

Response to The National Assembly for Wales' Environment and Sustainability Committee Inquiry into Sustainable Land Management

The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB) is a voluntary body whose membership includes all but one of the AONB Partnerships and Conservation Boards in England and Wales, many of the Local Authorities with statutory responsibility for AONBs, a Trust which manages AONBs in Northern Ireland, as well as a number of voluntary bodies and individuals with an interest in the future of these nationally designated landscapes.

Thank you for the opportunity to input to this Welsh Assembly Inquiry.

GENERAL POINTS

Wise use of land is a fundamental building block in achieving wider ambitions for sustainability. We know from many sources ([Planetary Boundaries](#)) that 'business as usual' is no longer a viable option. We need a change in approach to land management, one that moves us towards living within the limits of the natural world and more fairly with each other, locally, nationally and globally.

The challenge is to articulate a long term policy direction and select the actions or series of actions that will bring about the necessary changes in approach. We need to move to securing and restoring ecosystem services rather than unwittingly support ecosystem disservice.

Decisions about current and future land management practices are complex and complicated. The majority of land in Wales is privately owned with large areas operated by private estates. The motivations driving landowners and land managers choices about land use are many and varied; from personal knowledge to peer practice, market forces, fiscal regimes and government policy initiatives.

The case for building social and environmental value through land management

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practices should be the central goal of policy-making. As long as the achievement of good outcomes is separate from the real business of business, we will not see these outcomes achieved. Similarly, public policy cannot hope to create the best possible social and environmental outcomes unless we adjust the focus of policy-making.

The NAAONB supports the notion that functioning ecosystem services underpin the wealth, health and wellbeing of Wales and its people.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are distinctive landscapes of outstanding quality and value. The landscapes themselves are strategic national assets, and the partnerships that govern the AONB designation are in a prime position to advance sustainable development for the people of Wales.

AONB designation provides Welsh government with a framework for supporting sustainable management of special places, key habitats and functional ecosystems. AONB landscapes are understood by people and provide the ideal framework in which to negotiate and agree sustainable land use decision-making. At the core of this negotiated framework for change lie AONB Management Plans, valuable statutory mechanisms that can help shape and deliver long term visions for landscapes and ecosystems.

DETAILED POINTS:

The NAAONB is keen to ensure that there is clear and consistent use and communication of terminology to support better understanding of land management objectives. To achieve this, we need to understand the mutually supportive relationship between landscapes, biodiversity and ecosystem services.

The NAAONB subscribes to the EU Landscape Convention definition¹ of landscape:

“An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”.

The NAAONB supports the adoption of the ecosystems approach to land use planning, management and development. In England, AONBs have been piloting a checklist for land managers and delivery bodies to support holistic, integrated and joined up decision making. The NAAONB is keen that this experience and practice should be shared widely in the Welsh context.

The possibility that ecosystem disservice may occur must be kept in mind when planning, evaluating and monitoring the ecosystem approach. The distinction between

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an ecosystem service and disservice could be dependent upon the context and perceptions of actors involved. To improve the understanding of possible disservice, collaboration between landscape managers, ecologists and social scientists should explore interactions and provide quantifiable analysis of costs and benefits.

QUESTION - How we define the key ecosystems and ecosystem services in a way that makes sense for Wales?

The functional grouping of ecosystem services has been widely adopted.

Defining, mapping and communicating ecosystem services is a critical first step to better decision making about land use. It allows land use decision makers to:

- Understand the resource implications of land use decisions - What the key risks of their actions and decisions to ecosystem health are,
- Develop “Opportunities maps” where targeted activity will safeguard or restore ecosystem functionality,
- Help people, without a science background, understand how the ‘land’ contributes to society’s wellbeing.

The NAAONB is aware that there are sufficient data sets currently available to begin the process of mapping ecosystem services. Gaps in data do exist, especially for the full suite of ecosystems (i.e. marine data) and for the full suite of ecosystem services – we are aware more work is required to support better understanding of cultural services.

AONB partnerships can and should help with this work. A number of AONBs are already working to improve the read across from landscape character assessments to ecosystem services mapping. Much good work has been undertaken by the former Countryside Council for Wales and the Joint Nature Conservancy Council.

See

- Spatial framework for assessing evidence needs for operational ecosystem approaches <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-6241>
- The 'Ecosystem Service Mapping Gateway', developed by the NERC Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (BESS) Directorate, with funding from Natural England, brings together information on the growing number of projects concerned with mapping ecosystem service delivery at the landscape level <http://www.nerc-bess.net/index.php/bess-news/114-new-ecosystem-service-mapping-gateway>
- Landscape permeability mapping – Dorset AONB http://www.cordialeproject.eu/en/toolkit/tools/tool_03_biodiversity_corridor_mapping_methodology/

What is required, now, is a concerted effort to share approaches, build good practice and ensure consistent and compatible data is used across a variety of spatial scales – local to regional to national/ international.

QUESTION - How we develop a baseline from which to measure progress? This includes how we collect, coordinate and use data to support sustainable land management in Wales.

AONB partnerships are well placed to use the landscape framework to compile and negotiate integrated landscape/ ecosystem services planning. Central to achieving this will be the use of common methodologies for data capture and display and compliance with the EU INSPIRE directive.

The NAAONB recognises that agencies and organisations will need to work harder at integrating data use and ensuring there is a 'clear line of sight' between landscape, ecological and ecosystems mapping and monitoring.

The NAAONB is working with AONB partnerships to develop a common approach to landscape monitoring that adds effectively to the current work on ecosystems mapping. In Wales, the State of the Environment 2012 reporting together with State of AONBs work provides an excellent start-point for building a common and respected platform for integrated data sharing and monitoring of landscapes, biodiversity and ecosystem services.

QUESTION - What incentives we can provide land managers to develop sustainable practices, and in particular, any new sources of investment we can attract to support these?

The NAAONB has been working with a wide range of interested organisations to support High Nature Value (HNV) farming as a practical short to medium term response to landscape management.

In a Welsh context, High Nature Value (HNV) farming covers a large proportion of the country - mainly associated with extensive beef and sheep farming in the uplands and marginal farming areas, because of its high reliance on semi-natural vegetation (vegetation comprising native plants and maintained by grazing and/or mowing which has not been agriculturally 'improved') and unimproved pastures for grazing. However there are also examples from the lowlands which include some low input arable/mixed farming systems and coastal habitats which contain a mosaic of semi-natural features which support a rich assemblage of wildlife.

HNV farming relies upon the sympathetic land management practices of farmers – such as grazing with low stocking rates, the traditional mowing of hay meadows, leaving fallow areas, cutting rush or undertaking habitat restoration – all vital for maintaining many of our priority habitats and ensuring the survival of our most threatened wildlife species.

A coalition of organisations has identified five things the UK Government and Devolved Administrations can do to support High Nature Value (HNV) farming

- Through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), ensure that High Nature Value (HNV) farmers are properly rewarded for supporting our most precious wildlife and landscapes. Across the UK, there are thousands of farming businesses that contribute hugely to supporting our best natural assets, but these are failed by current CAP approaches,
- Prioritise spending on targeted Rural Development Programmes across the UK that support the farming systems most important for wildlife, and secure viable incomes for HNV farmers to enable them to deliver for society and the environment,
- Build on what we've got: through valuable funding programmes such as LIFE+ and INTERREG, support local community led initiatives that encourage the continuation of sustainable grazing and land management in places of highest value. These initiatives can foster investment in HNV systems, for example, via appropriate processing, marketing, revenues from certified products, sustainable tourism and business support,
- Make progress in identifying and monitoring HNV systems – this is a priority of the European Commission and a requirement for all Member States. In the UK, the Scottish Government has already made considerable progress in developing a HNV farming indicator; England, Wales and Northern Ireland must now follow suit and make this a policy priority, ensuring farmers are engaged in the process,
- Invest in research on HNV farming systems across the UK, including an assessment of the broad benefits they provide for society and the threats they face. The 'sustainable intensification' approach to farming fails to recognise the important environmental, cultural and economic benefits that these more extensive farming systems can provide.

QUESTION - How we ensure that our sustainable land management policies maintain vibrant rural communities and attract new entrants into the land-based sector?

The NAAONB supports an expansion of the concept of 'subsidiarity' – the idea that decisions are best taken at as local a scale as possible within a wider strategic framework agreed at a higher level.

Greater local production will require us to re learn many skills that have been forgotten. From agriculture to manufacturing to the provision of local finance, returning to appropriate scale means equipping ourselves with the means to do so.

A great strength of AONB partnerships lies in their ability to develop fit for purpose planning and business approaches that engage a wide range of stakeholders and deliver integrated solutions locally.

QUESTION - The most appropriate geographical scale(s) at which we should be delivering sustainable land management policies and practices in Wales?

The NAAONB recognises the benefits for integrated delivery that would flow from more consistent geographic focus for land management policies and practices. Existing administrative boundaries are rarely the best units for managing natural resources. AONB designated areas provide valuable geographic scales with strong community identification as well as ready-made stakeholder partnerships.

There is a case to be made for developing a common land management unit that all stakeholders understand and can relate to. A proposal could be to use river catchments as the common land management unit. The NAAONB is keen to play an active role in developing approaches based on common land management units.

QUESTION - If there are key actions we can take to deliver short-term 'quick wins' and the actions we should be taking for the long-term?

There are a number of key steps that will assist all partners in moving toward more sustainable land management in Wales.

Key Steps – Recognition of the Challenge, including

- Acceptance and support for the fundamental principle that earth-system processes are necessary for ensuring a safe operating space for humanity,
- Acknowledging the need to act in order to safeguard such processes from the threats of serious or irreversible damage as a result of human activities,
- Researching and developing our understanding of the nature and vulnerabilities of such processes, including the thresholds at which they could shift into new states and where boundaries at a safe distance from such thresholds would lie,
- Identifying the human activities that affect such processes, and monitoring the effects of such activities, including collecting, collating and presenting scientific data and information by reference to such processes and the human activities which affect them and
- Developing and communicating information about such processes in ways which are transparent and designed to encourage public engagement, trust, common understanding and acceptance of shared responsibility for safeguarding them.

Key Steps – Partnership Action including

- Baseline mapping of ecosystems and ecosystem services to establish extent of functioning and degraded ecosystems,
- Clearly articulated ambitions for restoration of degraded ecosystems with focus on “buffering” and extending priority habitats,
- A focus on restoring deep peatlands, ancient woodlands and riverine habitats,
- A focus on catchments and the water system,
- A focus on the woodland system,
- Support of HNV farming as part of CAP reform,
- Support of AONB Management Plans and the work of AONB partnerships as tried and tested mechanisms for delivering the ecosystems approach.

KEY NAAONB POINTS

Adopting an ecosystem approach is more than managing the environment as an integrated system; it involves managing societal and economic drivers as part of this system. This is fundamental, in our view, to achieving sustainable development and is a key principle behind the landscape approach. AONB partnerships, in their delivery of the AONB purpose, have an exceptionally important role to play in moving toward a more sustainable Wales.

The AONB designation acts as a framework for systematic, co-operative planning, and actively supports social well-being in ways consistent with the AONB purpose.

The NAAONB asserts that sustainable land management is at the heart of decision making within AONBs. By supporting AONB partnerships and plans Welsh Government can

- Build stakeholder engagement in land use decision making, (PEOPLE)
- Integrate decision-making to benefit landscapes and functional ecosystems whilst prioritising returns to the local economy (ECONOMY)
- Ensure long term management of natural capital and ecosystem service delivery (ENVIRONMENT)

NAAONB
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