



Habitat fragmentation

Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 Sites Theme Workshop Note

Introduction

Discussions with stakeholders and the Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 Sites (IPENS) Reference Group (a technical advisory group to the IPENS project) highlighted the importance of habitat fragmentation as an issue affecting the English Natura 2000 network and that the strategic approach of a Theme Plan would be a valuable addition. Interestingly, this topic did not emerge from the initial IPENS scoping exercise, probably because habitat fragmentation issues are not well identified at the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) unit level on Natural England's ENSIS reporting system (the system used to record the condition of SSSIs for reporting purposes).

A technical workshop was therefore convened on 28th August 2013 to seek views from a range of experts representing Natural England and stakeholder organisations. Views were sought about the importance of habitat fragmentation to Natura 2000 sites, priorities for action, how to resolve blockages to progress and innovative approaches. The wealth of information gathered by the workshop will be used to shape the content of the IPENS Theme Plan.

The Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 Sites (IPENS) has hosted a series of workshops with key stakeholders in order to gather views and ideas on how to resolve some of the issues affecting Natura 2000 sites. The views in this note are those of the workshop participants and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England or the Environment Agency.



Key messages from the workshop

- Our ultimate aim for Natura 2000 sites should be to have better ecological connectivity which provides improved resilience and leads to sites which are fully contributing to Favourable Conservation Status.
- **Evidence gaps** – we need to improve our evidence base about the impacts of habitat fragmentation and which interest features are affected. Better monitoring is needed and evidence of reduced fragmentation, eg increased gene flow. Improved evidence of the causes of fragmentation is needed at the site level, to ensure appropriate action can be taken.
- **Scale** – within-site fragmentation issues may be important for larger Natura 2000 sites whilst smaller sites may suffer more from connectivity issues with the wider environment.
- **Priorities for action** – recommendations included: interest features which are not self-sustaining; populations with low genetic variability; small isolated sites; sites surrounded by hostile landscapes; sites where the habitat is insufficient to support a minimum viable population; off-site management for mobile interest features; and declining interest features which have a high proportion of their population within Natura 2000 sites.
- **Mechanisms** - specifically targeted incentives and other mechanisms, which are appropriate to location, are needed to encourage connectivity. Mechanisms which both support habitat creation / restoration, and provide long term protection are necessary.
- **Approach to statutory designations** – more sites, bigger sites and adequate provision of sites to facilitate species movement are needed, recognising the inherently dynamic nature of species. The reduction or removal of ‘hard’ ecological boundaries around sites was called for, for example using designated buffer areas or long term management of habitats outside of designated sites. Marine sites are not affected in the same way as terrestrial sites so just require more designated areas.
- **Buy in** – we need the public and government to be enthused, engaged and bought into plans to reduce fragmentation. Natural England needs to work with delivery partners to form a consensus view of where we need long term protection, including land purchase.
- **Opportunities** – there may be geographical variation in the types of actions required to address fragmentation by increasing connectivity, for example the highly developed South East will present different opportunities compared to the more rural North West. Increased identification and mapping of habitat creation opportunities will help.
- **Funding and mechanism requirements** – proposals included: agri-environment and other agreements that cover many landowners, to enable large scale action; long term security of management including longer agreements such as covenants; better strategies for packaging bits of work to target funding streams; a new type of designation which acts as a ‘stepping stone’ or connectivity feature.

continued

Specific challenges:

- Some habitats may be so few that they are unsustainable in the long term, even though their protection is required by the Habitats Directive, eg rare species for which England is a stronghold.
- Some rare species may be threatened by increased connectivity, for example white-clawed crayfish which increasingly exist in isolated refugia which protect them from the spread of signal crayfish and the associated crayfish plague disease. Care is therefore required when planning habitat creation or restoration.

Envisaged next steps

- The content of the Habitat Fragmentation Theme Plan will be developed in conjunction with workshop attendees and invitees during 2014.
- Areas of focus for the theme plan are likely to include the development of a decision making framework to guide different types of intervention for different categories of sites or interest features.

Workshop participants

The following organisations and Natural England staff participated in the workshop:

Senior Adviser, IPENS
Team Leader & Partnerships Coordinator, IPENS
Deputy Chief Scientist
Principal Specialist, Landscape Ecology
Specialist, Mammals
Senior Adviser, External Funding
Senior Specialist, Vascular plants
Principal Adviser, Biodiversity 2020,
Climate Change & Ecosystem Services

Natural England
Natural England
Natural England
Natural England
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Natural England
Forest Research
Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
Liverpool University
RSPB

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