Written submission from RPSB Scotland

Call for Evidence – Scotland's Biodiversity and 2020 Aichi Targets

Summary

A wide range of species and habitats in Scotland are already in significant decline. The recent State of Nature[1] report illustrated the extent to which this is occurring across Scotland's biodiversity.

The Scottish Government has an international commitment to halt this decline under the Aichi targets[2] (agreed under the Convention on the Conservation of Biological Diversity). In order to deliver these targets, the Scottish Government published *Scotland's Biodiversity: a route map to 2020*[3]. While the roadmap was a significant step forward and laid out how Government can deliver on the targets, there remains a considerable amount still to do and questions over how these targets will be reached in 3-4 years time.

In order to meet these targets Government needs to:

- Embed the principles and objectives of the Land Use Strategy in all relevant land use policy, especially agriculture;
- Guarantee continued funding for environmental initiatives and agri-environment schemes, if Scotland leaves the EU;
- Secure and implement effective protected area management;
- Take decisive action on invasive non-native species;
- Take decisive action on reintroductions;
- Look to 2030 and set ambitious and action-based targets for biodiversity.

Introduction

RSPB Scotland welcomes the Committee's call for evidence on Scotland's biodiversity and reaching the 2020 Aichi Targets, and is pleased to offer this evidence.

Biodiversity is an important cultural, health and economic driver in Scotland. It underpins a healthy environment; is the foundation of many jobs and industries; is an inspiration to Scotland's great cultural figures; provides recreation for many, and is

[1] http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/State%20of%20Nature%20UK%20report_%2020%20Sept_tcm9-424984.pdf
[2] https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/
[3] http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00480289.pdf

one of the main features for our thriving tourism industry (the visitor economy being worth at least £11.6 billion[4]).

Our failure to halt the decline in biodiversity by 2010 has made it evident that we must not do so again. While there have been impressive conservation success stories since then, there remains significant challenges to delivering on the 2020 Aichi targets.

1. Agriculture and Land Use

The way in which we use and manage our land has significant impacts on biodiversity with agriculture having a major influence on the fate of many widely dispersed species. Achieving sustainable farming and other land use e.g. forestry and forest management, will be central to halting the loss of biodiversity in the wider countryside. Scotland remains a stronghold for many birds and other wildlife associated with farmland and upland habitats but there is growing evidence about population declines and changes in distribution. Of 62 bird species for which Scotland specific trends can be calculated using Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data, ten declined significantly between 1995 and 2014 including: kestrel (-62%); curlew (-57%); lapwing (-57%); oystercatcher (-33%); rook (-37%); skylark (-26%) and meadow pipit (-14%). Some species including grey partridge, tree sparrow and corn bunting are now too scarce in Scotland to measure reliably through the BBS. Such declines are not confined to birds as demonstrated by the recent State of Nature report; a wide range of other taxa are also affected by land use change and land management practices. For example, the diversity of flowering plants in Scotland has declined mirroring trends across the UK.

Achieving sustainable farming and other land uses is key to halting the loss of biodiversity in the wider countryside. Progress has been slow and greater effort is needed to ensure major land uses of agriculture, forestry and land managed for sport shooting (grouse and deer) do more to integrate action for biodiversity in their activities. The need for such integration is explicitly recognised in the objectives and principles of Scotland's Land Use Strategy, as well as other key strategies and policy statement. More needs to be done to embed the principles and objectives of the LUS in all relevant land use policy.

2. Environmental Funding Initiatives

Scotland currently receives substantial amounts of funding for environmental initiatives from the EU in order to conserve, enhance and protect our natural environment. These include significant sums through Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy for the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP), which includes the Agri-Environment-Climate Scheme and LEADER, and also through other funding measures such as LIFE+ Programme and Green Infrastructure Strategic Intervention.

The value and importance of this funding can be illustrated by reference to *Scotland's biodiversity: a route map to 2020*. The route map describes six "big steps for nature", each with a number of priority projects. Most, if not all, of these priority

[4] Nature-based tourism is estimated to generate at least £1.4 billion, with c.39,000 full-time equivalent jobs.

projects were envisaged to be delivered with funding from *inter alia* the SRDP, LIFE+ and/or with or by partners supported by such funding.

In the absence of such funding in the event of leaving the EU, it is unlikely that many of these projects will be delivered – and, thus, it becomes unlikely that the Scottish Government will meet its international commitments to biodiversity conservation. The Scottish Government should be asked to acknowledge this challenge and give assurances that it is pressing the UK Government to ensure that the level of funding provided through these mechanisms or their successors will not be reduced below existing levels. If such assurances are obtained, the Scottish Government must also commit to 'passing on' such funding to these objectives in Scotland.

3. Protected Area Management

A suite of 1,868 protected areas have been designated under national, European and international legislation. These protect the very best of Scotland's natural heritage and deliver multiple ecosystem services. However, despite the vital role that protected areas play in species and habitat conservation, progress towards improving condition of designated natural features has stalled in recent years. Between 2007 and 2015, the number of features reported as favourable under the National Indicator (NI) increased but only from 76% to 79.3%; this leaves one fifth of our best sites for nature in unfavourable condition.

Securing the appropriate management of designated sites is now largely dependent on funding through the SRDP and the Agri-Environment-Climate scheme in particular. The budget for this scheme, which must also contribute to meeting water quality targets under the Water Framework Directive and climate change targets as well as those for biodiversity, is underfunded at £48 million per annum.

The key pressures on sites which funding must address are: invasive species, impacting 19% of designated features on sites, followed by over-grazing (17%); recreation and disturbance (8%); water management (8%); under-grazing (6%); agricultural operations (5%); natural events (4%); burning (4%); forestry operations (3%) and trampling (3%)[5].

3.1 Protected Areas at Sea

Protected areas at sea are vital to safeguard the internationally important populations of breeding, foraging and wintering seabirds (currently largely through SPAs) and other marine habitats and animals (SACs and nature conservation MPAs) in Scotland. An ecologically coherent network of protected areas is a fundamental component to Scotland's marine nature conservation strategy and critical to a sustainable future for our coasts and seas.

Equally important is the development and implementation of appropriate management plans for these areas. Management plans must set out the necessary mechanisms by which these protected areas will deliver strong and ambitious

5 https://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/Pressures%20affecting%20conservation%20status%20of%20designated%20natural%20features%20in%20Scotland_tcm9-419296.pdf

conservation objectives. The conservation objectives must not allow damage to occur to sites or features and management measures need to be capable of recovering declining populations as opposed to merely maintaining depleted ones.

3.2 Landscape Scale Conservation

By adopting the principle of landscape scale conservation, larger areas of land can be managed with expanded aspirations for biodiversity outcomes. By taking larger areas and integrating biodiversity conservation across sectors and organisations, the ability to protect and enhance more species is achievable. Examples of this can be seen with the RSPB led Futurescapes initiative[6][7]. There is an opportunity to develop a National Ecological Network in Scotland to provide coherence and a large-scale integrated approach to conservation.

4. Decisive Action on Invasive Non-Native Species

Non-native invasive species represent a threat to Scotland's biodiversity on par with the predicted negative impacts of climate change. Furthermore, a warming climate is expected to accelerate the rate of biological invasions, and the establishment of new arrivals is likely to be helped by milder winters. Evidence indicates that invasive non-native species often outcompete or interbreed with native species, spread novel pathogens, and extirpate native fauna and flora through predation, particularly in fragile island ecosystems.

4.1 Scottish Islands

Islands are often subject to less intense pressures from land use change and development, major factors driving species declines on mainland UK. Conversely, island ecosystems face a disproportionate threat from the arrival of new, non-native species, particularly mammalian predators.

Scotland's islands, many of which are at present free of non-native invasive species, are arguably the UK's most significant contribution to global biodiversity. These islands harbour globally significant populations of breeding seabirds, and host a rich assembly of breeding and wintering avifauna of European importance. Many of these islands also have endemic subspecies of birds and small mammals, found nowhere else on earth.

Robust biosecurity is by far the most cost-effective option for securing the long-term conservation value of islands. Recent advances have been made in developing cross-border and regional legislative framework to tackle the threat of invasive non-native species (e.g. the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011, and the EU Regulation 1143/2014 on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species). Further, progress has been made in raising biosecurity awareness for the terrestrial and marine environments. However, domestic efforts to protect islands from biological invasions are lagging behind, and decisive action is urgently needed to address this.

[6] http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/scotland_tcm9-369350.pdf
[7] http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/futurescapessummary_tcm9-407124.pdf

Further, there is an opportunity in the creation of an Islands Bill to promote the conservation of island biodiversity locally. Local governments should have a responsibility to protect their unique species and habitats as part of this Bill in order to ensure that the preservation of Scotland's island biodiversity is integrated into local government aims.

4.2 National Rhododendron Strategy

The Scottish National Rhododendron Strategy was drafted by Forestry Commission Scotland, and is ready to be put into action. The benefits of this strategy are not only for biodiversity, but also for industry. Forest Enterprise invest a significant amount of public money in rhododendron control currently to protect the national forest estate from the commercial impacts of the Phytophthera disease.

Furthermore, over 70% of the Western Atlantic Woodland SACs (sites protected under EU Habitats Directive) are classed as unfavourable. Rhododendron and grazing are the key issues. There has been good progress on deer control but for this to deliver the full potential for biodiversity there needs to be an informed and well resourced move on rhododendron control too. It is part of the biodiversity route map.

5. Decisive Action on Reintroductions

The widely-reported trial beaver reintroduction in Knapdale, Argyll, run by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and the Scottish Wildlife Trust under the oversight of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), comprised a scientifically monitored, trial reintroduction that resulted in a comprehensive range of reports covering all aspects of beavers and their behaviour. The scientific literature on both Eurasian and the very similar North American beaver demonstrates that, overall, beavers have an overwhelmingly positive influence on biodiversity[8]and provide valuable ecosystem services[9].

The beavers released by the trial remain in place, pending the long-awaited decision by the Scottish Government as to their future. There are also other established beaver populations in Scotland, notably in the river Tay catchment, that originate from various escapes and unauthorised releases. All these animals currently exist out with any legal framework. Such a framework would provide protection whilst at the same time regulating any control measures that were necessary to mitigate conflicts with human interests. The published outputs from the Knapdale Trial have provided the Scottish Government with all necessary information to inform their decision on the long-term future of the beaver in Scotland.

6. Ambitious targets for 2030

The 2020 Aichi targets are only 3-4 years away, and so it is time to look towards what we want to achieve for Scotland's biodiversity by 2030. RSPB Scotland recommends that the Government looks to set ambitious and action-based targets for 2030. We must ensure Scotland's biodiversity is restored and enhanced, to

[8] Stringer, A. & Gaywood, M., 2016 The impacts of beavers *Castor* spp. on biodiversity and the ecological basis for their reintroduction to Scotland, UK. *Mammal Review* DOI: 10.1111/mam.12068

[9] Law, A., McClean, F., Wilby, N.J., 2016. Habitat engineering by beaver benefits aquatic biodiversity and ecosystem processes in agricultural streams. *Freshwater Biology* **61(4)**, 486–499

protect our globally important sites and species, and guarantee that the quality of our biodiversity continues to be a cultural, economic and health driver for our industries and our society.