

5.0 Conclusion

*Gentle Brent, I used to know you
Wandering Wembley-wards at will,
Now what change your waters show you
In the meadowlands you fill!
Recollect the elm-trees misty
And the footpaths climbing twisty
Under cedar-shaded palings,
Low laburnum-leaned-on railings
Out of Northolt on and upward to the heights of Harrow hill.*

John Betjeman, Middlesex

Lessons Learnt

A number of key lessons and issues have emerged from this study which must be taken into account in any consideration of London's natural landscapes. Firstly, whilst the findings are underlined by an objective basis, objective data and human perception are inevitably intertwined. In fact it is clear that geology, topography and habitats are only part of the story and that the notion of 'natural landscape' can never be entirely neutral, or indeed natural. This is reflected in the very possibility of intervention. The decision to encourage an area to grow wild, for example, or to continue to plant native species, is nevertheless an active human choice. This is further complicated by issues such as the value to wildlife of features typical of brownfield sites. The natural and the built environments are also mutually intertwined, as we have seen, and the true character of an area will always go beyond its underlying features. This is most clear from the diverging characters of the Natural Landscape Areas within the geologically consistent Landscape Types.

Secondly, since the way in which London's landscapes are understood here purposefully differs from that of other open space strategies, it must be acknowledged that contradictions are likely to emerge. An emphasis on wilderness, as but one example, may not be compatible with other values such as those of amenity or perceived safety. It will be interesting to see how policies stemming from this work might marry with other key policies in which amenity and accessibility are central concerns and to hear the views of the key stakeholders and policymakers who are likely to be involved in implementing these recommendations. In terms of policy, also, the disparity between administrative boundaries through which policy is disseminated and the 'natural boundaries' which are embodied in the Natural Landscape Areas is readily apparent. Previous attempts – notably sub-regional working – have been made to bring boroughs together in part through London's green spaces. The 'pizza wedges' are currently under revision but the Mayor of London is clear on the fact that cross-borough working is still desirable. The Natural Landscape Areas may provide one such model – at least as far as the natural landscapes of London are concerned.

Balancing potentially conflicting policies will always be a challenge. However, the Vision is intended to feed through at the very beginning of the process and the fact that the London Plan is currently being revised provides an opportunity not only to raise the considerations that are central to this report but also to decide how these might affect existing policies. The Consultation Draft Replacement London Plan, published in October 2009, makes a strong commitment to green spaces on a number of bases ranging from access and health to biodiversity, education and cultural activity. In particular the Mayor commits to partnership working to extend the Green Infrastructure principles of the East London Green Grid to the rest of London. Crucially the plan also recognises the importance of natural landscape for local character and the need to reflect this in local planning policy and decision making.

Next Steps

The publication of this study is the first step in implementing our vision for London's natural landscape. Consultation with boroughs and other organisations has refined the study and reflected local knowledge to some extent. It remains fundamentally a broad brush desk based framework for further work that will include fieldwork and more indepth assessments. The acknowledgement of the importance of natural landscape to local character within the Consultation Draft Replacement London Plan reinforces the importance of London's Natural Signatures. The immediate next step will be more detailed partnership working with the GLA, the boroughs and other organisations on how the vision within this document can be implemented through land management and the planning process.

The Importance of London's Natural Landscapes

We want finally to reiterate the importance of London's natural landscape, both in its own right and in its unique ability to reconnect Londoners to the underlying nature of the city. Existing perceptions of London, both as a thriving urban centre and as a collection of villages, are not incompatible with a vision of London as a 'green city'; indeed it is the multiplicity of London's character that makes it unique. However, London's remnant landscapes are all too often subsumed into a wider agenda which sees green spaces purely as resources. Natural spaces are of course crucial amenities which not only provide health, leisure and even educational opportunities but which, managed properly, can mitigate the negative effects of pollution and climate change. The notion of a green infrastructure is therefore sound. Nevertheless London's natural landscapes are more than a resource – they have shaped the city and the city has shaped them in turn. By raising awareness of the natural landscapes of London, both through dissemination of the Natural Signatures and through implementation of the Vision, we aim to ensure the continuation of this mutually positive relationship.