



State of the natural environment in the North East

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Contents

Foreword	1
Executive summary	3
The state of the natural environment in the North East	5
Health	11
Green Infrastructure	13
Climate change	15
Farmland birds	17
Targeting Higher Level Stewardship	19
Conclusion	23
Contacts	24



Foreword

In the North East Natural England is working to ensure a vibrant, healthy and well-managed countryside that is sustainable, economically viable and accessible to all. This report showcases some of the issues we believe are important to us all. It describes just a fraction of the work we are doing with individuals and organisations in the region to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings.

There are currently considerable challenges for the people and places in the North East. The challenges of re-building economic productivity, increasing consumer and business confidence, sustaining jobs and the impacts of climate change demand a long term and sustainable response. The pressures on the natural environment from housing, energy and food production (to name just a few) will be immense. Can we reconcile these and improve the life prospects and wellbeing of people – especially those in our most deprived areas whilst maintaining a healthy natural environment?

Showing how a healthy natural environment makes a real difference to people's lives remains an important challenge for the environment sector, especially in times of economic uncertainty. Our ***State of the natural environment in the North East*** report attempts to do just this by demonstrating how Natural England and its partners are working to improve the natural environment.

Some of our work is purely for the protection of the natural environment in its own right. What we also show is the significant benefit the natural environment has for businesses, our people and our places as well as how the natural environment can help the region both mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Natural England's *State of the Natural Environment 2008* report provided a national baseline against which progress can be measured in the future and draws attention to the issues which are in urgent need of action. This document also highlights the additional environmental evidence required by the region. Environmental partners, including Natural England, are currently working on the establishment of an Environmental Records Information Centre (ERIC) which will hold information on important species, habitats and sites in the region. Such evidence is currently held by a wide range of organisations, in differing formats and is often difficult to access. ERIC will collate, verify and validate data improving access to information on the region's biodiversity. ERIC has the potential to complement the activities of other regional bodies such as NERIP¹ to improve our overall evidence base across all sectors and assist inputs to, for example, the Sub-National Review of economic development and regeneration.

¹North East Regional Information Partnership.

The region's Sub-National Review and development of a new Regional Strategy provide additional challenges and opportunities across all sectors as do the changes in regional governance (not least the move to new unitary status in Northumberland and Durham). There are significant opportunities through these changes to marry up social needs, the needs of the economy and those of the natural environment to ensure that the North East region delivers true sustainability. Natural England and its partners are committed to working with other regional bodies to achieve this goal.

This report shows that we have much work to do to conserve our wildlife and landscapes in the long term. But it also shows that where strong partnerships work together we can, and do, make a huge difference to the natural environment. Wildlife rich landscapes are not 'extras'. They make a real difference for the people who live, work or visit the North East of England.



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Rob Aubrook
Regional Director



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Professor David Hill
Board Member

Executive summary

Purpose of the report

This report is designed to complement the national *State of the Natural Environment 2008* report and provide a regional flavour of some of the key issues affecting the natural environment.

The purpose of this report is therefore:

1 To describe the **state of the North East's natural environment and the strategic context in which Natural England works:**

- 31% of the region is within a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- 107,000 ha (or around 12% of our region) have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and over 84% are in favourable condition.
- The North East has a rich and important diversity of both habitats (eg upland hay meadows and coastal sand dunes) and species (eg red squirrel and black grouse).
- Nearly 80% of agricultural land in the North East is under some sort of agri-environment management which is an indicator of the extent to which land is being managed in a sustainable way.
- The North East has seen a small increase in the overall index of farmland birds compared to declines in nearly all other English regions and an overall long term national decline since 1994. Nevertheless nearly a third of the region's farmland bird species continue to decline.

2 To demonstrate, through case studies, the **value of the natural environment and some of the actions Natural England is taking with its partners to improve our environment and our communities and economy:**

- The natural environment has a significant role to play in the health and wellbeing of people in the North East. Natural England believes that everyone should be offered increased contact with the natural environment resulting in reduced stress and more fulfilling lives.
- Provision of green spaces brings significant benefits to the natural environment, communities and the local economy. Natural England believes that the provision of Green Infrastructure should be an integral part of the creation of sustainable communities.



North Tees Marshes

© David Mitchell

- We believe that a healthy and resilient natural environment, hallmarked by a rich diversity of habitat and species, is the bedrock of successful adaptation to climate change and, in protecting this, we also safeguard ecosystem services² vital to society and the economy. Natural England believes that peatland restoration should be a key regional priority in mitigating climate change.
- The biodiversity of the North East region is rich and varied and provides us with a good indicator of the broad state of wildlife and the countryside. Birds are particularly useful as an indicator due to the variety of habitats they occupy and their visibility.
- Natural England believes there is a need for large-scale transfer of agri-environment funds from income support to support for rural development, ensuring public funds are contributing to social welfare. It is important that we target our limited funding for agri-environment schemes in the highest priority areas for the natural environment.

3 To conclude by highlighting some of the key issues affecting our environment and to invite organisations across all sectors to work with the environmental sector for the benefits that cooperation will bring to the North East:

- The changes in regional governance that will come about as a result of the Sub-National Review and local government re-organisation present the environmental sector with significant challenges to ensure its voice is heard alongside socio-economic issues. Natural England believes that any future Regional Strategy should bring about greater alignment between environmental, social and economic policies and priorities.

- In the context of the current economic downturn, Natural England is concerned that the protection of the natural environment is not relegated below other concerns. We believe it would be folly to do so given the potential economic benefits that the natural environment provides and the additional costs (eg through climate change impacts) that failure to protect the natural environment will bring. We call on regional bodies to work with us to achieve sustainable economic growth in the North East whilst respecting our environmental limits.
- Natural England will work with partners to support appropriate measures for the adaptation to and mitigation of climate change. In particular we will support efforts to deliver the North East Climate Change Action Plan. We will commence work to research the potential impacts of climate change in south east Northumberland.
- Natural England recognises that there are key gaps in the environmental evidence base and we will continue to work with partners to fill these gaps. In particular we will support efforts to demonstrate the socio-economic value of the natural environment and to gather more widespread and up to date information on the region's biodiversity. We believe it is vital to have a regional environmental records centre and will support the development of the ERIC project described in the Foreword.

²Defined (by recent convention) as the *goods* (eg food, fibre and clean water) and the *services* (eg water purification, pollination and climate regulation) that are provided by ecosystems.

The state of the natural environment in the North East

The strategic context for Natural England

Natural England was set up under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 with the purpose of, *“ensuring that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development”*.

Our work is divided into four areas of activity which define the high level outcomes we wish to achieve:

A healthy natural environment – our natural environment will be conserved and enhanced.

Enjoyment of the natural environment – more people enjoying, understanding and acting to improve the natural environment more often.

Sustainable use of the natural environment – the use and management of the natural environment is more sustainable.

A secure environmental future – decisions which collectively secure the future of the natural environment.

A healthy natural environment

The North East region is a place of exceptional beauty encompassing an unequalled diversity and wealth of natural environment features.

Approximately 2.5 million people live in the North East with 70% of the population living along the river corridors of the Tyne, Tees and Wear on approximately 10% of the region’s land area.

The North East has the lowest proportion of people living in rural areas – less than 10% compared to the national average of 28.5%. Two thirds of the region, primarily to the north and west, is rural in character, sparsely populated and with large swathes of uplands.

Natural England is leading implementation of the European Landscape Convention on behalf of Defra. We will work with regional partners to establish a Landscape Forum to take forward this work and are supporting a project in the Northumberland Coast Area

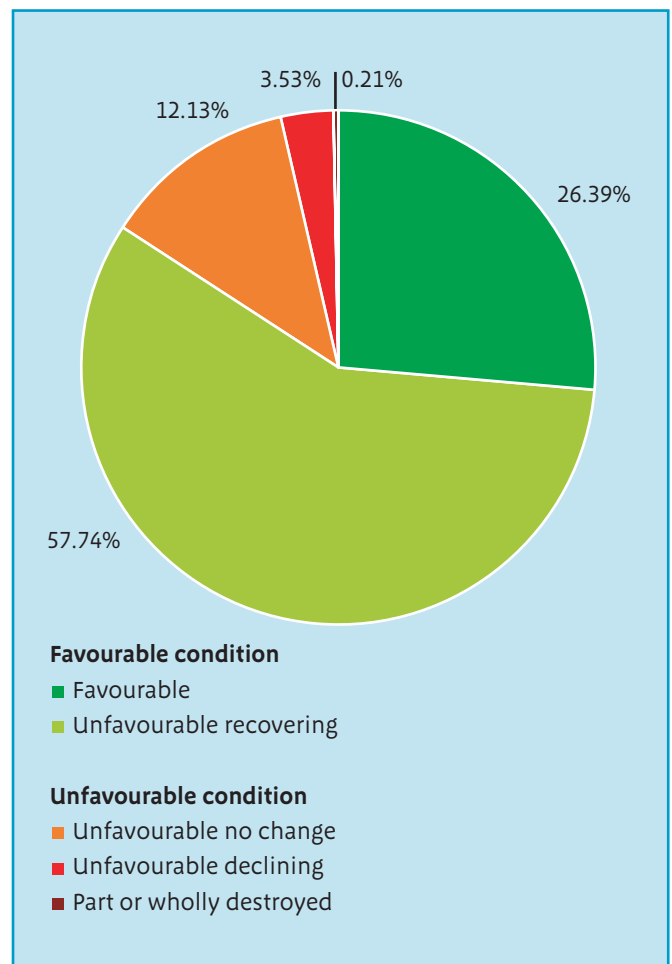
of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) called *Our Coast, Our Seas*. The region boasts a second, extensive AONB, the North Pennines, and combined they cover 18% (156,000 hectares) of our region. In addition the Northumberland National Park covers a further 13% (113,000 hectares) of the region³. A further 16,000 hectares of our most vulnerable wildlife-rich landscapes are protected through the suite of 15 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) in the region.

The **Marine and Coastal Access Bill** is another major piece of legislation that will inform future activities for Natural England. We will set up a network of Marine Protected Areas and provide access to the entire 180 km of our coastline (currently only 66% is accessible). Approximately 100 km have been designated as Heritage Coast.

Natural England also has a major responsibility to protect and enhance the region's **biodiversity and geodiversity**. We do this through our work to ensure Sites of Special Scientific Interest are managed favourably. The North East is renowned for its range of coastal, freshwater, wetland and grassland habitats (both lowland and upland) and its spectacular coastline. These include the blanket bogs of the North Pennines and north Northumberland, the limestone grasslands of east Durham, the heather moors of Simonside Hills, our diverse and beautiful coastal dunes and cliffs and the mudflats of Lindisfarne and the Tees estuary.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are nationally important nature conservation sites which support England's very best wildlife and geology. The region has 246 sites covering 107,044 hectares and Natural England is responsible under the Government Public Service Agreement (PSA) to bring 95% by area into favourable condition by 2010. At present 84.13% of the region's SSSIs are in favourable condition and the progress we have made in meeting the PSA targets is shown in the figure below.

Figure 1 SSSI condition in the North East



Beyond these sites we work with partners to deliver action for biodiversity through Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAP).

³A small proportion of the North York Moors National Park also falls within our region.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan identifies the habitats and species most at risk and therefore the priorities for action. The region supports a high proportion of some of England’s most endangered habitats as well as large areas of internationally important habitats. In particular:

Table 1

Habitat type	Area (ha)	Percentage of England total
Upland hay meadow	275	41
Coastal sand dunes	1,570	15
Blanket bog	61,500	18
Upland heath	57,350	19
Magnesian limestone grasslands	200	70

The North East also hosts a number of nationally or internationally rare species with the best known of these being the red squirrel and the black grouse. The North East is important for resident species (eg otter), summer visitors (eg roseate tern), and for wintering birds such as purple sandpiper and pale-bellied brent goose.



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Enjoyment of the natural environment

Our agenda to help promote **access** for all to the natural environment will be supported by Environmental Stewardship, our funding for National Trails (£290k for our 397 km of trails), promotion of accessibility standards through our work on Green Infrastructure and the Big Lottery-funded *Access to Nature* scheme (with potentially £2.5m funding in the region). All these mechanisms support our efforts to improve the region's **health** through experience of and contact with the natural environment. We are initiating two projects, *One Million Children Outdoors* and *Outdoors for All* to increase the connection of children and diverse groups with the natural environment.

Access to Nature is a Natural England run, Big Lottery-funded five year project worth £25m nationally. The project aims in the North East region are:

- 100,000 people to actively experience and enjoy the natural environment
- 8,300 people having educational opportunities
- 5,500 volunteers in training programmes
- Investment in the quality of 11 natural places
- 500 people engaged in the care of natural places
- All projects actively and positively engaging with local communities

Figure 2 Access to Nature

10% IMD 2004 Urban

LE_RANK

- Urban Worst 5%
- Urban Worst 5-10%

10% IMD 2004 Rural

NAT_IMD_RA

- Rural Worst 5%
- Rural Worst 5-10%

IMD = Indices of Multiple Deprivation



Source: Natural England, 2008

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Sustainable use of the environment

One of Natural England's principal tools to actively protect the environment is the **Environmental Stewardship** scheme. This provides some £26m annually in the North East to provide a wider variety of environmental benefits on farmland. The scheme has been re-designed to make it easier to understand and more streamlined, and it is being more strongly promoted. A new Upland scheme will be launched in 2010.

Environmental Stewardship⁴ (which replaced Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas in 2006) has two component parts:

- Entry Level Stewardship which provides funding over a wide area for environmental benefit, and
- Higher Level Stewardship which provides significant funding in targeted areas where we have identified the potential for the highest possible environmental benefits.

The older schemes are still providing wide environmental benefits (and will continue to be funded until existing agreements expire) but all **new** agri-environment agreements are now formed under Environmental Stewardship.

The area of the North East region is over 867,000 hectares of which 673,000 hectares is classed as agricultural. Of the latter nearly 80% is under some type of agri-environment agreement. A summary of the 2008 position for all environmental schemes in the North East region is shown in the table below.

Land use

Environmental Stewardship is designed to promote sustainable land **management** practices and maintain the natural environment. We also have significant responsibilities and interests in how land is **used** and are committed to the promotion of sustainable land use and the protection of the natural environment through the planning system.

Across the region we will be working to promote **Green Infrastructure** through Local Development Frameworks and maintain our robust defence of the natural environment through the planning process. We will also be working with each of the region's five **Growth Points** to develop Green Infrastructure strategies.

Table 2

Scheme	Agreements	Area (ha)	Value
Entry Level Stewardship (ELS)	1,650	338,400	£10.1m
Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)	154	48,600	£5.7m
Countryside Stewardship (CSS)	985	94,400	£8.7m
Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA)	333	13,300	£2.2m
Wildlife Enhancement Scheme (WES)	60	56,000	£0.3m
Organic farming (included in totals above)	100	15,800	n/a

⁴Which forms part of Axis 2 funding under the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE).

A secure environmental future

Climate change is clearly the biggest threat to the natural environment and we will be working with others on projects to help **mitigate against** and **adapt to** climate change. In particular we will support a number of projects including *Climate Proofing the Cheviots*, the National Trust's *Wallington Carbon* project, the *Peatscapes* project in the North Pennines AONB, and we will initiate a study to address climate change adaptation in south east Northumberland. We will also continue to advocate and demonstrate through our other activities the benefits that protection of the natural environment brings for both climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Natural England believes there are a number of key issues where support for and protection of the natural environment can assist in both climate change mitigation and adaptation:

- Water quality and flood prevention
- Managed coastal retreat
- Wildlife corridors to assist shifts in species distribution

- Protection of carbon sinks, sequestration through land management and planting of forestry
- Urban green space development to counter 'heat island' effects
- Acting as a sentinel – adding to the evidence base demonstrating the progression of climate change.

Natural England's purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved and enhanced for the benefit of present and future generations. At a national level we are developing a clear integrated vision for the natural environment to 2060 and are currently developing a range of scenarios to help us build a robust perspective on the long-term challenges to the natural environment. Climate change is just one aspect of this work with other environmental factors and economic, social and political issues all having significant potential implications for the natural environment. We will look to influence this emerging work and will be keen to share our thinking with others in the region who are researching future challenges across all sectors.

Natural England case studies

The following pages present case studies that illustrate the breadth of our work with partners to deliver positive environmental outcomes.

- **Health** – page 11
- **Green Infrastructure** – page 13
- **Climate change** – page 15
- **Farmland birds** – page 17
- **Targeting Higher Level Stewardship** – page 19

Health

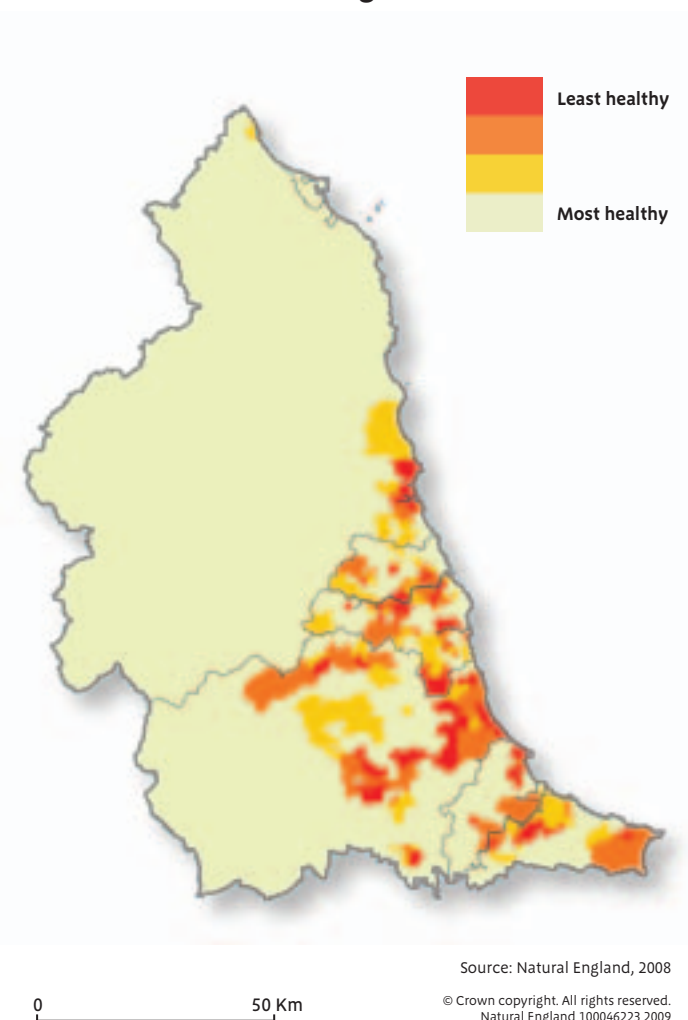
Natural England and health – what’s the link?

Getting more people actively engaged with nature and having more and better managed green space should be at the heart of our region’s regeneration; walking in quality green space is the simplest way to offer these benefits.

Natural England firmly believes that regular contact with the natural environment can help address some of the fundamental needs of society:

- To develop children to their full potential
- Reduce stress in adults, increase their wellbeing and make their lives more fulfilling
- Prevent disease in older people and promote independent and healthy ageing
- Create healthy communities and a lasting legacy that will benefit the health of future generations.

Figure 3 Composite rank of Health Indicators within the North East region



We have a countryside and region to be proud of and yet, as the map above shows, most of our population live in areas classed as ‘least healthy’ – where 70% of the population take too little exercise, costing millions in avoidable health problems such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.

Our region has:

- The lowest life expectancy at birth
- The most deaths from cancer
- The highest rates of smoking
- The second highest rate of coronary heart disease
- 17% of its people living in areas defined statistically as the most deprived in England.

The Middlesbrough self-referral leaflet

Nationally we have been working with the NHS Alliance to promote an increase in health walks. Most projects have been centred on traditional GP Exercise Referral models, but a different approach was tried in Middlesbrough. Natural England convened a partnership comprising the NHS Alliance, Middlesbrough Council and the local Primary Care Trust.

Interestingly, whilst activity levels are low, Middlesbrough possesses a lot of attractive **green space**. By targeting outlets not normally associated with 'countryside' (mail shots, community centre, shops, library etc), would it be possible to tempt 'new' users to get out and get walking?

We hoped to get more people walking and engaged with nature; and to get health professionals more interested in using the 'outdoors' as a vehicle for preventative care. Some of the results of this initiative and other benefits that healthy walking provide are captured in the table below.

The partnership targeted a defined area of Middlesbrough (Coulby Newham and Hemlington) using a leaflet to explain why 'green exercise' is good for you and to encourage local people to *Take a look!* at five walks on their doorstep.

The leaflet contained a self evaluation questionnaire designed to capture information about demographics, activity levels, use of green space and, importantly, willingness to get involved in follow-up studies.



Business	People	Place
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Potential for business to benefit through promotion of walking as part of a workplace health programme. ■ 'Walking' offers the health sector a low cost option for reducing preventable disease such as Type 2 Diabetes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 69% indicated that they would make more use of local green space for exercise as a result of reading the leaflet. ■ 58% were willing to be contacted again for further study. ■ Returns came from all age groups but the majority (53%) from 55-74 bracket. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ More people valuing and conserving the natural environment resulting from more people taking health walks outdoors. ■ Realisation of the importance of high quality green space beyond the traditional 'environment' sectors.

Green Infrastructure

We will work with partners to strategically plan for Green Infrastructure through Growth Point Green Infrastructure strategies, the Local Development Framework process and through the Sub-National Review. We also plan to support more on-the-ground projects such as those described below.

What is 'Green Infrastructure'?

Green Infrastructure is a “network of multi-functional green space providing a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits”. This can mean any area of green space from urban gardens, parks and cemeteries to large tracts of open moorland.

While all green spaces are valuable, the tools used to create and maintain them differ markedly between rural and urban areas. In addition the pressures and uses of green spaces also can be significantly different. The connectivity of all green spaces, be that between small urban areas or between urban and rural areas, is a key issue of importance to Natural England.

Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt)

Natural England believes that everyone and every home should have **green space** nearby and has proposed the following standards for maximum distances from accessible natural green space.

- 300 m of a 2 ha site
- 2 km of a 20 ha site
- 5 km of a 100 ha site
- 10 km of a 500 ha site

Why is Green Infrastructure important?

Given the breadth of issues that can be encompassed by Green Infrastructure the evidence base is extremely varied. Nonetheless there is a significant body of evidence which shows Green Infrastructure can provide:

- significant environmental benefits
- connection of habitats
- greater social cohesion
- mental health improvements
- physical health improvements
- attract new businesses and individuals
- higher average house prices
- climate change mitigation and adaptation.



Green space at Newburn Riverside, Newcastle

© Natural England/Nick Dales



Action for Green Infrastructure

Natural England, in close partnership with the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission, worked with the Government Office and all five of the regional Growth Point second round bidders over the summer of 2008 to promote Green Infrastructure within Programmes of Development (PoDs). Natural England hosted a regional workshop to promote Green Infrastructure and the requirements for Green Infrastructure included in the Growth Points guidance.

Green Infrastructure and Policy

- Included in 6 RSS Policies
- Included in PPS12
- GI Strategies a condition of Growth Point status

In Newcastle we are working with **Groundwork**, the **City Council** and local groups on two projects:

- In Byker work will soon commence to improve the environmental quality and accessibility of **St. Lawrence Park**.
- In **Heaton** we are supporting Groundwork and the City Council in regenerating an end terrace with scented flowers and herbs for pollinating insects.

In **Stockton** we are supporting a wider partnership under the **Borough Council** in cleaning up the area around **Brickie Ponds** and making it more accessible.

Green Infrastructure has the potential to:

Business	People	Place
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assist regeneration. ■ Attract businesses. ■ Provide greater attendance at work. ■ Reduce climate change costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improve mental and physical health. ■ Assist community cohesion. ■ Provide shade and increase comfort. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improve landscapes. ■ Enhance biodiversity. ■ Increase connectivity for people and wildlife. ■ Improve the safety of our green spaces.

Climate change

Both our uplands and coastal areas are of significance in responding to climate change.

Natural England and its partners are involved in a number of projects designed to increase the resilience of the natural environment to climate change and, in so doing, providing environmental, social and economic resilience across the region.

Uplands and *Peatscapes*

Peatscapes is a collaborative project run by the North Pennines AONB Partnership, in association with a number of partners including Natural England, the Environment Agency and Northumbrian Water. The project is restoring upland blanket bogs by blocking the grips (ie drains) in the peat that previously allowed water to drain off leaving the peat to dry out and erode.

Why peat is important

The North Pennines contains about 27% of England's peatland resource. This habitat is important because it:

- Has an important catchment-scale water quality and flood amelioration function.
- Acts as a significant sink of atmospheric carbon, which has a moderating role in global warming.
- Is the UK's largest terrestrial carbon store – our peatlands contain more carbon than the combined forests of France and UK.
- Contains a record of the vegetation change of the area during the last 10,000 years.
- Is of European and nationally recognised biodiversity importance for key plant community types and bird species.
- Has important cultural and economic links to current and past land use.

The key aims of *Peatscapes* are:

- **Restoration:** Supporting restoration and management work on peat bogs through the promotion of existing agri-environment and wildlife enhancement grants and through sourcing new additional funds.
- **Celebration:** Raising the level of understanding and appreciation of the significance of the resource to those living in, working in and visiting the area.
- **Promoting best practice:** Supporting the provision of management advice on upland peatland to form the basis of practical management works.
- **Research:** Supporting and disseminating new and existing research into peatland processes, ecology and management.



The coast and sea

Climate change at the coast is one of the greatest challenges we face. Sea level rise has the potential to fundamentally change coastal processes, often accelerating erosion rates. We will see more frequent winter storm episodes threatening homes, habitats and wildlife alike. In our seas, temperature changes are already having a discernible effect upon marine ecosystems and sea surface acidification is impacting on the ability of our oceans to retain their role as the single largest carbon sink on the planet.

The **Shoreline Management Planning** process, for which Natural England is a statutory consultee and through which coastal defence policy is promoted, has now placed the conservation of the natural environment as one of the central aims of its work.

The **North East Coastal Observatory (NECO)** is a web-based information partnership led by Natural England designed to promote **integrated coastal zone management**. The site will deliver a marine and coastal information resource for the North East region. A comprehensive range of coastal issues and interests will be represented on the site of which climate change will be one of the most important.

Conserving and enhancing the natural environment delivers on climate change by:

Business	People	Place
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reducing costs. ■ Providing protection (eg from floods). ■ Providing new opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Protecting homes. ■ Providing green space. ■ Improving air quality. ■ Improving water quality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Conserving the range and ecological variability of habitats and species. ■ Increasing connectivity between wildlife-rich areas.

Farmland birds

Farmland birds are a visible and reliable indicator of the state of the region's wildlife.

Farmland birds, as measured by an index of key species, showed a significant national decline between 1970 and 1994. A key factor in this decline was a move to more intensive and specialised farming methods. Since 1994 the North East has been one of just three regions to see a moderate rise in the index but within the index there is considerable species variation and some well known species remain in an extremely vulnerable position.

The corn bunting (pictured) is a once familiar bird of arable and mixed landscapes now, sadly, with increasingly fragmented breeding populations and missing altogether from some former strongholds in the North East.

The **North East Farmland Birds Initiative** is a project designed to help sustain the fragile recovery of farmland bird numbers and species variety in the North East. The initiative is a partnership between Natural England and the RSPB, with support from Northumberland National Park and the two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the North East, the Northumberland Coast and the North Pennines.

A project officer provides dedicated expertise to land managers to help them manage their land in a way that encourages birds to thrive. The project will set up a string of neighbouring agreement sites providing a large area with favourable management for all farmland birds.

Natural England has carefully targeted Environmental Stewardship (see page 19) which helps the project officer focus his expertise in the areas most important for farmland birds. At a farm level the project



Corn bunting

Feature	Management	Result
■ Grazing grasslands in flood plain areas.	■ Creation of areas of standing water.	■ Increase numbers of breeding waders.
■ Winter cereal cropping (eg wheat or barley).	■ Spring cropping leaving winter stubbles.	■ Winter food provided for arable birds.
■ Poor/no hedges.	■ Plant or gap up hedge.	■ More breeding birds.

officer identifies the best features which are suitable for enhancement to help farmland birds. The table above shows examples of farm features and their proposed management.

The success of the project and individual agreements clearly require willing landowners and a strong partnership given the complexities of managing farmland appropriately for farmland birds. A number of target species are involved – all with their own particular requirements. Corn bunting, tree sparrow, grey partridge, lapwing and yellow wagtail are just some of the main species the project is designed to protect. In addition the project identifies areas suitable for benefiting key wintering species such as pale-bellied brent geese and twite.

Providing access is an important part of both the HLS scheme and the Farmland Birds Initiative. The project will provide access to improved sites where this will not be detrimental to the birds concerned. There is also a strong educational aspect to the project which includes events for land managers, school children and all members of the public to learn about farmland birds.

Environmental Stewardship and farmland birds

Nearly 4,100 ha of land is now under ‘arable options’ designed to provide food and cover for key species of birds such as corn bunting and tree sparrow. There are also significant areas being managed in upland areas that benefit black grouse and breeding waders such as lapwing.



© Natural England

Lapwing

The Farmland Bird Initiative provides:

Business	People	Place
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Funding support to landowners. ■ A boost for tourism. ■ Indirect support to rural businesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A connection between communities and wildlife. ■ Promotion of the natural environment to a wide audience. ■ Opportunities for physical activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Protection for habitats. ■ Maintenance of landscape character. ■ Resilience to climate change.

Targeting Higher Level Stewardship in the North East

Natural England has introduced targeting to increase the benefits of its agri-environment schemes.

Higher Level Stewardship is a specific element of the overall Environmental Stewardship scheme (see page 9). The key features of the scheme are:

Environmental Stewardship	Higher Level Stewardship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Introduced in 2006 as part of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). ■ Replaced Countryside Stewardship and ESAs. ■ Two main components: Entry Level Stewardship and Higher Level Stewardship. ■ Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) designed to provide broad environmental benefits across large parts of the region. ELS is a whole farm scheme. ■ Also organic elements to ELS and HLS. ■ Aspires to complement activities under other RDPE axes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aims to deliver significant environmental benefits. ■ Focuses on high priority situations and areas. ■ Competitive (unlike ELS). ■ Concentrates on more complex types of land management. ■ Professional assistance may be required to work up agreements. ■ Agreements usually combined with ELS so providing some high priority benefits in a whole farm surrounding. ■ HLS agreements in the region now total more than £5.7m.

HLS has the five main aims of preserving and enhancing the natural environment for:

- Biodiversity
- Landscape
- Historic Environment
- Access
- Resource Protection



Stanhope, County Durham

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HLS before targeting	HLS after targeting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ No prioritised areas or themes. ■ Reactive applications. ■ Rejected applications. ■ Time wasted for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ landowners ■ agents ■ staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Evidence based. ■ Outcome focused. ■ Clear areas of priority. ■ Clear principles for funding. ■ Broad partner agreement. ■ Less wastage across the board. ■ Better use of public funds.

Figure 4 Natural England Higher Level Stewardship Target Areas in the North East



How did we do it?

- During 2008 Natural England worked closely with its partners to gather evidence relating to the five objectives of HLS.
- The data sets gathered were plotted on GIS for each km square in the region.
- A priority map for each objective was created.
- Objective maps were merged into an overall regional priority map.
- No weighting was given to any one objective over another.
- Complex process taking over seven months to complete.
- Target maps launched in October 2008.

Natural England recognises that some key HLS priorities lie outside the target areas and has developed a suite of regional themes to address these issues. Around 20% of the overall budget will be dedicated to these themes.



Other regional environmental targeting activities

Natural England is not alone in targeting its resources more effectively. The RSPB, Environment Agency, English Heritage, the Wildlife Trusts and Natural England have produced **Wetland Vision** maps to highlight current and future opportunities for wetland creation. The Wildlife Trusts have recently launched their **Living Landscapes** project. Strategically, the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) identifies key areas for habitat restoration and recreation. In October 2008 the North East Biodiversity Forum, North East Environment Forum and Natural England held a Landscape Scale conference demonstrating the desire of the environmental sector to work together in delivering environmental benefits.

HLS targeting assists:

Business	People	Place
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The support of businesses and jobs directly and indirectly. ■ RDPE Integration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provision of access. ■ Provision of physical and mental health benefits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The maintenance of high value landscapes. ■ Climate change adaptation.

Conclusion

This document demonstrates that the North East's natural environment is hugely important for our people, our economy and for nature itself – but it is under pressure from many quarters. Some, such as the intensification of land and sea management, are long standing pressures. Others, such as the economic downturn are more immediate and yet others, the worst effects of climate change for example, are for the long term.

The past decade has seen some levelling off in declines in some habitats and species but some of our more vulnerable or specialist biodiversity continues to decline. The good news is that conservation action can be successful through direct action by individuals and organisations, backed up by designations and regulation, demonstrating that our most valuable wildlife can be protected and can expand.

But more needs to be done. The shoots of recovery over the last decade only go some way to replacing the massive declines compared to 50 years ago. Natural England believes the key issues facing the environmental sector in the North East are:

- Climate change
- Development pressures
- Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy
- The need to embed the natural environment within changing regional governance arrangements and within regional plans and strategies
- Lack of, or quality of, environmental evidence
- Engaging people in environmental issues.

In order to protect our natural environment we need more evidence about its condition, how it is valued and used and the most effective mechanisms to address the challenges we face. Our national *State of the Natural Environment 2008* report lists our national priorities for evidence gathering and many of these are relevant for the region. We look forward to working in collaboration with others – to gather that evidence, to enable us to protect and enjoy the North East's very special landscapes and wildlife now and in the future.

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Front cover photograph

Holy Island Castle

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Natural England is here to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings.

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ISBN 978-1-84754-102-X

Catalogue Code: NE133

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Printed on stock comprising 75% recycled fibre.