



# Future landscapes

Draft policy for consultation

## Natural England's Draft Policy on Future Landscapes – for consultation

### Context

Change is an intrinsic characteristic of landscapes. Landscapes have never been static, and have evolved as a result of both natural processes and human use. Changes resulting from natural processes, such as erosion, deposition and vegetation succession, normally occur over very long periods of time and are often imperceptible, although sudden storms and flooding can cause rapid and substantial change. In contrast, change due to human actions can often occur very quickly.

All of the landscapes we see today have changed considerably. Some of these changes have been sudden and dramatic such as the urban expansion and development of the canal, road and rail networks of the industrial revolution. Other changes have been gradual and barely perceived over several generations. The scale of change can also vary, from small scale local changes such as the removal of a field tree or length of hedgerow, to more extensive changes such as urbanisation or the impact of extractive industries. Our perception of landscape change and whether we feel that change is acceptable is influenced by both the scale and pace of change.

How landscapes are viewed by society has also changed over time, reflecting the dominant values of the time and functions of the landscape. Landscapes have different purposes leading to different public benefits, at different points in their evolution. In the past, for many, the landscape would have had a primarily utilitarian value, as a source of food, shelter and raw materials. The appearance of the landscape would have been of secondary importance compared to its function, and changes to the landscape would probably not have been regarded as important unless they impacted on its primary uses. Over time, society began to attach cultural and aesthetic values to landscapes, such as scenic beauty and spiritual enrichment, to the extent that some landscapes that previously were only valued for their practical utility, such as old mineral workings and industrial sites, are now valued for their historic associations or biodiversity interest and are maintained to provide an entirely new set of public benefits. Today, we are starting to think about the new services and functions that landscapes will need to provide in the future, such as carbon storage, climate change adaptation and flood protection. Over time, these will begin to influence the way people think about the landscape and their attitudes towards landscape change.

Some landscape change has improved the quality of the natural environment, for example where derelict industrial sites have been restored, but the overall picture is one of landscape change resulting in declining diversity, distinctiveness and ecological richness. Over the last century we have experienced:

- a gradual erosion of local distinctiveness in some areas, through a process of standardisation and simplification of some of the components that make up landscape character;
- a loss of some natural and semi-natural features and habitats, such as ancient woodlands and unimproved grassland;
- a decline in some traditional agricultural landscape features, such as farm ponds and hedgerows, and a loss of archaeological sites and traditional buildings;
- increased urbanisation, often accompanied by poor design standards and a decline in the variety of building materials, and the importation of urban and suburban building styles into rural areas;
- a loss of remoteness and reduction in tranquillity, due to built development and traffic growth.

Generally, past landscape change has occurred in a largely unplanned manner, as a result of largely ad hoc decisions. Compared to the past, we are now much better placed to take

an informed view about the impact of any changes on the landscape and the types of landscapes we might want to see. For example, we have a much greater understanding of existing landscape character. Using landscape character assessment techniques, the whole of England's landscape has been mapped and described at a national level, and there is increasingly widespread coverage of more localised landscape character assessments. These usually contain some analysis of the forces driving landscape change and may include landscape management objectives. English Heritage's Historic Landscape Characterisation programme also provides a valuable evidence base, with a wealth of information about current landscape character. This understanding of landscape character provides a sound baseline against which any future changes can be assessed.

We are also much better at monitoring landscape change. The Countryside Quality Counts project has provided evidence about the ways the English landscape changing with respect to previous character, and has made an assessment of countryside change for two periods, 1990 – 1998 and 1999 – 2003. A further project to measure change since 2003 is currently being planned. Such initiatives help us to keep track of changes to the landscape and to determine whether they are significant in terms of their impact on the qualities of the landscape that people value. The information gained can also help answer the questions 'what future landscapes do we want?' and 'how can we influence their evolution?'

Our ability to understand in advance the sorts of changes that might occur has also improved. Developing techniques for horizon scanning, scenario development and visioning can help us to anticipate and plan for a range of possible futures. With this understanding, we are in a better position to plan interventions to achieve the outcomes we desire. Natural England's project to develop a long term vision for the natural environment is employing many of these techniques, and it will be important to ensure that this work incorporates an understanding of the issues driving landscape change and the creation of a vision for future landscapes.

## Issues

A recent literature review considered the most important anticipated drivers of landscape change and their root causes. These included agriculture and forestry; built development; transport infrastructure; information and communication technology; natural resource management, especially water and flood management; minerals extraction; energy infrastructure; tourism and recreation; and conservation and environmental management policy.

As Natural England develops its vision for future landscapes, it will need to take account of all these forces for change. It will also need to consider a number of new issues and concerns. In some areas, these will challenge traditional approaches to landscape conservation, and require a move away from a focus on the appearance of landscapes to consider the more explicit services and benefits landscapes can deliver for society. This will require society to be more open to the idea of landscape change, and to accept that even some of our most valued landscapes will need to adapt if they are to meet society's future needs.

Some of the key emerging issues include:

### Climate change

Climate has always been a key defining factor in landscape development, and past changes in climate have had a significant role in shaping the physical character of the landscape. The projected increase in the rate of climate change could have significant implications for future landscapes and introduces a dynamic factor to landscape management.

Research on climate change impacts is generally set within the framework of global climate change scenarios provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, with climate

change scenarios for the UK provided by the UK Climate Impacts Programme (UKCIP). There is little doubt that climatic changes on the scale envisaged by UKCIP will impact on England's landscapes. These changes will result from:

- Direct impacts. Examples include changing patterns of habitats and species as they adapt to new conditions, flooding (both coastal and alluvial), coastal erosion, and changes in agricultural productivity. The direct landscape impacts of climate change are likely to be complex, subtle and slow to materialise, but could be more significant if severe weather events and flooding become more frequent.
- Indirect impacts arising from measures to reduce carbon emissions or sequester carbon. Examples are likely to include on-shore and off-shore wind energy developments, other renewable energy developments and associated infrastructure, nuclear power stations, biofuel and biomass production, and new public transport infrastructure. There may also be measures to increase the area of woodland or peat to store carbon.
- Impacts resulting from planned measures taken by society to adapt to climate change. Examples could include initiatives to promote habitat connectivity and species movement, changes in water and flood risk management (for example, a move towards 'soft' flood defences), and changes in patterns of agricultural production. Within urban areas we may see changes in building design and the management of green space.

To understand how these changes will impact on landscape character and the services provided by the landscape, we need to bring together an understanding of the changes themselves and the landscapes that will be affected. This analysis will need to consider the nature, scale, distribution and likelihood of any changes, and the significance of these changes to specific landscapes. This is fraught with difficulties. Foremost among these is the degree of uncertainty about the likely impacts. These uncertainties are significant and include:

- the possibility that the magnitude, speed and distribution of climatic changes will differ significantly from those contained in the IPCC and UKCIP scenarios;
- uncertainty about how natural systems will respond to changes in climatic variables such as temperature and rainfall;
- uncertainty about how society will respond to these changes through both mitigation and adaptation measures;
- uncertainty about external factors such as global economic conditions, the price of oil and political changes.

Natural England is currently undertaking a pilot project in a small number of Character Areas to assess the impacts of climate change on the natural environment and identify the measures necessary to adapt to climate change.

### Ecosystem goods and services

Since the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the functions of the natural environment, expressed as 'ecosystem goods and services' have attracted considerable attention. Government has signalled that an understanding of ecosystem goods and services will be an important factor in the future management of land. Landscapes deliver a wider range of ecosystem goods and services to society, such as food production, clean water, flood management, and climate regulation. They also provide a range of non-material cultural services such as spiritual enrichment, recreation, historical associations and aesthetic experiences.

We need to identify the types of landscape that will best help deliver the ecosystem services society will require in the future. However, there may be occasions when proposals to

deliver specific ecosystem services will change the character of the landscape in ways that conflict with long held landscape values, especially if land is managed to provide a single service to the exclusion of all others.

### Biodiversity conservation at the landscape scale

Healthy landscapes are crucial for conserving biodiversity. Natural England's State of the Natural Environment report is clear that a rich natural environment has landscapes that are diverse, resilient to external pressures, and have abundant wildlife populations which are able to use connected habitats to move through the landscape. Poor natural environments are characterised by simplified land uses, crop monocultures, lack of diversity and fragmented habitats that are not only small but are isolated, making it difficult for many species to survive.

It is now recognised that to conserve biodiversity and allow ecological systems to function more naturally, conservation activities need to be planned at a larger scale, setting site based approaches within a wider landscape context. This will mean focussing not just on existing important areas, but also on the connections and networks between areas, promoting greater heterogeneity within landscapes, and restoring/creating areas of semi-natural habitat. Such landscapes will be more ecologically robust and better able to allow the natural components of that system to adapt to the consequences of climate change. We do not currently have a precise assessment of the degree of land use change that will be necessary to achieve biodiversity objectives, or how this should be balanced against competing land use objectives. However, in some areas this could involve significant changes in the appearance of the landscape.

## **Policies**

### **Policy 1**

**Change is a fundamental characteristic of landscapes. Our future landscapes should emerge as a result of planned interventions, set within the context of a long term vision.**

Landscapes are inherently dynamic and it is inevitable that they will change in the future as a result of natural processes and human action. Rather than frustrate their evolution, we should embrace the opportunity this presents to proactively plan, protect and manage their evolution, and ensure that all decisions take account of their potential landscape impacts. Natural England has a clear role in landscape leadership, and can help to ensure that landscape development is driven by deliberate and planned interventions as well as functional changes and processes. To fulfil this leadership role, we need a strategic national vision for our landscapes, which in turn, should inform the development of more detailed landscape objectives for specific areas, which can be incorporated into regional and local strategies.

### Evidence

Although the last sixty years have seen significant efforts through the planning system and other mechanisms to regulate aspects of environmental change, these have only been partially successful in directing landscape change. Most landscapes have evolved with very little strategic input. Many of today's landscapes are the unplanned consequence of the way society has responded to the prevailing economic and social circumstances of the time.

The extent of past landscape change, the unplanned manner in which it has occurred, and the well documented impacts on landscape quality, highlight the need for a more planned and coordinated approach to the protection and development of England's landscapes. Compared to the past, our improved knowledge of how landscapes function, the forces

driving landscape change, and people's attitudes towards landscape change, place us in a much stronger position to help shape our future landscapes for the benefit of society and the natural environment.

## **Policy 2**

**The character, condition and quality of England's future landscapes should be built on an understanding of existing landscape character, through a landscape character approach.**

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) and Historic Landscape Characterisation provide a framework for understanding and describing an area in a systematic and transparent way, and for identifying the characteristics that contribute to a sense of place and make a particular landscape unique. This understanding can then inform the planning and management of landscape change. It should be used at all landscape scales to facilitate judgements and comparisons on the capacity and sensitivity of different landscapes to different drivers of change; to understand how change may affect the characteristics of landscapes that society values; and to identify areas which offer positive opportunities for landscape improvement and creation. We should use what we know now, to shape our plans for the future. At a national level, Natural England will continue to review, use and promote the use of Character Areas, and provide and refresh detailed guidance on how to undertake LCAs and their use in planning and managing change.

### Evidence

There is a wealth of information about existing landscape character and the way character is changing in response to current pressures. This evidence can help to underpin strategies and policies aimed at guiding landscape change. The Character of England map and descriptions published in 1999 provides a broad analysis of landscape character across the whole country, although this requires updating, particularly on the identification of forces for change. Many County and District Councils have prepared more detailed Landscape Character Assessments for their area, and many have developed accompanying landscape strategies. Assessments are also available for all National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. English Heritage has promoted a complementary programme of Historic Landscape Characterisation.

## **Policy 3**

**Our vision for England's landscapes will accommodate a range of different futures. Some landscapes will be transformed and some will change less markedly.**

Natural England's overarching landscape policy commits us to articulating a vision for future landscapes. This landscape vision will contribute to Natural England's overall vision for the natural environment. It will set out a series of strategic objectives relating to future landscapes. These objectives will help us to come to a judgement about whether, for a particular landscape, it is most appropriate to: conserve and maintain existing and historic character; enhance existing character through the introduction of new elements and features or altering the management of existing ones; restore character to that of a previous time; or take opportunities to create, or accelerate change towards, a new character. Deciding which approach to take in any given circumstances, what objectives to set for a particular landscape, and how much change is appropriate, will require careful thought about the overall character and key characteristics of the landscape today; the forces driving the direction, scale and pace of landscape change, both now and in the future; the functions, goods and services that we want the landscape to provide; and the preferences and values attached to current landscapes by the public. Our approach to the historic environment in

the context of landscape change will be set out in our Historic Environment Policy.

### Evidence

The deliberate creation of new landscapes to serve particular environmental and recreational purposes is not new. Examples range from the creation of the National Forest and community forests, urban parks and pleasure gardens, and successful initiatives to transform the landscape, mainly in areas degraded by industrial dereliction and intensive agriculture. These have usually had environmental enhancement at their core, but have generally been closely linked to recreational provision and economic regeneration. From an urban perspective, the post-war new towns are another example of large scale landscape transformation. Further opportunities for landscape creation may arise through rewilding. This encourages new landscapes to develop naturally. This is already happening in areas of managed realignment on the coast, and in a limited number of large scale experimental projects such as Wild Ennerdale in Cumbria, and the Great Fen project in Cambridgeshire. In other areas, the emphasis has been on minimising change and conserving and enhancing their existing character.

### **Policy 4**

**The vision for England's future landscapes must be developed and owned by all major stakeholders who impact upon the use and management of the land.**

England's landscapes are not the sole responsibility of Natural England. Many of the causes of landscape change lie outside our direct sphere of influence, and dealing with the complex challenges facing our future landscapes will require collective effort from a range of organisations and individuals, including landowners and managers, public bodies, NGOs and local communities. Future landscapes must be developed with the active involvement and support of those who have the power to shape the future landscape through their activities and policies.

### Evidence

Natural England is able to contribute to landscape change through influence and advice; incentives, for example through agri-environment schemes; direct management of its own estate; and regulation. Our development of a vision for the natural environment will be engaging a range of stakeholder across all sectors, and provides an opportunity to start the process of building the necessary consensus and commitment to a shared landscape vision.

### **Policy 5**

**There should be a multi-function approach to future landscape management, with England's future landscapes planned and managed to provide a range of ecosystem goods and services.**

The provision of ecosystem goods and services, including cultural services, will become an increasingly important feature of landscape management, and we need to find ways of achieving this which allows landscapes to remain distinctive, diverse and high quality. We should become much clearer about the functions, services and benefits we expect from our landscapes. Future landscapes should be capable of demonstrating a wide range of ecosystem goods and services, and decisions affecting the landscape should be informed by an understanding of the value of these services as well as the impact on its intrinsic value. The development of new approaches to valuing ecosystem services will help provide greater recognition for the goods and services landscapes provides.

## Evidence

Landscapes are more than just attractive scenery. They provide a wide range of essential services and benefits, including food, drinking water, flood management, climate regulation and disease management. They are also vital for our national culture, providing enjoyment, relaxation, inspiration, spiritual refreshment, and a link with past societies. Traditional approaches to landscape management have tended to focus on the intrinsic value of landscapes, such as their scenic beauty and their value for wildlife and recreation. The more utilitarian benefits and services provided by the landscape have tended to be undervalued and under-represented in decisions affecting the landscape. Natural England recognises the limitations of placing economic values on the natural environment, as values need to capture both the services the natural environment provides and its intrinsic value, and we are undertaking further research on this.

## **Policy 6**

**Developing our future landscapes requires an improved understanding of people's sense of place, values and perceptions, and of the factors that influence attitudes towards landscape change, in order that we can encourage more informed debate about specific proposals affecting landscapes.**

How society views different landscapes and landscape change has itself changed over time, reflecting the dominant values of the time and functions of the landscape. It is people's reaction to change that often determines its significance. A better understanding of why people favour one type of landscape over another, or what determines attitudes towards landscape change is necessary to build understanding and acceptance of change. This needs to be supported by robust evidence on the forces influencing our landscapes, and most importantly how these are impacting on the ground in different locations and different types of landscape. It is important that decisions affecting future landscapes are made on the basis of the best available evidence and modelling.

## Evidence

Current knowledge of public values and perceptions on landscape is poor. A large amount of academic research has been carried out into, but this has not been collated. Natural England now has work in hand to address this.

There is a growing amount of evidence on past landscape changes, for example through the Countryside Quality Counts project, Countryside Surveys, and the New Agricultural Landscapes project. This evidence is likely to continue to be collected through the planned CQuEL project. The Countryside Agency also undertook a major review of evidence on the forces driving landscape change in 2006. Most local level landscape character assessments also consider the impact of current drivers on the landscape, although few consider the impact on future landscapes. Future work needs to look beyond narrow sectoral concerns to examine the inter-relationships between drivers. The horizon scanning and scenario development work planned as part of the Natural Environment 2050 Vision project should yield valuable information.

## **Consultation responses**

We are very keen to hear your views on this draft policy, so please let us have your written comments by **27<sup>th</sup> March 2009**.

Comments should be sent to [andy.neale@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:andy.neale@naturalengland.org.uk)



**Cover photograph**

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Natural England is here to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings.

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