Thank you for your letter of 18 March on behalf of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. I thank the Committee for their hard work and diligence in scrutinising this important area of policy. I felt the level of consensus during the Parliamentary debate and your committee's hearings bode well for the direction of travel. Your letter contained a number of important recommendations, which we shall consider in finalising the strategy for biodiversity to 2020. As you request, I set out below an initial response to your recommendations and an update on some of the issues you raise.

Mainstreaming

I support the Committee's suggestion that other Parliamentary Committees should also take an interest in the Biodiversity Strategy. Protecting nature and the role that the natural environment plays in supporting our prosperity has relevance across many policy areas. I would welcome the RACCE Committee taking a lead in pursuing synergies with other Committees, and supporting the Government's aspirations in this regard. I will encourage SNH to lead the collaborative effort here, and to build on the alliances and partnerships it has forged with other agencies, the NGO sector and government departments.

The Committee recommends that further detail be included in the strategy about how the biodiversity duties of public bodies will be met and the benefits of taking an ecosystem approach. We plan to give greater prominence to this in the final strategy, highlighting policy areas where furthering the conservation of biodiversity can be incorporated. The Biodiversity Scotland website has advice for public bodies on implementing the biodiversity duty [http://www.biodiversityscotland.gov.uk/duty/](http://www.biodiversityscotland.gov.uk/duty/) The benefits of taking an ecosystem approach are also reflected in the Land Use Strategy which has a specific proposal to 'demonstrate how the ecosystem approach could be taken into account in relevant decisions made by...
public bodies to deliver wider benefits, and provide practical guidance. Specific guidance has been published [http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Environment/Countryside/Landusestrategy/ecosystemsap proach](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Environment/Countryside/Landusestrategy/ecosystemsap proach) and details of other milestones towards this proposal are available in the annual progress statement [http://scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/06/4649](http://scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/06/4649).

**Accessibility and Public Engagement**

I agree that encouraging engagement with biodiversity is a vitally important area. There are a number of on-going initiatives, such as the Year of Natural Scotland, that are encouraging people to explore and investigate their natural environment. As Dr Deborah Long noted during the stakeholder evidence session, Scotland is doing well in this regard and there is an important role for environmental NGOs to play in this agenda. Environment LINK represent over 0.5 million members in Scotland which suggest a very healthy interest in environmental matters. We are keen to work more closely and effectively with the members.

With regard to the language we use, I agree that the terminology used has to be appropriate to the audience. Words such as ‘nature’ and ‘wildlife’ resonate more warmly with people than ‘biodiversity’ – so, let’s use them. We have tried to reflect this in the strategy. Language used will be different for a leaflet or webpage - aimed at stimulating the public’s interest in a particular aspect of our nature - from that for a strategy document. However, we intend that the strategy document be accessible to all interested readers. We want it to be read, understood and acted on.

**Education**

I agree with the Committee that education is fundamental to the success of future work to protect and enhance our biodiversity. We will seek to reflect the role of outdoor learning in the Curriculum for Excellence and the potential for more teaching in and about nature, particularly at secondary school. We would like to see these schools seizing opportunities to broaden opportunities for students to interact with and make more of the role of nature in shaping and supporting society, and nature itself.

**Land Management**

I agree that the Scottish Government should take into account the importance of ensuring appropriate advice is readily available to land managers. As well as the guidance on the ecosystem approach mentioned earlier, targeted advice to land managers is a key element of the developing SRDP programme for 2015-2020.

I will be happy to keep the committee informed of progress in relation to a national ecological network as policy relating to the National Planning Framework 3 and Scottish Planning Policy develops. I hope you will agree that the strategy now provides a good deal more clarity on the network.

**Loss of Plant Species**

I am pleased the Committee welcomes the Scottish Governments commitment to introducing a strategic programme for re-establishing species. Through its leadership of the National Species Reintroduction Forum, SNH is developing a *Code of Good Practice for Species Reintroductions* to guide its work and proposals from others. This is internationally cutting edge work and I am keen to keep the committee updated on this.

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Funding

The Scottish Government’s intention is to hold a consultation on contingency plans for agri-environment schemes in the summer and I look forward to receiving the Committee’s input to this. I would also be happy to consider suggestions from stakeholders about innovative funding methods. I very much hope that the development of a peatland code will be taken forward as part of SNH’s Peatland Restoration Strategy. We have important opportunities to be uniquely innovative in how we develop peatland restoration and management practices and incentives.

Restoration of Degraded Ecosystems

To deliver the strategy a series of indicators are being developed to measure ecosystem health. These are vital to our understanding of the state of ecosystems and the pressures on them, including from invasive non-native species. Taking an ecosystem approach and promoting landscape scale projects will also be vital to restoring degraded ecosystems and protecting healthy ecosystems. I will be happy to provide updates to the committee as requested.

Marine and Seabird Issues

I welcome the Committee’s intention to monitor the progress of developments in marine policy and will provide updates as requested. I note, incidentally, at the time of writing the high sensitivity of seabirds, such as puffins, in the east of Scotland to harshly cold weather conditions. I also note your interest in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Marine Scotland has a section on its website that is kept updated with progress in identifying a MPA network for Scotland. The latest newsletter provides details on the Sustainability Appraisal, management considerations, surveys and tagging work, as well as the current consultation on Historic MPAs: [http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/marine/marine-environment/mpanetwork/engagement/MPANews](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/marine/marine-environment/mpanetwork/engagement/MPANews).

Monitoring and Targets

I agree that any targets should be clear and achievable. We plan to establish delivery agreements with key partners that will set out how they will contribute to delivering the commitments within the Strategy. I would be happy to provide the Committee with an annual update on progress implementing the strategy.

I also recognise the committee’s concerns about taxonomic expertise, the role of institutions such as the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh is vital in identifying and filling these gaps as are initiatives like the Natural Talent Apprentice scheme which helps build knowledge and capacity in environmental non-governmental organisations.

SNH will also continue to develop the Natural Capital Asset Index and associated tools and guidance as necessary.

River Catchment Areas

Effective delivery of the strategy will require more joined-up delivery at regional and catchment levels. I am looking to SNH, SEPA and FCS to deepen their level of cooperation in working at catchment levels, and there is a need to include local authorities and other partners in this vital work. The development of the next River Basin Management Plans will provide a useful focus for this work.

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We must recognise that there are already a number of overlapping areas that affect localised policies for the natural environment, such as CPPs, flood risk management districts, regional forestry forums, river basin sub-districts, agency area offices, SRDP regions, and LBAPs. It would not be helpful to impose a further set of areas or institutional arrangements on such a crowded landscape. Rather, we look to the various delivery bodies and groups to find models that work for local circumstances to bridge the gap between different policies to ensure effective coordination, prioritisation and delivery of policies that protect and enhance the natural environment. I would like SNH to develop its leadership role here, and I expect the LUS regional pilots in Aberdeenshire and Scottish Borders, to provide one model of how this could be achieved.

**Invasive Non Native Species**

I agree with the committee and stakeholders that invasive non-native species (INNS) are one of the main areas of concern when protecting biodiversity. We have made great strides here in developing legislation and good practice. The Code of Practice, established under the Wildlife And Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 (WANE), sets out which bodies lead on INNS activity in different habitats and helps ensure that action is coordinated across Scotland. The WANE Act has provided us with the regulatory powers to take effective action against the threat from INNS, where this is practicable. We will continue to develop our capacity to monitor and react to INNS and provide input to the developing EU Directive.

**Neonicotinoids**

As the committee will be aware, neonicotinoids is a topic that has also been of considerable interest to the wider Parliament. On 28 March I answered parliamentary question S40-01977 from Graeme Dey which set out the current position on this topic. I will be happy to keep the committee informed as things progress.

**Conclusion**

I am now working on proposals for taking the strategy forward in ways which significantly mainstream biodiversity across Government, and provide enduring gains for nature and its wider benefits. I thank you and your Committee members for providing fresh and constructive views and proposals on how we can take this work forward.

Kind regards

Paul Wheelhouse

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