

# 1.0 Introduction

The London Landscape Framework comes at an important moment for London's natural landscapes. On the one hand, London's green spaces are under threat from factors ranging from an urgent demand for development in a city with an ever-growing population to global issues such as climate change. On the other hand, their importance – environmental, social and economic – has been better recognised and they are increasingly accorded a prominent place in national and local policy.

Nevertheless, due to the built-up nature of London and to perceptions of London as overwhelmingly urban, London's natural landscapes have not received the same attention as those of the rest of the country. There are certainly significant and widespread policies in place, which focus largely on biodiversity, access and amenity values, as well as health benefits, all of which are of course crucial, whilst detailed area frameworks such as the East London Green Grid and The Thames Gateway Parklands Vision, which perceive London's networks of open spaces in terms of 'green infrastructure', focus primarily on the notion of multifunctional amenity. None however aim specifically to raise the profile of London's natural landscape in its own right.

This is not to suggest that the human use and enjoyment of and relationship with nature is irrelevant – indeed, it is questionable how far the 'natural landscape' is ever entirely natural, since land has been managed, cultivated and utilised by humans since at least Neolithic times. Rather, as the European Landscape Convention succinctly states, landscape is 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors'. Yet none of the existing policies and frameworks specifically aim to reconnect Londoners with London's underlying nature, nor do they reveal an interest in the way in which London's remnant landscape make legible the origins of this extraordinary city. The role played by London's natural landscapes in the overall character of London has therefore yet to be defined.

## Purpose and Methodology

Natural England now wishes to extend its in-depth characterisation work across the Greater London area. This study sets out to achieve a number of clearly defined goals, all of which focus on key Natural England objectives:

- Defining a vision for London's Natural Landscapes;
- Ensuring that the geography of London is informed as much by the natural as by the built environment;
- Enabling local policy-makers to recognise key natural landscapes;
- Ensuring planners are aware of opportunities for restoring, enhancing or recreating natural landscapes.

In doing so the intention is to provide a robust yet flexible framework that can be developed and built upon; and which sits alongside the important work already undertaken in, for example, the Mayor's Draft Geodiversity Strategy (2008) and Biodiversity Strategy (2002) and other key policies and guidance. Indeed this framework is intended not as an endpoint but as a coherent, accessible and inspiring piece of work which at the same time is only the beginning of an ongoing dialogue. We have chosen to develop a very specific methodology, tailored to the singular nature of this project and its situation within the national context. Reflecting the unique circumstances of London, rather than a classic landscape character assessment it mixes Landscape Character Assessment and Historic Landscape Characterisation techniques. It also uniquely places at its heart the geology, topography and habitats from which stem London's natural landscapes. The basis of our study is the division of London into 7 Landscape Types and 22 Natural Landscape Areas which sit loosely within the 7 National Character Areas that fall within London.<sup>1</sup>

## Natural Landscape Areas

The Landscape Types and Natural Landscape Areas cross borough and other boundaries such as that of the Lee Valley Regional Park. A positive side-effect of this is the potential to unite policies across borough boundaries on the natural landscape. A similar cohesion was intended by the sub-regional divisions (the 'pizza wedges') of Livingstone's London Plan, and whilst their effectiveness is now under question, the power of natural spaces to bring boroughs together to work for change is compelling. Division into Natural Landscape Areas might potentially have the same effect but with a more logical – indeed natural – 'bedrock': this framework will allow each borough to see what assets lie within their boundaries but also what they share with their neighbours in terms of Natural Signature and assets.

1. See the Character of England Map in *Countryside Character Volume 7: South East and London* (Countryside Agency 1999).

Nevertheless policy is inevitably disseminated on a borough basis and we have clearly noted the boroughs to which issues relate.

Each of the 22 Natural Landscape Areas contains a number of key natural landscape features, which we have also listed as a resource. Some of these will be familiar to boroughs whilst the importance of others may not have been recognised, since our criteria for defining the natural landscape has a uniquely 'natural' bias which differs from those for defining important green spaces. Our definition, crucial to the choices set out in this report, is an accessible space which:

- is an original watercourse or
- contains vegetation typical of the soils and geology of its area and/or
- allows an appreciation of the wider geomorphology and natural topography of London.

This means that whilst we recognise the amenity importance of canals, major parks or commons containing no natural remnants, as well as their crucial roles as what we might call 'perceived natural landscapes', we do not focus on them here. This is in part because they have received much attention elsewhere but, more importantly, because they are not revelatory of the underlying nature of London – our central concern.



The London Wetland Centre: reflecting the Natural Signature

## The Natural Signatures

Having noted these environmental assets it is clear that not all of them will be as reflective or evocative of the broad underlying characteristic as others. These underlying characteristics – those which define the Area – we are terming the ‘Natural Signature’. A signature is the recognisable expression of the individual, so recognisable, in fact, that it holds immense legal power; a ‘Natural Signature’ should likewise be unique, recognisable and symbolically potent. Some Areas, of course, will have a more distinct Natural Signature than others, although all the Areas have overriding characteristics which we have aimed to distill. Crucially, these Natural Signatures should provide a key to reconnecting Londoners with their natural landscape through their ability to condense and evoke the ‘essence’ of the underlying landscape. What we are concerned to do here – and this is where subjective perceptions do play a part in this study – is to focus on those areas which, on the one hand, have natural characteristics of the underlying Area but which, on the other, are also most easily recognised as such by the people that use and perceive them.

These examples of the Natural Signatures are intended to serve as evocative, easily recognisable landscapes that are strongly reflective of the broader Natural Landscape Area of which they are a part. Just as London is often thought of as a collection of villages, so too is it a collection of Natural Landscape Areas, and in a strong and vivid sense, the Signatures embody a vision of each Area. In turn each provides a vision which can inspire and guide future forces for change



The River Lea

in a positive direction which draws on and reflects back this ‘Natural Signature’. This allows us, finally, to lay out a number of aspirations in the shape of Design Clues, as well as contributing to a broad Vision that, we hope, will play a key part in inspiring positive management and change as well as raising the profile of London’s natural landscapes.

## Limits of the Framework

Finally the sheer scale of this study, combined with pragmatic limitations, means that it can only ever be a desk-based work which draws on GIS data and other existing resources, without fieldwork or consultation. Potentially a limitation, in fact this has allowed for an objective overview to which can be added future research and consultation – both that which takes into account the actual status of these landscapes as currently managed today and that which considers in-depth human perceptions and interpretations. This framework has emerged through a layered process. We also hope that it forms a sturdy base layer upon which further contributions might be overlaid.



View over London from Primrose Hill

## Structure of the Framework:

1. Introduction
2. The Natural Landscape of London – outlines the relation between built and natural London and discusses Forces for Change
3. A Vision for Natural Landscape in London – sets out a Vision for the future of London’s landscapes
4. Landscape Types, Natural Landscape Areas and their Natural Signatures – describes methodology; lays out the 7 Landscape Types and 22 Natural Landscape Areas, their landscape features and their Natural Signatures; provides Design Clues for future development
5. Conclusion – Considers lessons learnt and looks to the future



Aerial view of London from Kenwood House



