, since when new information about extent, distribution and condition may have become available. The 2001 review considered a number of guiding principles which are listed in Annex A Section 5.

More recently, the Standing Committee agreed to defer a decision on ratifying the seven types in light of the proposed review of habitat and species priorities tasked to BRIG. Two woodland plans for upland birchwoods and lowland mixed deciduous woodlands have been produced, however the mechanism for conclusion and adoption seems unclear.

The working group agreed the need to maintain and take account of the previous review of priorities. The 2001 gap analysis should be revisited (but not reinvented) in light of new information e.g. inventory data and consideration given to options for implementation based on advice from specialists e.g. through the grouping of plans. For example, the latest two draft woodland plans would perhaps reap benefits (such as through easing action delivery) in terms of being implemented if considered as part of a wider semi-natural deciduous woodland plan.

The selection criteria would benefit from being clarified and redefined. The working group agreed that there was limited benefit in revisiting the current list of priority habitats as this is likely to be a largely academic exercise, insofar as a second full review would largely result in the same suite of HAPs i.e. existing plans are unlikely to be discarded. The review should instead explore with habitat specialists whether the classification and definition of priority habitats is causing particular implementation difficulties and seek recommendations and resolutions for improvements.

The working group considered the continued development of the list of Habitats of Conservation Concern and how such a list may be used e.g. guiding LBAPs. Establishment of a full HoCC list and supporting justification would facilitate future prioritisation reviews. Consideration should be given to guidance for identifying habitat types and definitions, based on the principles used in the 2001 review. In addition, the Working Group felt that the country groups have a key role in ratifying proposed priorities for the UK list, agreeing the relevance of the habitat in their country in terms of implementation role and the country share of the targets. The review process should include a means to reconcile inconsistencies and the perspectives of the country groups where this will impact the ability to implement Action Plans.

Since the broad habitat statements were published in 1995 the classification has been substantially revised (Annex A section 4) and some work is required to update these statements and the priority to broad classification in light of the review of priorities.

*Summary of the key issues for the review of priority habitats:*

- Agreeing a process for ratifying recommendations for habitat plans and in particular the seven plans considered by the Targets Group and more recently the Standing Committee;
  - Clarifying the existing selection criteria and identifying additional criteria in light of previous reviews. This could include assessments of the appropriateness of or necessity for an Action Plan as opposed to the effectiveness of other types of conservation action, as well as the relevance of grouping plans;
  - Establishing a full list of Habitats of Conservation Concern;
  - Country-specific habitat plans, similar to the work undertaken in Northern Ireland;
  - Changes to the Broad Habitat Classification and revision of broad habitat statements;
  - Establishing an audit trail to support the five year review cycle;
  - Ensure sufficient information available to support future reviews and to address data gaps.
  - Explore whether priority habitat definition and classification is causing implementation difficulties.
  - Recommend clarification over processes for HAP ratification and adoption
- Species*

The background to the review of species priorities is not clearly documented and in many cases, subsequent to the plans being published, new information has become available to support the review of priorities e.g. atlas data. The Working Group also agreed that the selection criteria would benefit from being clarified and refined. This was highlighted by JNCC's recent pilot review of the vascular plants. There are currently 82 plans, but in testing the original criteria, this pilot identified 26 species to be deselected and an additional 98 species that meet the published criteria. A further critical factor is information. For some species, suitable data exist to support a review of priorities, however for other taxa significant information gaps may hamper a review. For these species, we may wish to initiate a review for specific taxa as information becomes available.

The Review Working Group considered that the SSA project has a crucial role in addressing the issues relating to selection criteria and developing the decision-making audit trail. Both this group and the SSA project have a role in developing a mechanism and clear system for the taxonomic specialist groups and individuals to apply the selection criteria to review the list of priorities. The SoCC list should be considered as the basis for taxa not currently being considered by the SSA project (freshwater fish, marine organisms and mammals) and suitable specialist groups identified to contribute to the review, perhaps steered by the SSA project.

The group agreed that in applying the selection criteria, consideration should be given to issues such as the implications of survey successes,

speciation/evolution, species identified as 'in recovery' but not yet in the 'stable' category and cases of known extinctions.

*Summary of the key issues for the review of priority species:*

- Redefining and applying the scientific criteria in light of the vascular plant pilot (for example consideration of sub-species, non-natives and species complexes. See Annex A section 6.) ;
- Role of the Species Status Assessment Project and taxonomic groups;
- Future of the Species of Conservation Concern list;
- Establishing an audit trail to support the five year review cycle, and in cycle 'emergency' cases;
- Consideration of additional selection guidance (for example assessment of relevance of or necessity for a specific Action Plan as opposed to other measures to ensure effective action?).
- Recommend JNCC maintains 'master file' for species criteria to support audit trail

### **Guiding principles for the review of priorities**

The Review Working Group identified a number of further over-arching guiding principles for the review of priorities. These were considered to be based on such issues as practicability and should serve to clarify the process and ensure that lessons are learned from previous reviews and actions

- The list of priorities should remain dynamic, responding to conservation need. The reasons for selection should be robust, transparent and reflect genuine conservation priorities;
- There is a continued commitment to the action plan process, identifying priorities and the target-led approach;
- Recognition that species and habitat action plans have been more successful for some taxa or habitat types in fostering conservation action; providing valuable lessons learnt;
- The selection criteria should be clarified and redefined e.g. treatment of subspecies, consideration of weighting each criterion;
- Guidance for selection and deselection and ratification of priorities should be established;
- The options for implementation to maximise conservation benefits for priority species and habitats should be identified;
- Sustained recovery (achieving or working towards favourable conservation status) should be assured before species and habitats are deselected or assigned a lower level of priority. We can be achieving the targets and yet to secure recovery. There is the potential that recovering species (in particular) are removed from the list too soon and downgrade the effort required, resulting in a negative trend;
- Monitoring should be maintained for those species and habitats in recovery;
- The action plans should be costed;
- An audit trail should be established to justify the reasons for selection and the proposed course of action (e.g. new action plan, grouping of species or species and habitats, monitoring only).

The Review Working Group further agreed that following on from the application of the revised scientific criteria for selection, the species and

habitats should be reviewed using a number of additional 'tests' which should identify a subset of new species and habitats meeting the relevant scientific selection criteria which would most benefit from the development of an action plan. Initial thoughts as to what this secondary layer of 'soft' criteria might include are outlined below:

- Can we do anything to save the species or habitat?
- Can we cost the actions?
- Is an action plan appropriate and if so, what type? For example, individual SAP, HAP or grouped plan, based on functional or ecological requirements recognising species and habitat links.
- Is information available to confirm the level of priority and type of conservation action required?
- What are the options for conservation (linked to country biodiversity strategies)?
- Can we take account of the implications of climate change in conserving the species or habitat?

Applying these 'soft criteria' could perhaps be used to establish a graded listing within the suite of species and habitats meeting the relevant scientific criteria to provide an indication of which species or habitat should be progressed as action plans in priority order. The vascular plant pilot indicates the potential scale of change to the priority list and the implications for targeting limited resources most effectively.

**Conclusions:**

The working group agreed to develop a provisional work programme for the review. It also considered linkages to the work of the other BRIG working groups and the need to co-opt additional members as necessary.

## **Annex A**

### *Current selection criteria*

#### **1. Criteria for selecting Species of Conservation Concern**

Species which qualify under one or more of the following categories should be considered as species of conservation concern:

- threatened endemic and other globally threatened species;
- species where the UK has more than 25% of the world or appropriate biogeographical population;
- species where numbers or range have declined by more than 25% in the last 25 years;
- in some instances, where the species is found in fewer than 15 ten km squares in the UK; and species which are listed in the EU Birds or Habitats Directives, the Bern, Bonn or CITES Conventions, or under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Wildlife Order (Northern Ireland) 1985.

#### **2. Criteria for selecting Priority Species**

Species which qualify for one or both of the following categories should be considered as priority species:

- species which are globally threatened; and
- Species which are rapidly declining in the UK, i.e. by more than 50% in the last 25 years.

#### **3. Selection criteria for Priority Habitats**

Habitats for action planning were identified using the following criteria:

- habitats for which the UK has international obligations;
- habitats at risk, such as those with a high rate of decline, especially over the last 20 years, or which are rare;
- habitats which may be functionally critical (ie areas that are part of a wider ecosystem but provide reproductive or feeding areas for particular species); and
- habitats which are important for priority species.

In the review of the selection criteria for the marine priority habitats, and the way they should be interpreted, two additional categories were identified and adopted:

- marine habitats for which a high proportion (over 40%) of the north-east Atlantic resource is located in the UK; and
- habitats which may be formed from a keystone species - one which hosts a characteristic community of other species.

#### **4. The following criteria were used to re-examine the Broad Habitat**

##### **Classification:**

- comprehensive - all of the habitats types of the UK should be described within the classification;
- exclusive - the habitat types should be discrete to ensure that there is a 'once only fit' in the classification for each habitat encountered in the field;
- structured - the classification should provide a framework for organising and presenting the priority habitats that are the focus of action plans;

- nested - priority habitats should fit into only one broad habitat type;
- measurable - broad habitats should be easily recognisable, have a measurable surface and physical or biological features that are clearly characterised and wherever possible can be selected from existing systems for data collection; and
- consistent - there should be consistency in the division of the broad habitats. The classification should not sub-divide some ecological units more finely than others.

The Broad Habitat Classification should also aim to provide:

- a comprehensive framework for surveillance of the UK countryside and surrounding seas which is compatible with other widely used habitat and land cover classifications, particularly Phase 1 and Countryside Survey 2000;
- a means of setting priority habitats in context and a system for identifying gaps and emerging new priorities in the list of priority habitats; and
- a means of characterising patterns and mosaics upon which wide ranging species are dependent.

#### **5. Additional guiding principles used for in assessing and developing new proposals for priority habitats.**

- For any habitat to qualify as a priority type there needs to be a demonstrable conservation benefit from having a HAP.
- The series of priority habitats should be a sub-set of semi-natural vegetation types for which co-ordinated conservation action across the UK is required, rather than a comprehensive list of habitats.
- Habitat definitions should be clear, mutually exclusive, and where possible defined in terms of existing vegetation classifications (e.g. NVC and Phase I). New priority types should generally fit within a single broad habitat.
- Priority types should be mappable and should have measurable quantitative or qualitative attributes for monitoring purposes.
- Priority habitats should be defined at a broadly consistent hierarchical level.

## **6. Issues regarding the species selection criteria**

Using the vascular plant data, Stuart Ball tested the original criteria for selecting UK BAP priority species and made a number of observations and recommendations. A summary of the issues raised appear below.

- *Can taxa other than species qualify for consideration? What about subspecies, hybrids, races?*
- *Native species and archaeophytes. What species qualify?*
- *Micro-species complexes – generally restricted to plants (e.g. Limonium, Euphrasia, Hieracium)*
- *Use of Red Data Books to define "Globally threatened" species*
- *Habitat and Species Directives and "Globally Threatened Species"*
- *Quantifying decline especially population size within 10 km<sup>2</sup>*
- *Localisation criterion for SoCC – drop the phrase "in some instances..."*

**Annex B**

*Species and Habitat Review Working Group*

**Meeting on Monday 8 September 2003**

**Scottish Executive, Edinburgh**

**Attendees:**

Joanna Drewitt, Scottish Executive (Chair)

Peter Brotherton, English Nature

Debbie Jackson, Defra

Ant Maddock, JNCC

Amelia Morgan, SNH

Ian Strachan, JNCC

Robin Wynde, RSPB (on behalf of WCL)

**Apologies:**

Liz Howe (CCW)

John Baxter (SNH)

John Robins (Defra)

Deb Procter