



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

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Dear Paul,

Scotland's Biodiversity

The Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee (RACCE) has been considering the Scottish Government's proposed revised strategy for biodiversity, *2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity*¹ and has taken evidence on the draft strategy, prior to submitting its views to the Scottish Government.

As part of its scrutiny the Committee debated motion S4M-05320² in the Chamber on 17 January 2013³. It also held a roundtable discussion with key stakeholders⁴ on 30

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/07/5241>

² <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S4M-05320&ResultsPerPage=10>

³ Official report 17 January 2013

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=7685&mode=pdf>

⁴ Andrew Midgeley, Scottish Land and Estates Ltd; Dr Maggie Keegan, Scottish Wildlife Trust; Dr Paul Walton, RSPB; Matt Shardlow, Buglife; Dr Adam Smith, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust; Professor Alison Hester, James Hutton Institute; Deborah Long, Plantlife; Jonathan Hall, NFUS;

January⁵ and heard evidence from you⁶ on 20 February which further informed its views.

The purpose of this letter is to outline the views of the Committee regarding the issues it believes require consideration by the Scottish Government when finalising its biodiversity strategy. The detailed views of the Committee on the draft strategy are attached in the Annex to this letter.

The Committee understands the Scottish Government plans to use the information obtained from its consultation, the Chamber debate and the views of the RACCE Committee to inform the final strategy for meeting its biodiversity targets for 2020. The Committee looks forward to receiving the final document.

In the meantime the Committee would welcome a response to its recommendations, an update from you on the outcome of the EU discussions on neonicotinoids, and being appraised of the work being undertaken to designate Marine Protected Areas.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rob Gibson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Rob Gibson MSP
Convener

Professor Des Thompson, Scottish Natural Heritage; Davy McCracken, SRUC; David Jamieson, City of Edinburgh Council.

⁵ Official Report 20 January 2013

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=7723&mode=pdf>

⁶ Official Report 20 February 2013

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=7759&mode=pdf>

Broad Conclusion

The Committee supports the Minister for Environment and Climate Change in championing biodiversity and agrees with the Minister that biodiversity is fundamental to the success of Scotland as a healthy environment underpins a healthy society. In addition to its intrinsic benefits biodiversity brings significant additional benefits to individuals, and to society, including benefits to mental, physical, social and economic health.

The Committee is, however, disappointed that Scotland has failed to meet its 2010 targets in relation to halting biodiversity loss. The Committee understands there are a number of reasons for Scotland's failure to meet the targets, which include the impacts of climate change, increased pressure on our land and threats from Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) together with a lack of clear understanding of where responsibility for delivery lies. The Committee also recognises that all European countries have missed their biodiversity targets.

The Committee welcomes the Minister's commitment to ensuring the correct framework and structures are in place to enable us to meet the challenge of the 2020 target but considers a step change is now needed to ensure Scotland meets the 2020 targets. The Committee recognises the difficulties involved in measuring success when targets are difficult to define and hard to measure and welcomes the Minister's proposals to establish a biodiversity monitoring committee to report on progress in this area. The Committee is encouraged by the level of engagement and enthusiasm of the stakeholders it heard from during the round table discussion and by their willingness to work together for the benefit of Scotland's biodiversity. Engaging effectively with the people of Scotland will be vital to meeting the challenge ahead. The key issues arising from discussion with stakeholders are set out below.

Areas of consideration

Mainstreaming

The importance of mainstreaming biodiversity duties throughout Scottish Government departments, local authorities and other public bodies was drawn to the Committee's attention. Stakeholders believe that biodiversity policy should be embedded across all Scottish Government departments to provide the lead for business, industry and society to follow. It was also suggested that wherever possible the roles and responsibilities of public bodies in relation to their biodiversity duties should be made clear, for example, in relation to Non Departmental Public Bodies this should be set out in the grant-in-aid letter.

The Committee notes the involvement of the Minister in the Health and Equality Ministerial Working Group, chaired by the Minister for Public Health, as an example of the Scottish Government's commitment to mainstreaming biodiversity throughout its own areas. The Committee welcomes this and would encourage other Parliamentary Committees, including the Health and Sport Committee, the Local Government and Regeneration Committee and the

Education and Culture Committee to give consideration to biodiversity matters where appropriate.

Stakeholders raised concerns about the level of active engagement of many local authorities in biodiversity and the Committee agrees it is important local authorities are able to share examples of best practice in relation to biodiversity with each other.

The Committee understands the draft strategy has been produced at a high level to ensure it can apply to all areas of the public sector and business. The Committee also understands the intention behind taking an ecosystems services approach is to highlight the advantages and benefits to other sectors and to enable them to see the strategy as relevant to them and to facilitate understanding of the positive impact it will have on their organisation.

The Committee agrees that biodiversity policy should be embedded across all Scottish Government departments to provide a lead for business, industry and society to follow and welcomes the Scottish Government's approach to mainstreaming. The Committee recommends that further detail on how the biodiversity duties of public bodies will be met and the benefits of taking an ecosystems services approach are clearly reflected in the final strategy.

Accessibility and public engagement

The draft strategy refers to engaging with stakeholders in specific areas such as the marine environment and in developing ecosystems services, however the evidence the Committee heard pointed to the benefits of encouraging as many people as possible to become engaged in biodiversity. The Committee raised concerns that approximately 75% of the population do not know what biodiversity means and sought the views of stakeholders on how this could be improved. The overall view was that while several different initiatives already exist what is needed to ensure these are successful in changing behaviour in relation to biodiversity is that the wider public is encouraged to actively engage with nature. One suggestion on how to achieve this was by using more accessible language such as 'nature', 'wildlife', 'plants' and 'maintaining the balance of nature' rather than scientific language which could be off putting. The Committee recognised that people have an interest in what is around them on their doorsteps and this interest should be encouraged and supported as this, in itself, could lead to the desired behaviour change.

The Committee acknowledges that whilst the draft strategy uses technical and scientific terms it Committee agrees with the Minister that in order to successfully relate the message to the wider public it is important to do so in terms easily understood by all.

The Committee recommends the Scottish Government ensures its final strategy includes greater detail on ways to engage the wider public in as many different aspects of biodiversity as possible, including through local centres and schools and with partners in the business and voluntary sectors. The Committee encourages the Scottish Government to consider the terminology used in engaging with the public to ensure accessible and appropriate language is used.

Education

In terms of education the Committee heard of the importance of encouraging children of all ages to become involved with the outdoors and nature. It heard how the Curriculum for Excellence works well in getting school children at primary level to engage with the outdoors but, unfortunately, this success does not appear to be replicated in secondary schools.

It is evident to the Committee that making outdoor learning and biodiversity an integral part of the Curriculum, both in primary and secondary schools, is crucial to the success of future work to protect and enhance our biodiversity. The Committee agrees with the Minister that more could be done via education and, in particular, more could be done to encourage and maintain an interest in biodiversity in secondary schools. The Committee welcomes the Minister's commitment to raise the issue of how this can be improved, particularly in secondary schools, with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and looks forward to seeing this reflected in the final strategy.

Land management

Representatives of land owners and managers highlighted to the Committee that as the vast majority of land in Scotland is managed, positive engagement with those that own and manage the land is essential. They recommended structures should be put in place to ensure comprehensive advice is available to land owners and managers. The Committee agrees it is vital that land managers are aware of their responsibility to biodiversity and meeting this obligation is not necessarily in conflict with their economic and food production objectives.

The Committee agrees with the Minister that the Scottish Government should seek to help reduce conflict and achieve a balance between competing objectives, for example in identifying sites for forestry that do not prevent new entrants to farming or the maintenance of the livestock sector.

The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to "supporting and encouraging an approach to land management that fosters sustainable use of land and water resources and puts biodiversity at the heart of integrated planning and decision making" and recommends the Scottish Government takes into account the importance of ensuring appropriate advice is readily available to land managers.

The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment in the draft strategy to deliver a robust ecological network which will in turn provide the framework for establishing a National Ecological Network. The Committee notes that one of priorities set out in the draft strategy in relation to habitats and protected species is to complete the suite of protected places and improve their connectivity through a National Ecological Network centred on these sites.

The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to establish a National Ecological Network and will seek updates from the Minister on the

development of this work and the potential inclusion of the National Ecological Network in the forthcoming NPP3.

Loss of plant species

In addition to action for habitats and protected species the Committee was concerned to hear, during its debate in the Chamber, of the decline in plant diversity in Scotland. It heard that, according to a recent report, in the last 60 years we have lost 97 species of plants including 28 mosses and liverworts. The Committee also heard, during its evidence session, of the link between the decline in pollinators and the decline in plant diversity. The Committee notes the Scottish Government makes clear in the draft strategy its commitment to conserving the diversity of plants and fungi and acknowledges that while there has been some success with recovery of certain species there are many further species that require protective action.

The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to introducing a strategic programme for re-establishing species driven to local and national extinction, or threatened by climate change and other forces. The Committee will seek updates from the Minister on the progress and success of this work.

Funding

The importance of using the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to help drive the required changes in land management was highlighted to the Committee in evidence. The Committee welcomes the commitment in the draft strategy to ensuring that measures implemented under the CAP reform will encourage land managers to develop and retain a diversity of wildlife habitats and landscape features across all land use systems.

The Committee notes the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) will be the main source of funding to support the implementation of the revised strategy. However the Committee is concerned that the delay in agreeing the EU Budget and CAP reform have meant that transitional arrangements will be needed in 2014. While these arrangements should allow existing agri-environment commitments to continue to be funded, it seems likely that there will be a delay in opening the new SRDP for applications, which is regrettable. The Committee is also concerned about the various increasing demands on the SRDP, the impact this may have on support available to agri-environment projects, and the possibility of a reduction in funding available to support biodiversity via the SRDP.

The Committee welcomes the Minister's confirmation that contingency plans are being put in place to allow existing agri-environment projects to continue to be funded. The Committee understands it is intended these plans will be available for consultation in the summer and will scrutinise the proposals when they become available. In addition to seeking to provide continuity of funding the Committee recommends the Scottish Government works with stakeholders to identify different and innovative methods of securing funding and ensuring effective spending to deliver biodiversity benefits.

The Committee agrees with the view that public funds should be spent effectively and in this respect agrees with stakeholders on the importance of ensuring that other policy initiatives deliver biodiversity benefits, for example through the development of a peatland carbon code and revision of the forestry code.

Restoration of degraded ecosystems.

The Committee agreed with stakeholders that the current work on peatland is an excellent example of the restoration of a degraded ecosystem and is an approach that could possibly be used in other circumstances. In particular it heard that work had been undertaken to develop a tool to identify the benefits of restoring peatland which could have application for other degraded ecosystems.

The Committee understands the Scottish Government is looking to restore other degraded ecosystems including coastal, dune and heathland and notes the Minister is also of the view that tackling INNS would assist in meeting the target of restoring 15% of degraded ecosystems, which is one of the Aichi targets.

The Committee recommends that the issue of restoration of degraded ecosystems clearly addressed in the final strategy and encourages the Scottish Government to consider the scope for development of tools similar to that which has been developed to identify the benefits of peatland to identify the most effective ways of restoring other degraded ecosystems. The Committee will seek updates from the Minister on the progress of the work being undertaken to restore degraded ecosystems.

Marine and seabird issues

The Committee heard that marine biodiversity is coming under increasing pressure from various threats. It also heard of the importance of ensuring that the forthcoming National Marine Plan achieves coherent and co-ordinated sustainable development in the marine environment. In particular the Committee heard of the lack of protected foraging areas for seabirds and protected areas for sand eels.

The Committee notes the draft strategy recognises that as predicted changes in temperature are likely to shift the distribution of marine species and rising sea levels and storms are adding to the likelihood of coastal flooding there is an urgent requirement to put effective marine and coastal management in place. The Committee agrees with the views expressed by stakeholders on the importance of the National Marine Plan, the need both to ensure effective marine spatial planning and to designate an ecologically coherent series of Marine Protected Areas to effectively tackle these issues and other marine biodiversity concerns.

The Committee is pleased to hear of the Scottish Government's plans to tackle marine biodiversity and will monitor the designation of Marine Protected Areas closely along with the on-going work on the National Marine Plan and will seek updates from the Minister on the progress of this work.

Monitoring and Targets

The Committee heard evidence that if Scotland is to make progress in tackling biodiversity then we need to clearly define our priorities and ensure we have clear achievable targets leading up to 2020. In addition to this we need to have clarity in the definition of roles and responsibilities with regard to the various actions that require to be undertaken. The importance of being able to monitor the effectiveness of the actions we take to ensure that we are able to adapt and make appropriate changes if required was also stressed to the Committee. The strategy should establish a clear process of setting a target, identifying the actions necessary to meet the target, and monitoring and reporting on progress in meeting the target. Feedback loops are also required so that if a target is not being met, it is clear why not, so that actions can be adjusted.

The Committee believes that targets in the biodiversity strategy should be clear and achievable and roles and responsibilities for delivery should be clear and unambiguous. The Committee welcomes the Minister's proposal to establish a biodiversity monitoring committee to report on progress in this area. The Committee would welcome an annual update on progress in implementing the strategy which should include information on any changes or adaptations that are required in order to meet the targets.

The Committee notes with concern the point raised in evidence on the decline in the number of people with the relevant degree of taxonomic expertise, leaving a significant gap in the skills required to allow identification and biological classification of different species. The Committee considers that having sufficient expertise to carry out effective monitoring and to assist with tackling Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) will be vital.

The Committee agrees that having people with the relevant skills and expertise is essential to successfully monitor the effectiveness of our actions and recommends that the Scottish Government gives consideration to how any gaps in expertise could be identified and resolved as part of its final strategy.

The concept of ecosystems services and how it will help make biodiversity relevant to other organisations because it will enable them to see the benefits to themselves was raised in evidence to the Committee. The Committee is interested in the value of ecosystems services and how this can be accounted for in, for example, planning decisions.

The Committee agrees the Natural Capital Asset Index is an important part of the approach to understanding how our actions are impacting on biodiversity and the capacity of the environment to provide ecosystem services. The Committee encourages the Scottish Government to develop this work further to develop tools and guidance to enable decision makers to better understand the impacts of developments and policies on ecosystems services.

River catchment areas

The 2020 challenge document suggests that biodiversity policies should be implemented at a river catchment level. This would follow the way the Water Framework Directive has been implemented. A set of indicators of ecosystem health will be developed, and these will be used to identify priorities for action. The Committee agrees with the Minister that taking a comprehensive view of the health of a river catchment is constructive and logical and that an ecosystem services approach could be applied at a river catchment level.

The Committee would welcome further information from the Scottish Government on how this approach is likely to be implemented, for example, who will lead on the work? Will there be biodiversity plans developed for each catchment? How will catchment plans link into the funding available from the next Rural Development Programme?

Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS)

One of the main areas of concern expressed to the Committee is the issue of INNS. It heard from stakeholders that they believe biosecurity and prevention of INNS arriving in this country is key to reducing the impact they have both on our biodiversity and on our economy.

The Committee believes of equal importance to preventing entry is the ability to prevent INNS from moving around the country once they have been identified in a specific location. The Committee agrees with stakeholders that where prevention is not possible then early identification followed by a process which enables action to be taken quickly is essential. It also notes the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 is an important mechanism in tackling INNS as it gives responsibility to agencies for groups of species, providing a clear lead to take early action to address the problem ensuring valuable time is saved.

The suggestion by stakeholders that communities could play an important role in reporting and monitoring the presence of INNS is reflected in the draft strategy and the Committee agrees this is a positive step.

The draft strategy sets out detailed proposals for tackling INNS. The Minister provided the Committee with additional detail on how work is on-going at both political and official levels between Scotland and the EU. The Committee understands all relevant agencies (SNH, SEPA, Forestry Commission and Marine Scotland) are working on the current Code of Practice and have close links with their European counterparts. The issue of INNS is one the Committee has identified as a priority in its consideration of EU matters⁷

⁷ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/59909.aspx#i>

European and External Affairs Committee, 1st Report, 2013 (Session 4): Report on the EU priorities of the Committees of the Scottish Parliament

The Committee also heard of the importance of trees, such as the Ash, to Scotland and that many saplings had been imported from Europe. The Committee agreed that encouraging the use of locally produced saplings may help prevent diseases such as “ash dieback” entering the country.

The Committee welcomes the importance placed by the Scottish Government on tackling INNS in its draft strategy and will continue to monitor the progress of the issue as part of its consideration of EU matters.

The Committee recommends that the revised strategy ensures that policies in relation to INNS are effectively co-ordinated to ensure there are no loopholes or unintended consequences that may exacerbate the challenges of dealing with INNS

Neonicotinoids

The Committee notes with concern the evidence it heard on the decline of insect populations and pollinators such as bees, and the apparent link to the use of neonicotinoids as a form of pesticide. The Committee understands there are challenges in finding appropriate alternatives but is encouraged by the positive comments made by the representatives from the farming sector and their willingness to respond to evidence based approaches to tackle the issue.

The Committee understands that Scottish Ministers have the legal powers to withdraw or amend existing pesticide authorisations in Scotland but recognises there may be practical difficulties in enforcing any changes in this way. The Committee understands the Scottish Government is currently awaiting advice from the Advisory Committee on Pesticides on the European Food Safety Authority’s review of neonicotinoids. In addition the Committee is aware that the European Commission’s final proposals on restrictions on the use of neonicotinoids are due to be voted on by member states at a meeting on 14-15 March.

The Committee shares the concerns raised by stakeholders about the use of neonicotinoids and welcomes the seriousness with which the Scottish Government also views the issue. The Committee looks forward to receiving an update from the Minister setting out the Scottish Government’s definitive view on how it will take matters forward following the forthcoming European decision. This is an issue the Committee will continue to monitor closely.