

UK Biodiversity Action Plan Targets Review

Introduction

For our priority habitats and species, the targets provide the milestones against which we assess progress towards a level at which their long-term viability is assured and at which special conservation action is no longer necessary. To remain effective at guiding conservation action, the targets need to be updated periodically to take into account the latest knowledge about status and trends and to reflect changes in threats, pressures and opportunities for conservation. The first full review of UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP) targets since the national species and habitat action plans were published (1995-1999) has just been completed. The review was coordinated by the Biodiversity Reporting and Information Group on behalf of the UK Biodiversity Partnership Standing Committee. The targets were proposed by the action plan Lead Partners and Steering Groups, in consultation with the Country Biodiversity Groups in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The targets that result are shared ones, belonging to the UK Biodiversity Partnership as a whole and should be considered in the context of ecosystems, climate change, the priority list review and the need to set priorities in the light of limited resources.

The revised targets have a number of new features that will make them more fit for purpose. In particular:

- In recognition that biodiversity conservation is now the responsibility of devolved administrations, the targets have been set for each country not just the UK.
- The targets follow a new structure: nearly all are now quantified and allocated to standard categories, making assessment more objective and facilitating links to local biodiversity partnership targets.
- A new 'description' section includes information on priority areas and good practice for delivery.
- A new 'monitoring' section explains how progress towards the target will be assessed.
- For some groups of habitats and species, new types of targets have been set that aim to improve the resilience of species populations and habitats in a changing climate.

Outcomes of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan Targets Review

Targets have been revised for all terrestrial, freshwater and coastal habitats and for most species. A notable exception is the targets for most marine habitats and species. The revision of these targets, together with those of the few terrestrial species for which no revised targets were submitted, will await completion of the priority species and habitats list review (see below).

Once published, the full set of revised targets will be available for download from the Target Review pages of the UK BAP website (www.ukbap.org.uk/GenPageText.aspx?id=98) and can be accessed using the Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS: www.ukbap-reporting.org.uk). The UK

BAP website will also contain a spreadsheet explaining the decisions for those targets proposed by Lead Partners that did not meet the review criteria.

Overview of Lead Partner returns

Revised targets have been agreed for 34 out of the current 47 priority habitat types (i.e. the 45 habitats for which there are published HAPs, and also Lowland mixed deciduous woodland and Upland birchwood) and for 315 priority species. No revised targets were set for 13 habitats and 98 species, including most marine habitats and species.

Setting targets in the context of ecosystems

The UK BAP targets summarise what we aim to achieve for individual components of our biodiversity. However, when determining how best to deliver these targets, priority habitats and species cannot be treated in isolation. Trends in species and habitats are not only important in their own right, but also as key indicators of the success of our ecosystem approach; in line with the thinking behind the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment approach we need to consider ecosystems as a whole and how the different components function and depend on one another, especially as these relationships respond to climatic and other environmental changes. One of the main concerns is that the highly fragmented natural ecosystems typical of much of the UK will be a major constraint for the long term viability of many species and habitats. Action will therefore be needed to overcome the fragmentation of priority habitats and to reduce pressures on biodiversity more generally in the wider environment through which species move. These broader, landscape-scale actions are reflected in some of the new targets, such as the targets to increase the patch sizes of grassland habitats and the cross-cutting target to establish landscape-scale complexes for wetlands.

Setting targets in the context of climate change

Climate change is likely to have an impact on some priority species and habitats during the period for which the new targets have been set. Whilst the general principles and direction of climate change impacts on biodiversity in the UK are understood, the details and timing of impacts on individual species, habitats and sites remain very uncertain. In cases where the limited evidence and these uncertainties permit, the likely effects of climate change have been taken into account when setting the new targets. For example, the targets for woodland expansion have been proposed with the aim of buffering and reducing the fragmentation of ancient woods. For two water plants – floating water plantain and grass-wrack pondweed - the targets are about increasing the connectivity between existing populations, while for small cow-wheat, the target is about increasing genetic diversity to help the species adapt to the effects of climate change. For some butterflies, such as the Adonis Blue and Silver-Spotted Skipper, climate change may actually help. An ongoing programme of research and monitoring will be needed to inform implementation of action plans, future assessment of progress and further updates of targets.

Climate change in particular, and other environmental changes, underline the need for a long-term, ecosystem-based approach. Not only will habitats and species be affected directly by climate changes and sea level rise but, probably as significant,

they will also be affected by policy and behavioural shifts in other sectors such as agriculture, water and energy. In making investments and undertaking actions to deliver biodiversity targets it will be important to allow for major but, as yet, uncertain changes in climatic conditions and resource management regimes. In these circumstances investments which aim to reduce other pressures, improve ecosystem resilience and facilitate natural responses are most likely to deliver long term benefits. Further guidance for nature conservation practitioners is in preparation for publication by the UK Biodiversity Partnership Standing Committee.

Reviewing the lists of priority species and habitats

Just as this review of BAP targets aims to ensure that appropriate milestones are set to guide conservation action and effort, it is equally important that the priority lists themselves are periodically reviewed to ensure that they remain dynamic and responsive to both new information and conservation needs. In 2005, the UK Biodiversity Partnership, through its Biodiversity Reporting and Information Group (BRIG) therefore also began a review of the priority species and habitats. Hundreds of experts have since contributed to a scientific assessment of the conservation status of terrestrial, freshwater and marine species and habitats. This scientific assessment is now complete and the next stage of the review will develop proposals for appropriate delivery mechanisms and appropriate success criteria. Further targets might be adopted where achievable through the delivery mechanisms identified. It is at this stage that the revision of targets for marine species and habitats will also be considered. BRIG is committed to this process being transparent and inclusive and will provide more information about the review as it progresses.

Setting priorities in the light of limited resources

The revised UK BAP targets represent an ambitious programme for reversing the declines of our priority species and habitats. Achieving them will make an important contribution towards meeting the 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss, particularly as other species and habitats will also benefit from general improvements in our natural environment associated with the actions taken to meet the UK BAP priorities.

Existing resources, such as agri-environment schemes, are being better targeted to meet the UK BAP priorities and many organisations are already contributing towards meeting our UK BAP species and habitat targets. Nonetheless, achieving our targets will be challenging, and will require prioritisation of the limited resources available and better co-ordination of policies and programmes across Government and non-Government organisations. In particular, meeting our maintenance targets should be seen as a top priority because it is usually better for biodiversity as a whole, and more cost-effective, to prevent further losses than to re-create habitats or reintroduce new populations of species.