

Connecting the connectivity

Since our college days of understanding island biogeography, it's seemed dumb to work in a UK policy context that overlooks such a crucial concept. But now we have a momentum shift and the aims of the 2010 Lawton Report are being actioned. Lawton urged-on the push for connectivity and reinforced the interest in 'thinking big' for reserves and their hinterlands. Ideas on Living Landscapes and landscape-scale conservation have finally been championed at high-level, and a new era is upon us, as wildlife breaks out of its boundaries. Tight prescriptions for specialist species still have their place, but no longer should they prevent us taking steps to enrich nature beyond the demarcated places. Yes, more radical re-wilding is wanted by many of us, but let's enjoy the walk now and run later.

So, in this issue, Nicholas Macgregor and colleagues explain how a ramble through England's eastern fens crosses various big conservation schemes. These combine to offer a greater chunk of resilient land. On the ground and on the map the conservation estate is spreading. Likewise, in south west England, Lisa Schneidau notes the various projects branded as big-scale ventures in south west England, and she explains how one of the 12 Nature Improvement Areas, Northern Devon, under her charge, will boost the conservation agenda. NIAs need to prove their worth in double-quick time to justify their heightened attention and their budgets. Our case study shows the full intentions of the NIA set up in Northern Devon, from protecting Culm grassland to helping people appreciate local special places.

Meanwhile, the very essence of much of Scotland's great outdoors demands grand-scale conservation, and progressive estates have delivered much we can learn from. Bill Adams guides us through recent research on large-scale conservation in Scotland, and distinguishes the traits of different projects. This style of categorisation might help in England and Wales too. Knowing how projects compare and contrast may indicate what type of links are most useful and where there may be new cause and effect relationships across the landscape.

As the various big conservation schemes grapple with their targets and visions, what will be the actual wildlife results? More natural processes replacing traditional conservation management work, creating surprises regardless of our targets? More attention to nature's healing powers, as we dabble further into social and health affairs? And what will be the affects of closer ties with the landscape agenda? Our authors look at the complexities of embracing landscape character and seeing nature and the environment as a whole. In tough times it is good to see large scale conservation staying on course and offering new hope and fresh challenges. For now at least, don't mention that other landscape-scale policy, the CAP...