

Nature Improvement Areas 2012-15

Making Space for Nature on a Landscape Scale



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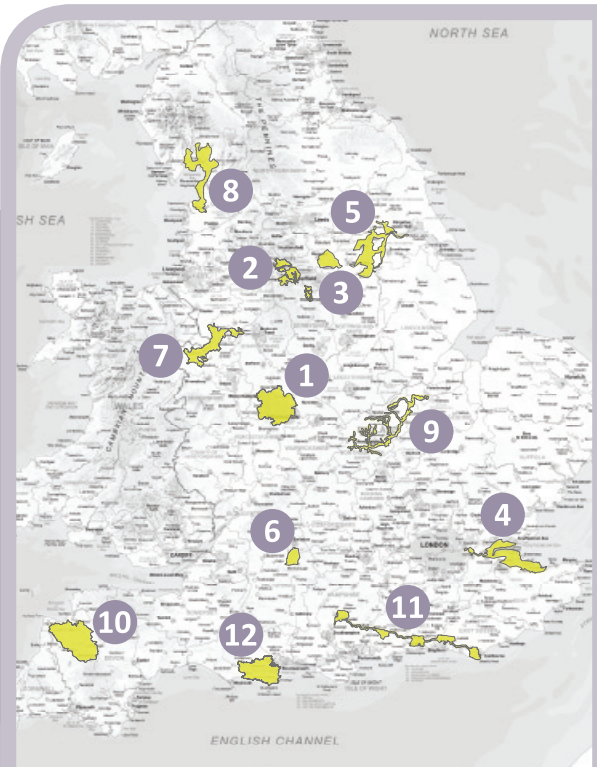
Foreword

I find it hard to believe that at the end of March 2015 the 12 Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) will have been in existence for 3 years. Underpinning their establishment was the view that (despite many successes) to prevent the seemingly inexorable decline in England's wildlife, conservation needed a step-change in activity. The solution was "more, bigger, better and joined" (more sites and bigger areas devoted to conservation, with better management and connectivity between sites) and the NIAs were the vehicles for delivery – not the last word, but a big, bold experiment in doing things differently that could be copied and replicated across the nation.

This booklet shows just what can be achieved by local 'consortia of the willing' working to make space for nature in their own area. It is astonishing, and England's wildlife is the richer for it already. Yet in one way this isn't very surprising; "more, bigger, better and joined" is based on a large amount of sound ecological science. What I do find quite extra-ordinary is the way in which all sorts of organisation and individuals have risen to the challenge to deliver 'their' NIA, and collaborated in a way that I don't think anybody could have predicted. The legacy of the NIAs is actually therefore two-fold; more space for nature, and more, bigger better and joined up collaboration between land-owners, local communities, local authorities, utility companies, statutory authorities, conservation charities and so on to deliver benefits of people and wildlife.

We now know it works, and more locally determined NIAs are emerging or being proposed. My worry is that to succeed in the long-term, this remarkable movement needs more secure, long-term commitment from both the private and public sectors, because "more, bigger, better and joined" cannot be for just three years.

Professor Sir John Lawton CBE FRS
York, February 2015



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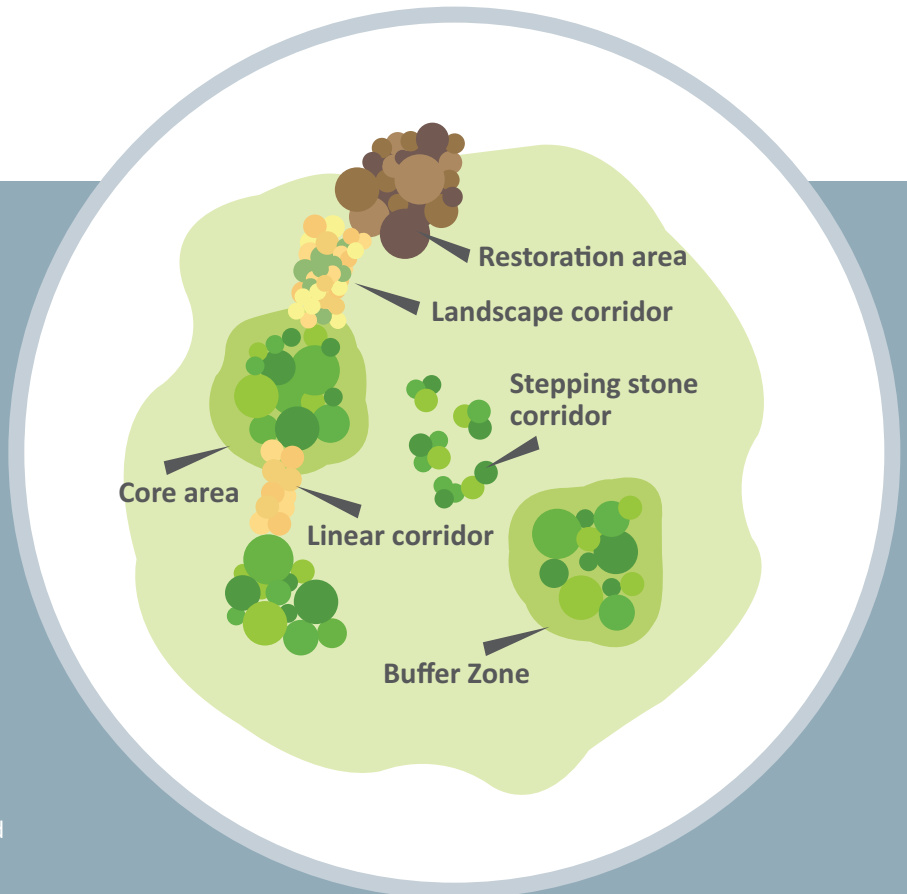
The Landscape-scale approach

Despite our attempts to reverse decades of biodiversity loss in the UK, many species and habitats continue to decline, facing pressures such as development and climate change. These have wide-reaching impacts. Biodiversity loss affects many of the services provided by our natural environment. Examples of these services include provision of clean water, climate regulation, pollination, access and recreation. We need a more sustainable approach that benefits both the environment and the economy.

To do this we need to think and act on a much bigger scale. We can no longer focus our efforts only on individual wildlife sites but need to think about the wider environment of our towns, cities and countryside. How can we integrate different land uses in a way that is sympathetic to the environment and therefore benefit both wildlife and people?

In 2010 the Government commissioned an independent review by Sir John Lawton titled 'Making Space for Nature'. This report identified the need to establish a strong and connected natural environment by ensuring:

- More sites and bigger areas are devoted to conservation.
- Better protection and management of designated wildlife sites.
- Increased connectivity between sites.



The report suggested that a landscape could be categorised into 'core areas' (such as designated sites), 'restoration areas' (such as degraded areas of habitat), 'corridors', 'buffer zones' and 'sustainable use areas' (such as farmland managed under Countryside Stewardship agreements). This is illustrated in the diagram above.

In June 2011 the Government published a response to this review in their Natural Environment White Paper setting out a new direction of travel for managing and valuing the natural environment in England. This supported a landscape-scale approach to conservation and greater recognition of the value of the ecosystem services provided by our natural environment which underpin our economy, society and individual health and well-being.

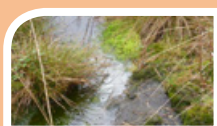
Introduction to Nature Improvement Areas

Twelve initial NIAs were established by Government as a key mechanism for restoring the natural environment to benefit people and wildlife. These were funded through a national competition and allocated £7.5 million. The successful NIAs were announced in February 2012:



Birmingham and the Black Country

© Simon Atkinson



Dark Peak

© Dave O'Hara

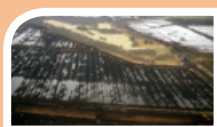


Dearne Valley



Greater Thames Marshes

© RSPB-images, Rolf Williams



Humberhead Levels



Marlborough Downs

© David White



Meres and Mosses of the Marches

© Mark Ecclestone



Morecambe Bay Limestones and Wetlands

© Rob Grange



Nene Valley

© Henry Stanier



Northern Devon

© Devon Wildlife Trust



South Downs Way Ahead

© Stewart Garside



Wild Purbeck

© Mark Heighes

Each NIA focuses its policies, funding and delivery across their area to:

- improve the way land is used and managed;
- revitalise landscapes and reduce habitat fragmentation to re-establish wildlife and restore ecological networks; and
- improve the health of the environment to deliver ecosystem services such as food production, flood alleviation and access to nature.

The benefits of Nature Improvement Areas

The monitoring and evaluation report for the national NIA programme outlines impressive empirical outputs recorded by NIAs; the text below summarises the benefits which NIAs have collectively realised over the initial three year programme. This section doesn't focus on the value of nature, which is well documented elsewhere, but in the added value of the NIA programme itself.

In the first instance, the grant funding helped to **unlock the potential of key sites** within ecological networks where alternative revenue streams were unsuitable, for example removing an ill-sited commercial conifer plantation to make way for upland heath and native broadleaf woodland at Burbage in the Dark Peak NIA was long identified a priority but was not fundable through other sources. Additionally, NIA funding has provided a stimulus, attracting landowners to undertake more sustainable, wildlife-friendly use of land. For example in Morecambe Bay, over 300ha woodland has been brought into ongoing woodland management schemes, helping to generate an economic return from conservation.

NIA partnerships have been especially committed to changing **how local communities value landscapes**. NIAs have been building strong connections through awareness raising activities and volunteer programmes to support nature and wellbeing. Three NIAs participated in a Sciencewise* project which sought to engage communities in decision-making as a result of active dialogue. Partners would have been unable to access Sciencewise* without the NIA programme, but highly value the lessons learnt.

The development of focused and shared objectives within partnerships results in **more efficient use of resources**. NIAs have been a vehicle to bring together key partners to better align delivery in a challenging economic climate. For example, in Wild Purbeck the NIA was instrumental in bringing together Natural England, RSPB, National Trust, Forestry Commission and local landowners to create and

manage important heathland sites. These benefits are not easy to quantify but progress is notable in comparison with other areas where this co-ordination has not been present.

The NIA programme has been a **catalyst for stimulating development of new projects** and partnerships. NIAs have invested time in identifying shared priorities, with a commitment to seek innovative solutions to some challenging issues. Partnerships have been successful at drawing down additional funding, securing a 3.5:1 return on investment. Outside the 12 fully-funded partnerships, the NIA "bidding" process created momentum. For example the Great Manchester Wetlands Partnership successfully obtained Landscape Partnership funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

There has been a strong commitment across partners to **work together and share lessons** learnt, not just within individual landscapes, but across the wider community. We have seen co-operation between NIAs and representatives from National Parks, AONBs, conservation NGOs, local authorities, academics, landowners and statutory agencies to share experiences and work together.

The above benefits, and the achievements outlined by individual NIAs, have been realised as a result of the strong framework of "more, bigger, better, and joined" through which to deliver landscape-scale conservation. The impact of the Lawton Report exceeded expectations, and partners are seeking to build on the lessons learnt from NIAs to meet wider environmental and economic objectives.

**www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/ The UK's national centre for public dialogue in policy making involving science and technology issues.*

Nature Improvement Areas – the future

“The next few years are clearly going to be a time of budgetary constraint, when additional resources are unlikely to be available. We recognise that it will not be possible to take all necessary action immediately, or even soon. We do, however, need to plan for the medium and longer term and Make Space for Nature. Amongst this uncertainty, there is one thing of which we can be certain: the sooner we act to establish a coherent and resilient ecological network, the lower the eventual cost and the greater the benefits for us all.”

From Lawton, J.H. et al (2010) Making Space for Nature: a review of England’s wildlife sites and ecological network. Report to Defra.

Continuing the vision

The 12 initial NIA projects have delivered well above expectations during their first three years. Now, in 2015, we find ourselves with strong partnerships, a deal more experience and lessons learned, and with significant achievements under our belts.

However, landscape-scale conservation is a long-term commitment, not a three year project. Most existing NIAs have long term visions to 2020 and beyond; recognising that achieving habitat gain on the ground is only part of the landscape picture. Changing cultures and attitudes, removing barriers, and increasing understanding of the benefits that nature provides, requires real tenacity and continued investment.

Our challenge now, in a difficult funding climate, is to find creative and innovative ways to continue NIA work at the local level, using a diversity of funding sources and partners. National and local level support will be crucial if the existing NIAs are to consolidate their gains and work steadily towards our visions of locally valued, coherent and resilient ecological networks.

More, bigger, better and joined... NIAs

It is essential that more NIAs are identified throughout England, and that current learning in landscape-scale work across the country is shared effectively. A number of Local Nature Partnerships have already identified ‘locally determined’ NIAs, working to a shared ethic of innovation, integrated delivery and habitat connectivity. Many more landscape scale projects exist, each with their own local issues and challenges.

We recommend that the landscape-scale conservation community is supported and developed into the future to maintain and develop standards, monitoring and sharing of local experience. Support from statutory bodies and Local Nature Partnerships will help to embed the NIA approach into other initiatives such as agri-environment schemes, the Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) and the planning process. These actions may not cost a great deal in additional funding, but they will make all the difference in achieving Lawton’s vision.

Birmingham & Black Country

www.bbcwildlife.org.uk/NIA

Area: 60,000 hectares

The Landscape

The landscape in which the 2.2 million people of Birmingham and the Black Country live is a mosaic of inner cities, towns and villages linked by 20th century suburbanisation. Within the conurbation thousands of hectares of encapsulated countryside, post-industrial sites, public open space and modern agricultural land are linked by a vast network of rivers and canals. A diverse geology and land use history has seen the development of ecologically-rich sites that support habitats including ancient and recent woodland, neutral, acidic and calcareous grassland, dry and wet heathland, hedgerows, mires, pools and ponds. More than 600 of these sites covering over 10% of the Nature Improvement Area are designated for their value to wildlife.

Partnership structure

As lead partner The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country has worked with over 60 other organisations including local authorities, government agencies, businesses and voluntary groups to develop and deliver nearly 200 projects.



Volunteers creating a new meadow on top of the Black Country

© Joe Peacock



School children planting primroses near Dudley town centre

© B&BC Wildlife Trust

Highlights

The Nature Improvement Area has galvanised 2,000 volunteers, 100 community groups and 30 schools to diversify 90 hectares of young woodland, create and enhance 70 hectares of meadow, improve 10 kilometres of wetland corridor, restore 3 hectares of heathland and manage 20 geological sites.

Learning

In the first three years the NIA Partnership has continued to develop an evidence-based strategy that seeks to meaningfully address biodiversity decline and achieve our vision of an urban landscape permeated by a network of high quality greenspace which is rich in wildlife and enjoyed by the people who live and work here. The conurbation's 'Core Ecological Areas' have been identified and our strategy has seen our partners focus on enhancing existing sites and creating new ones in priority 'Ecological Linking Areas' to create 'stepping-stone' wildlife corridors through the heart of the conurbation.

The Future

The Birmingham and Black Country Nature Improvement Area has demonstrated that delivering landscape-scale nature conservation in an urban context achieves significant benefits for people and wildlife. Our strategy towards 2020 will see us continue to build strong partnerships and inspire people to make space for nature, focus on publicly-accessible sites, target interventions in areas of greatest need, continue to build the evidence base for urban nature improvement and support communities to take responsibility for their natural greenspaces.

Dark Peak

www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/dark-peak-nia-0

Area: 25,000 hectares



The Landscape

As the only upland NIA, the Dark Peak represents the southern range of English uplands and is internationally recognised for the wildlife its blanket bog and moorland fringe habitats support. As well as being an important area for nature, uplands provide 75% of our drinking water; store carbon in intact moorlands; and provide agricultural products. Its green spaces also provide crucial recreation grounds for surrounding major conurbations.

Partnership structure

The Dark Peak NIA combines NGOs (RSPB (lead), National Trust and Sheffield Wildlife Trust), local government organisations (Sheffield City Council, Natural England and Peak District National Park Authority), private companies (United Utilities), access groups (British Mountaineering Council) and existing partnerships (Eastern Moors and Moors for the Future). It has provided a catalyst, sparking the sharing of knowledge, expertise, practical support, and pooling of resources. Our monitoring programme has provided a valuable baseline to evidence the benefits that our work will provide for biodiversity and human well-being in the future.



Partnership working in action

© Nabil Abbas

Highlights

We have:

- Installed nearly a thousand gully blocks and innovatively re-introduced Sphagnum moss to damaged blanket bog; to restore hydrological integrity, reduce carbon loss and increase biodiversity.
- Worked together, and with local farmers to create over 84ha of new broadleaf woodland.
- Started the restoration of hay meadows from improved pasture; removing invasive plants and introducing wild flowers to islands of in-bye land, creating wildlife hotspots of the future.
- With the aid of volunteers we have improved access along footpaths (see image 1) and bridleways, including enabling disability access to the Eastern Moors.

Learning

“The key lesson for me is that in the NIA the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The NIA funding has provided opportunities to bring together partners who work in the same landscape, allowing skills to be shared and relationships built. For example Ellie, a Sheffield Wildlife Trust ranger, was able to spend a day working with the National Trust ranger team flag laying a path on Sheffield City Council land. They subsequently worked together alongside Sheffield Wildlife Trust volunteers at a different site, sharing equipment and passing on skills to help the team learn how to lay flags safely and effectively.” - National Trust.

The future

The ethos of landscape scale conservation, beyond ownership boundaries and designated areas, will continue through existing partnerships in the Peak District and South Pennine Moors, building on the foundations of the NIA to improve the uplands for nature and people.

Dearne Valley Green Heart

www.rspb.org.uk/whatwedo/futurescapes/dearnevally

Area: 16,000 hectares



The Landscape

I find it hard to believe that at the end of March 2015 the Dearne was once the proud heart of the extensive South Yorkshire coalfield, which underpinned the thriving economy of the area but left a legacy of polluted rivers and contaminated land. The Dearne Valley, the river and its catchment has been improved beyond all recognition through major landscape-scale habitat restoration. Wildlife now flourishes around its core wetland habitats, where flood prevention, habitat creation and amenity use go hand in hand. The woodlands have seen an equally dramatic restoration. As a result, the valley now has a growing reputation as a leisure destination for activities including Nature-watching, walking, cycling and fishing.

Partnership Structure

Established in 2005, the Dearne Valley Green Heart Partnership was set up to improve the Dearne Valley for wildlife and people. The partnership includes the RSPB, Environment Agency, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England, the Forestry Commission, the Garganey Trust, Barnsley Biodiversity Trust and the local authorities and communities of Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster.

The partnership hosted the NIA best Practice "Planning event" in 2013 and has jointly developed a Planning Advice Note (PAN) to promote sustainability in new developments. It has also produced an exciting GIS mapping tool to aid planning of the ecological network and measure habitat connectivity.

Highlights

- Core habitat creation schemes, at Houghton Washlands and Carlton Marsh, woodland and scrub creation and restoration of calcareous grasslands in the East of the NIA.
- Major Landowners, Barnsley Rotherham and Doncaster councils have made changes to the management of amenity grasslands; these are now great for wildlife and better for the budget.
- 100,000 globally threatened European eels have been reintroduced to the catchment, water vole and harvest mice are thriving, otters and bitterns returning and the Dearne is now becoming the premier lowland breeding wader stronghold in Yorkshire.
- NIA status has also helped the partnership to aid social and economic regeneration in communities so often under-resourced.

Learning

The Dearne Valley NIA has demonstrated that environmental restoration is also vital for communities and the economy.

The sustainability of the Partnership is based on efficiency and delivering multiple objectives through joint working on projects.

The Future

Dearne Valley Eco-vision is funding an NIA manager, employed by Yorkshire Wildlife Trust to deliver the next phase of the partnerships ambitious vision.

Greater Thames Marshes

www.greaterthamesmarshes.com

Area: 55,000 hectares

The landscape

On the doorstep of London, and surrounded by heavy industry and infrastructure, the Greater Thames Marshes is one of the best places for nature, with nationally and internationally important brownfield, coastal grazing marsh, intertidal saltmarsh and estuarine sites.

These habitats aren't only important for the populations of wildlife they support, but the range of services they provide for businesses and communities: health and wellbeing, carbon storage, flood defence and water management, food production and the visitor economy.

Partnership structure

The NIA is chaired and administrated by Thames Estuary Partnership, who lead a project steering group consisting of RSPB, Essex County Council, Kent Wildlife Trust, Environment Agency and Natural England – this group meets 6-weekly to monitor budget and progress against NIA objectives. We have established a much wider Advisory Group to provide expertise and recommendations on future development of the NIA.

Highlights

- 850ha habitat restored and improved through direct interventions and provision of targeted advice.
- 33,000 local residents better engaged with nature on their doorstep.



Elmley

© Jo Sampson



South Essex Marshes

© Eleanor Bentall, RSPB

Learning

The NIA has facilitated the development of a core functioning partnership with a track record of co-ordinated delivery. Key lessons learnt relate specifically to project delivery:

- Partners value the opportunity to network, share experience and contribute new ideas to support ongoing priority actions – as a result we will continue to grow the capacity of the Advisory Group.
- Our climate adaptation assessment helped highlight key priorities for the NIA, habitats are relatively coherent, but are not resilient to pressures driving change, therefore our core delivery objective is to create “more” and “better” habitats across the ecological network.
- We have learnt a lot more about what farmers and landowners need, and how to better engage with them locally to maximise wildlife outcomes as part of sustainable rural business.
- A biodiversity offsetting pilot, and planning advice guidance, have highlighted the complexities and opportunities of securing net gains for wildlife through the planning system.
- Local communities have a better awareness and understanding of what is on their doorstep, and we have identified new mechanisms to increase access to nature.

The Future

We have created an Action Plan for 2015-2020, outlining our priorities for delivery. Partners have emphasised “legacy and sustainability” throughout the NIA programme and will submit 3 major European funding bids in 2015.

In the next phase of the NIA, we have forged a formal governance link with the Thames Gateway Local Nature Partnership, and will better integrate expertise and experience of the Advisory Group in future project delivery.

Humberhead Levels

www.ywt.org.uk/node/4006

Area: 49,000 hectares

The landscape

Straddling Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire the Humberhead Levels is an internationally renowned landscape of peatlands and wetlands connecting from the inner Humber Estuary across the agricultural landscape that also contains England's largest lowland raised mire system.

Partnership structure

Main Partners: Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England, RSPB, Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, Environment Agency, Ouse and Humber IDB, Doncaster East IDB, Shire Group IDB, Isle of Axholme and North Notts Water Management Board, Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council, North Lincolnshire Council.

The parent partnership is the Humberhead Levels Partnership, which has been operating since 2004, and the NIA Steering Group report to the Executive Board. The project management governance is based on a Steering Group for decision making, and a Stakeholder Group for engagement, and the Wetland Advice project whose capital fund and focus is defined through bringing together all relevant land advisors and agencies in the Land Advice Working Group.



Highlights

- UK's first reed based fuel briquette created
- 960ha of better, 40ha of bigger, 350ha of more and joined habitat.
- Engaged over 13,000 people through events and enabled over 43,000 hrs of volunteering.

Learning

- Important to enable and apply an evidence based approach
- Increase in productivity and likely outcomes through strong project management and business planning
- Whatever the geographies we create, there is a need to support work that crosses and breaks boundaries

The Future

- LIFE+ funding to restore the Humberhead Peatlands NNR
- HLF Landscape Partnership - developing Stage 2 application
- Funding bids submitted to continue restoration works
- Humberhead Levels Partnership integrated NIA ambitions/ approach into Delivery Plan up to 2020



Pond dipping

© Kat Woolley

Marlborough Downs

www.mdnia.org.uk

Area: 10,370 hectares



New dewpond created 2012

© David White

The landscape

At the heart of the Marlborough Downs lies an expansive landscape of open rolling downland, defined by the crest of a chalk scarp along which runs part of the Ridgeway National Trail. A predominantly arable landscape, remnants of chalk grassland cling to steeper slopes and protected sites. The Downs are sparsely populated with no significant watercourses. However, what we lack in people we make up for in wildlife, being a hotspot for farmland birds and supporting many species associated with chalk grassland.

Partnership structure

Our key drivers and decision-makers are our 'delivery groups' composed of farmers, experienced amateurs, seconded professionals, and members of the project management team. The overall project manager reports to the partnership board, at the centre of which are the MDNIA charity trustees elected by the members, all of whom are Marlborough Downs farmers. The trustees are supported by representatives from the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust and Wiltshire Council. The board is responsible for ratifying decisions made by the delivery groups, higher level strategic development, and ensuring compliance with legal and contractual requirements. This bottom-up approach has worked extremely well. The project has been driven by those responsible for on-the-ground delivery and so targets have been well-informed, realistic and largely achieved.



Farmer working with students to create tree sparrow village

© Nick Upton

Highlights

For the past three years 35 farmers with control of almost 8,500 hectares have for the first time been working together for wildlife:

- Over 60 ha of chalk grassland created / undergoing restoration
- Seven new Wildlife Sites identified
- Over 250 ha of rough grassland managed for owls and raptors
- Necklace of 16 new or restored ponds across the Downs
- More widespread populations of tree sparrow, corn bunting and short-eared owl
- Improved public access on 47 miles of footpath and bridleway
- 8.5 miles of permissive access for disabled carriage drivers
- Over 4,300 people attended 42 talks, 25 farm walks, 2 Open Farm Sundays, 24 volunteer workdays, 13 best practice workshops, and 10 celebration events

Learning

This project is owned by the farmers and our supporters. We have invested in it and are therefore committed to the responsibility of ensuring achievements are sustainable. Wildlife conservation is not all about money and we have shown that it is delivered far more enthusiastically by people who are genuinely motivated rather than incentivised by financial reward. We have also discovered that by working together – with other farmers, with specialists and with the local community – we can achieve so much more than we would alone.

The Future

There is a strong desire to continue with both the biodiversity and the outreach elements of the project and we are currently seeking funding to take the work forward.

The Meres and Mosses of the Marches

www.themeressandmosses.co.uk

Area: 40,153 hectares

The landscape

The Meres and Mosses is a post-glacial landscape covering parts of Cheshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire alive with dozens of meres (glacial lakes), mosses (peat bogs) and associated wetland habitats, largely underlain by peat soils. The Nature Improvement Area portion of this landscape is working with communities in a largely rurally populated area based around four market towns and features a variety of agriculture with a focus on dairy in the north and arable in the south.

Partnership structure

The Partnership Board comprises 10 organisations from the statutory, local authority and charity sectors, and this is supported by specialist working groups encompassing a wider range of organisations. This structure is supported by the Meres and Mosses Business Environment Network working to engage the business community and their employees.



Installing sheet piling to restore lowland raised bog at Wem Moss

© Matt Jones

Highlights

The Meres and Mosses has the highest concentration of field ponds in Europe, operating as key stepping stones across the landscape.

Learning

The Nature Improvement Area designation has allowed the Partnership to develop new ways of working. This focus on landscape-scale delivery has resulted in the development of a new targeting methodology which takes into account the natural isolation of sites within a post-glacial landscape and sets them in the context of their specific catchments. This methodology will also enable a new way of linking our approach to conservation, communities and business and will be published in British Wildlife in 2015.

The Future

The Nature Improvement Area programme has been delivered alongside a Heritage Lottery funded Landscape Partnership Scheme and this will continue until 2017 with part of the focus on creating sustainable systems such as self-sufficient community groups and sustainable land and water management processes. The NIA work has enabled the previous National Character Area partnership (the Meres and Mosses Wetland Area Landscape Partnership) to be resurrected and this will now use the NIA principles to deliver across a wider landscape of more than 365,000 hectares. In addition, the creation of the Meres and Mosses Business Environment Network will offer a new way of sustaining funding of both core co-ordination functions and sponsorship of specific projects.



The annual Merefest landscape festival attracted more than 2,500 people in 2014 with a healthy mix of fun and learning!

© Ian Sheppard

Morecambe Bay Limestones and Wetlands

www.morecambebay.org.uk/whats_new/M'Bay_NIA

Area: 48,970 hectares

The landscape

The area surrounding Morecambe Bay in northwest England is famous for its wildlife and stunning landscapes. There is an extraordinary diversity of habitats - limestone pavements, grasslands and woodlands and coastal and freshwater wetlands - which are home to internationally important populations of birds, wildflowers and butterflies. However, nature is under threat due to a range of pressures. Through the NIA programme we set out to improve and connect the key habitats to ensure this special landscape is as resilient as possible for the future.

Partnership structure

Morecambe Bay Local Nature Partnership aims to create a bright future for the area by improving the quality of the natural environment and connecting up nature, businesses and communities. We are an influential team of key organisations working together in a collaborative way: Arnside & Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership (NIA lead partner); Butterfly Conservation; Cumbria and Lancashire Wildlife Trusts; Lancaster City Council, Lune Rivers Trust; Morecambe Bay Partnership; National Trust; RSPB; Forestry Commission; Natural England; Environment Agency; South Cumbria Rivers Trust; Cumbria Woodlands; Wyre Council; and others.



Family enjoying Arnside Bioblitz

© Art-image



Highlights

Through the NIA programme we have:

- Restored or enhanced over 1,700ha priority habitat in partnership with landowners.
- Achieved significant improvements in habitat connectivity by improving core areas and creating buffers, stepping stones and corridors of grassland, woodland and wetland.
- Set up two community woodfuel initiatives now operating independently.
- Established a business nature network involving over 200 businesses.
- Delivered nature activity programmes for 20 schools and a series of large-scale community participation events.

Learning

We have learnt to collaborate closely, to be ambitious with our aspirations and to promote a multi-objective approach. Securing NIA status has been a catalyst for attracting significant investment for a series of other projects with both environmental and socio-economic outcomes.

The Future

We are continuing our ambition to bring about a step change in the quality of the natural environment around Morecambe Bay through a variety of different mechanisms. As a partnership we are delivering major landscape-scale initiatives such as a Heritage Lottery Fund Landscape Partnership Scheme along with a series of smaller schemes, and continue to develop and seek funding for new projects.

Nene Valley

www.nenevalleynia.org

Area: 41,350 hectares

The landscape

The Nene Valley NIA extends from the source of the Nene in west Northamptonshire through Northampton, Wellingborough, Oundle and Peterborough to the Nene Washes. The Valley is characterised by naturalised man-made lakes and grassland formed after gravel extraction, within a mosaic of intensively farmed land and urban areas. Fragments of species-rich grassland and wetland habitats remain within SSSIs or Local Wildlife Sites. At the heart of the NIA is the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area and Ramsar Site, important for over-wintering and breeding birds of wetlands. There are many pressures here, in the UK's second largest growth area, including built development, public access and competition for water resources. Our priorities include sustainable development, managing access and recreation, improving the river environment, providing support for wildlife-friendly farming, and valuation of services provided by nature.

Partnership structure

The Project Board included 11 key partners. Five Working Groups were established to oversee each objective of the NIA and to feed back to the board. Five members of staff were employed by the NIA grant; a Natural Development Officer, River Restoration Advisor, Land Advisor, Post-Doctoral Research Assistant, and a Project Manager.



Seed was harvested from existing meadows to help restore other sites.

© Matt Johnson



Greening the river bank, in Peterborough

© Simon Whifton

Highlights

- NIA Objectives incorporated into Local Development Framework documents & Green Infrastructure Delivery Plans endorsed by local planning authorities.
- Access to natural greenspace mapped across the NIA using Natural England's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard (ANGSt).
- Visitor Access Study, and Breeding Bird Survey completed and informing land & visitor management.
- Community Panels established & action plans completed for 3 priority sites in the SPA.
- Over 350 projects identified to improve the river Nene & 4 projects implemented to improve the river environment.
- 13 HLS agreements signed covering 2,000ha and including management & restoration of 214ha of priority habitat.
- Maps produced showing supply, demand, and service flows for 10 ecosystem services.

Learning

Three years of project implementation passes very quickly so an exit strategy needs to be prepared very early to ensure resources are in place to sustain effort.

A strong partnership helps draw together different areas of work and brings added value while preventing duplication of effort.

The Future

A business plan for 2015-20 has been produced. The Partnership is hoping to secure a Heritage Lottery Fund Landscape Partnership Scheme grant to further develop the NIA with greater involvement of local communities.

Northern Devon

www.northerndevonnia.org

Area: 72,324 hectares

The Landscape

Covering the greater part of the river Torridge catchment the Northern Devon NIA holds 35% of the UK resource of Culm grassland, a variety of purple moor-grass and rush pasture, surviving in vulnerable fragments. Broadleaved woodland is difficult to access and often neglected. River Torridge water quality is poor, largely due to high levels of phosphates and sediment. The landscape supports many key species, including two of Europe's top ten threatened species: marsh fritillary and freshwater pearl mussel.

Partnership structure

Working within the North Devon Biosphere Reserve and led by Devon Wildlife Trust, the partnership's steering group includes charities, statutory agencies, local authorities and businesses. Since April 2012, the NIA Business Plan has been delivered by a team of 5.5 full time equivalent staff employed by Devon Wildlife Trust, with direct input from partners and a wide community of landowners and other local people.

Highlights

- Safeguarding diverse and threatened wildlife and habitats - over 1500 ha of Culm grassland and associated habitats are now in positive management, supporting marsh fritillary populations, one of the top ten most threatened species in Europe. 81 hectares of new wildlife habitat have been created.



Culm grassland is a key habitat in Northern Devon

© M. Symes



Bradworthy School children
planting trees

© Devon Wildlife Trust

- Supporting the local economy - £3.6 million has been brought into the local economy, direct to local farmers, from RDPE programme funding.
- Capacity building with landowners and communities – providing knowledge, skills and resources to secure sustainable land management and care of our local landscape, holding 51 workshops for landowners and over 100 community events.
- Undertaking cutting edge research – identifying and quantifying the role of land management and wetland habitats in future flood mitigation strategies.
- Added value on Defra investment – over and above the £3.6 million of RDPE funding, over £400,000 of additional funds from in kind partner contributions, volunteer support and added value projects have been secured.

Learning

- Rural Development Plan funding, together with sustained advisory and practical support, is essential in order for landowners to afford to restore, re-create and maintain wildlife habitats on their land, and deliver ecosystem services on behalf of the taxpayer.
- Research has shown that access to natural habitats at the parish level, and more general access to the river, is extremely limited for many people in the catchment.
- Partnership work has been inspiring – for example, Beaford Arts has taken the NIA's vision to its heart and explored new ways of engaging people through theatre.

The future

The Northern Devon NIA partners have developed a Business Plan for 2015-20, and we are currently developing projects and fundraising towards meeting different aspects of this plan.

South Downs Way Ahead

www.southdowns.gov.uk/looking-after/biodiversity/south-downs-way-ahead-nature-improvement-area

Area: 42,000 hectares

The landscape

The South Downs Way Ahead focuses on enhancing and increasing connectivity of Lowland Calcareous Grassland (more commonly referred to as chalk grassland) in the South Downs National Park. Chalk grassland is the defining landscape and habitat of the South Downs, however it only makes up 4% of the area of the National Park. It supports a rich and diverse range of flora and fauna (chalk grassland can contain up to 40 different kinds of plants per square metre), but many of these – such as the Duke of Burgundy butterfly, Burnt Orchid and Skylark – are rare or threatened by the habitat's decreasing size and growing isolation. The chalk downland of the South Downs is a managed landscape (an estimated 85% is farmed or managed), which provides enormous benefits to a wide range of people, including the provision of clean drinking water (supplying as much as 75% of the public water supply in the area), as well as an access and recreation resource (there are more than 40 million visits to the South Downs National Park each year). The southern edge of the NIA project area flows into the urban areas of the coastal conurbations, such as the city of Brighton and Hove.

Partnership structure

Led by South Downs National Park Authority, the South Downs Way Ahead NIA Partnership consisted of 29 partners, comprising land managers and farmers, conservation and voluntary organisations, local community groups, government bodies and water companies.



Medley Bottom

© Neil Hulme



Duke of Burgundy

© Neil Hulme

Highlights

The nationally declining and threatened Duke of Burgundy butterfly has responded spectacularly to habitat management work performed as part of the South Downs Way Ahead NIA, recovering them from the brink of extinction and extending its territory. In the 'Chantry to Chanctonbury' area of the NIA, annual counts rose from 82 to 408 between 2012 and 2014, an increase of 398%. Further west, at Heyshott Escarpment near Midhurst, peak daily counts rose from 31 in 2012 to 104 in 2014, an increase of 235%.

Learning

Partnership working has been invaluable, landscape scale restoration and conservation is only achievable through collective partnership working.

The Future

Partners have recognised the need for the continuation of a chalk grassland landscape scale project through continuing the NIA Partnership. Future funding for the NIA is likely to comprise four major streams:

- Countryside Stewardship;
- Heritage Lottery Funding;
- European Funding (e.g. Life +); and
- Payments for Ecosystem Services.

Wild Purbeck

www.dorsetaonb.org.uk/our-work/wildpurbeck

Area: 45,971 hectares

The landscape

Wild Purbeck is a fantastic area for wildlife. It covers a huge array of habitats through rocky shores, limestone grassland, heathland and a natural harbour including the 10km square with the greatest diversity of plant species in the country. This wonderful diversity is reflected in the number of sites and designations crammed into an area which covers only 17% of Dorset. It is also a landscape under great and growing pressure: large areas surrounding Poole Harbour are low-lying and vulnerable to sea level change and its outstanding natural beauty draws in over 2.5M visitors annually.

Partnership structure

The project was led by the Dorset AONB who co-ordinated the initial bid and project managed the NIA. Dorset County Council was the accountable body and responsible for processing and claiming grant. Funding partners and signatories to the NIA included Dorset County Council, Natural England, the RSPB, National Trust, Dorset Wildlife Trust, Forestry Commission, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South West and Kingston Maurward College. Non funding partners included Wessex Water, the Environment Agency, National Farmers Union and CLA.

There were two supporting staff, one full time and one part time. Regular partnership meetings took place every 2-3 months. This arrangement has proved effective for managing the expenditure of the NIA grant and ensuring co-ordination between partners.



Minibeast hunting at Wild About Wareham

© R Janes



Highlights

- Over 13% of the population of Purbeck has been engaged in community, education or other NIA activity
- 124 Ha land has been purchased and safeguarded for the future
- 467 Ha of heathland restored or managed
- Over 20,000 hours volunteer time across the NIA
- The NIA has enabled partners to lever in funding they would otherwise not have been able to access

Learning

- The opportunity to enthuse local people is there, providing you can engage with topics that interest them.
- The importance of embedding NIA work within existing organisations to provide a long term legacy.
- The need to be flexible and have worked up projects with different budgets, should unforeseen underspend occur in existing projects, or additional funding become available (as occurred in year 2).

The Future

£1.7 million has been secured through a section 106 agreement for 2 character areas within Wild Purbeck. This will be used to provide continuity of staff and to fund / part match fund future projects. The partnership has agreed a work plan of future priority projects, and will continue to meet regularly.



View from Irthlingborough church tower

© Heather Procter

NIAs have enabled partnerships to work with people, wildlife and the farmed environment in a connected way. With a shared vision for the future these partnerships will remain strong and focussed on delivering improvements for nature and people.

This booklet was produced in 2015 by the first 12 NIAs in order to document the lessons learned, celebrate achievements and promote the concept to others.