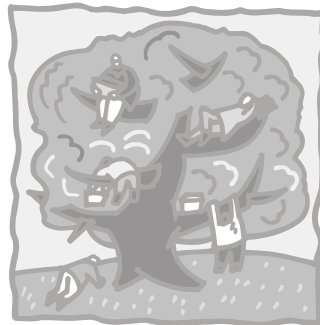
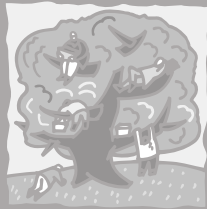


# Theme 7: Biodiversity & Landscapes

A Sustainable Future  
for the South West

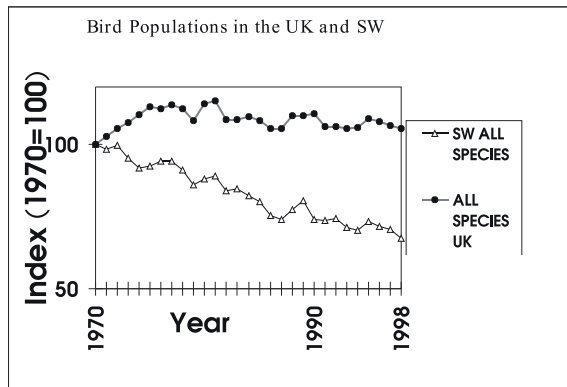


The Regional Sustainable Development Framework  
for the South West of England



# Theme 7: Biodiversity & Landscapes

## Theme 7: Biodiversity and Landscapes



### Setting the scene

Biological diversity, the variety of life on the planet, is vital to human health and well-being. It provides us with natural resources, genetic material, knowledge and inspiration. Biodiversity enriches our lives in many vital, but often unvalued ways. Our landscapes and associated biodiversity are part of our natural capital and as such deserve protection.

The natural environment is a key issue for the region and our unique landscapes, and the wildlife they support, set it apart from other parts of the UK. Its diversity is in itself significant. This is illustrated by the 26 of the 39 UK priority habitats found in the South West, including chalk streams, coastal saltmarsh and lowland wood-pasture and parkland. This diversity of habitats and species begins to explain what makes the region special.

This high quality environment attracts people to live in the region and businesses to invest here.

Environment related activity contributes to over 4% of employment and to between 5-10% of the region's GDP. The South West RDA has recognised that the environment is a key driver for the region's economy; for example the National Trust estimate 78% of all holiday trips to the South West are motivated by conserved landscapes.

However, these regional assets continue to be degraded. Damage to important sites for wildlife continues and the wider countryside supports less biodiversity than it did in the past. This is best illustrated by the sustained decline of wild birds associated with farmland - the skylark population down by 75% in 25 years.

The region's landscapes and wildlife require action if they are to remain viable and continue to provide an asset which enhances the quality of life for people in the region. Enhancing these environmental assets is a key test of sustainability. This is further emphasised by the two National Parks and the designation of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty over 30% of the region. The South West also contains a number of valuable 'tranquil' areas.

The region covers some 15% of England and within its boundaries we find as rich and diverse a natural environment as anywhere in Europe.

The region's biodiversity is particularly special including habitats of international importance - 62% of the UK's calcareous grassland and 25% of the UK's lowland heaths. Amongst the rich assemblages of flora and fauna are at least 25 species of global importance and 34 species endemic to the UK (11 of which are found nowhere else in the country).

Not all wildlife can be protected within designated sites. However the South West holds 21% of England's Sites of Special Scientific Interest (the nationally important network of sites) covering nearly 25% of the England total (as of December 1998) and the country's only Marine Nature Reserve, at Lundy, Devon.

*The South West is the most important region for butterflies, yet at least eighteen species are declining as a result of habitat loss, abandonment or changes in management practices. For example, the downland butterfly, chalkhill blue, has declined by 28% in Cornwall, Devon and Somerset during the past 25 years. Some species are now especially vulnerable and restricted to a small number of sites, for example the heath fritillary, for which Exmoor is one of only two sites in the country, has lost half of its colonies in the past 10 years.*

Conservation of biodiversity must also include measures to protect habitats and species in the wider countryside. Many of the region's important habitats require deliberate management, and so are closely associated with agriculture, forestry and fishing. The South West has the highest area of land in agriculture of any English region (80%), with dairy farming predominating (grassland covers 65% of the agricultural land). Forestry is a land use with the potential to increase, currently woodland covers 9% of the region (the English average 7.5%). The region has high-quality rivers including some of the best fishing, yet some species, especially salmon, are declining.

The urban areas can provide unique habitats - parks, gardens and disused industrial land. Such places can have a special role in showing wildlife to people. The designation of local nature reserves can promote the better understanding of conservation as well as providing protection to species.

The marine habitats of the South West support some of the richest plant and animal communities in the world. The region's waters mark a boundary between warm southern and cool northern seas, resulting in an abundance of different species.

## What are the opportunities for improving sustainability?

There are three significant steps which can be taken to conserve landscape and biodiversity which will contribute to sustainable development.

### *Improve the quality and extent of habitats*

The region's landscapes, both rural and urban are composed of different habitats. Many habitats are currently remnants of once extensive areas (e.g. chalk grassland in the region is only 5% of the original area.) and such fragments are highly vulnerable.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan has set targets for species conservation over the next 15 years. The BAP process should guide restoration and describe appropriate management. A regional breakdown of the UK priorities is available, which identifies those parts of the UK BAP that can be delivered in the region.

Opportunities to enhance and re-create priority habitats should be linked to development planning, restoration of mineral sites, managed retreat and conservation projects. Development must avoid areas of importance for wildlife and landscape.

*The SW Biodiversity Partnership produced a regional biodiversity audit and regional biodiversity action plans for the South West. The audit documents the important wildlife and habitats in the region. The action plan sets out targets for enhancing priority species and habitats, and actions to deliver these targets. These targets are integrated within the emerging RPG and the Rural Development Programme (SW Chapter).*

### *Better management of the wider countryside*

We need to improve the health of the wider countryside, particularly to tackle poor and in appropriate land and river management. This is particularly important for those species reliant on agricultural activity - here change, often subtle, can have a dramatic impact.

Sustainable management of the countryside, including farming, forestry and fisheries, means producing food whilst supporting rural communities and helping wildlife. The England Rural Development Programme, which is run by MAFF, has given a substantial increase in funding for agri-environment schemes including Countryside

Stewardship, Environment Sensitive Areas and Organic Farming. Such schemes need to be expanded so that they are available to all farmers wishing to participate. At least 25% of the EU agriculture budget should go to support the Rural Development Regulations.

The farming community should be encouraged and financially supported to deliver environmental benefits to the rural landscape which contributes to the UK Biodiversity Plans and produce living and vibrant landscapes.

*Farmers working with the RSPB have proved that wildlife friendly farming can help rare farmland birds. In 1999 450 pairs of curlew were recorded in south Devon, compared with only 118 pairs in 1989. The increase was 70% on farms within Countryside Stewardship areas between 1992 and 1998.*

### *Improve the gaps in our knowledge*

Nature conservation is increasingly a target driven process with the expectation that both the statutory agencies and the voluntary movement can contribute and report on the outcomes. Access to biodiversity data is a serious constraint for all involved. The National Biodiversity Network is designed to provide the information necessary for decisions to be made. It will be an electronic network to provide ready access to existing operations managed by Local Record Centres and should be used to guide decision making and resolve conflicting interests.

The promotion of landscapes, the habitats they include and the species reliant on those habitats is essential if they are to be recognised as assets to the region and the community. Better information and a celebration of the role of designation will help people value our unique environment. The environment must be recognised as an important asset to the people of the South West.

*Marine - Devon Wildlife Trust  
Since the early 1990s, the Devon Wildlife Trust has organised a marine survey which has improved our knowledge of the marine and coastal environment of Devon. The survey has found previously unrecorded species such as the football seasquirt *Diazona graeca*. This has enabled work to be focused on species and habitats which give greatest cause for conservation concern.*



# Theme 7: Biodiversity & Landscapes

## What are the objectives for improving sustainability in the South West?

Objective	Examples of how it might be achieved	Links to potential partners and processes
Protect and enhance habitats and species	1. Secure optimal management for the regions priority habitats	EN, MAFF, local authorities, conservation organisations guided by UK and local BAPs
	2. Increase areas of important habitats in line with UK BAP, and reduce fragmentation	Local authorities, Forestry Commission, conservation organisations, MAFF through incentive schemes, development planning, guided by BAPs
	3. Increase biodiversity in the wider countryside	MAFF, Forestry Commission, CA, EN, conservation organisations working with farmers and farming organisations
Promote biodiversity as a regional asset	1. Support and promote eco-friendly tourism such as wildlife watching, scenic trips and sub-aqua nature trails	Local authorities, conservation organisations, CA, structure funds (EU)
	2. Establish nature reserves with access including urban local nature reserves	EN and local authority with nature conservation groups and community groups
Protect and enhance the regions urban and rural landscapes	1. Protect existing tranquil areas	Local planning authorities Conservation organisations
	2. Minimise light pollution	Highways Agencies and local planning authorities



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