

Where next for landscape-scale conservation in England?

It's been over three years since Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) started, as a first step towards putting the Lawton vision of 'bigger, better, more and joined' landscapes for nature into practice. Here's a perspective on the highs and lows of landscape-scale conservation in England since that time – and some ideas on how to keep the vision active.

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In 2012, I wrote for *ECOS* about the start of the first twelve NIAs in England, all excited about the opportunity to create real change and develop the landscape-scale agenda across a number of communities and disciplines.¹ Looking back, those seem like heady days: so we had only achieved 12 areas to start with, but they were valued by government and part of a new programme which gave us some hope about the future.

Successes and constraints

Three years on, and the Northern Devon NIA has been a great success so far. Working with local landowners and communities has achieved over 1500ha of restored wildlife habitat and 81ha of new habitat, significant interventions to improve water quality, over 150 events, 52 school habitat visits and two arts projects. So far we have advised on management of 21% of the land in the river Torridge catchment. We enjoy a strong and diverse partnership under the auspices of the North Devon Biosphere Reserve. You can read more about our results and learning so far at <http://www.northerndevonia.org/news/38/nia-impact-revealed>

Similar work has been underway across England – progress for all twelve original NIAs has been impressive. The third year report for the NIA programme, with all data collected through the complex NIA Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, is still in draft and due to be published in January 2016.

The outlook for landscape-scale approaches

The original 12 NIAs and hundreds of other landscape-scale initiatives continue across the UK, quietly doing excellent work, and almost all (in rural areas) continuing to be reliant on HLF, landfill tax and agri-environment schemes to achieve meaningful change. But our funding and staffing foundations are often shaky and alarmingly short-term. Many schemes rely on a strong lead partner to underwrite and fundraise for the staff time required for project management, partnership co-ordination and scheme development that all landscape-scale approaches require.

In their 'phase 2' projects, landscape-scale initiatives have a challenge to overcome the difficult 'second album syndrome', particularly in times of austerity where the

minds of partner organisations are being pulled back to core functions. We have already seen some excellent initiatives with ambitious visions fizzling out after three years, with little to follow. At a recent conference I was told by a colleague from another conservation charity: "We're not doing landscape-scale projects any more: our funding ran out, so we are focusing on something else."

Our challenge, then, is to work with the short-term project funding which is a curse and a blessing for our sector, *and* for local partnerships to maintain, promote and uphold our landscape-scale visions. The tricky part is not being diverted from our vision by short-term project funding priorities – or a reduction in government commitment.

The nature of our times

NIAs were originally meant to be 'pilots' for a much wider landscape-scale programme across England, but in September 2014 all twelve original NIAs were told to go away and carry on the good work with no further Defra funding. The original ambition of the Natural Environment White Paper quietly slipped away as all the boxes of the original Defra programme were ticked. There has been little word of the role of Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) in identifying further 'local NIAs' since criteria were published in 2013. Although NIAs and LNPs are still within the remit of Defra, leadership from central government on landscape-scale conservation is sorely needed.

Since the return of the Conservative government in May, negative change in environmental policy and environmental funding has accelerated, and this is inevitably denting the confidence of nature conservation bodies. When the very foundations of our legal protection for internationally important sites have come into question, a quarter of staff in the statutory organisations have been lost, and the rhetoric of 'environment being a barrier to business', which we know to be unsubstantiated, is becoming ever louder, it is difficult to assert the positive benefits of landscape-scale conservation. Many Local Nature Partnerships have found it impossible to secure interest or funding from their Local Enterprise Partnerships, and again there is little leadership from government to encourage this.

Some other initiatives are worth noting in a landscape-scale context. Defra's response to the continuation of landscape-scale work in England has been the Countryside Stewardship (CS) Facilitation Fund. This has the same level of funding, £7.5m, as the original twelve NIAs enjoyed, although it's not from Treasury but from CAP coffers. Defra's aim is to spread this over a much larger number of projects. The scheme has potential to increase farmer confidence, skills and ownership of environmental outcomes in defined areas, linked to the Mid Tier of CS, with real positive potential. However, NFU lobbying for a 'farmer-led' approach has led to a scheme which favours land agents and consultants, and is in danger of devaluing the significant skills, expertise and relationships built between farmers and conservation organisations.

It seems to have become fashionable to be negative about agri-environment schemes, and I find this unhelpful and counter-productive. Yes, we want farming to be so green it doesn't need extra funding as a sticking-plaster for its lack of space for nature. But that time is a long way away, and much of the agricultural

sector seems determined to reduce its environmental sustainability even further. In the meantime, and in the absence of meaningful environmental regulation, agri-environment schemes are essential, and I believe that we should value and promote them. After all, they are simply taxpayers' money paying for ecosystem services.

Another development is the 'rewilding' agenda, which gives an exciting boost to the renewal of truly wild ecosystems. The application of this approach on a crowded island is challenging, although initiatives such as the beaver project on the river Otter in Devon are inspiring. However, this approach must not detract from the importance of semi-natural landscapes for wildlife across much of England, particularly the lowlands. I believe we must avoid the development of an agenda which draws too sharp a contrast between 'wild' landscapes and intensive agriculture. Landscape-scale conservation deals with the tenacious and complex work of integrating more nature into *all* landscapes. The notion that it is acceptable for some landscapes to be devoid of nature altogether, because of the dominance of one unsustainable industry, if other landscapes elsewhere are 're-wilded', is a dangerous one for a number of reasons.

The ecosystem services agenda, swiftly developing into 'natural capital', is another area which can be developed and delivered through landscape-scale approaches. I believe this can bring significant learning and integration of the environmental agenda with the needs of wider society. One example is the use of Culm grassland to help manage flood risk in north Devon. But the concept of ecosystem services is not the answer to everything. Let's not lose our holistic vision, intrinsic environmental values, or the heart of nature conservation, in the process.

Lastly, the NIA programme, and the conservation sector as a whole, has become more fluent and confident in recent years with the health and wellbeing agenda, leading to new and exciting connections between nature and people. Our challenge now is to develop our inspiring health and wellbeing projects and integrate them into everyday delivery structures, to make these connections last beyond time-limited funding.

Looking forward: courage and leadership

If we allow landscape-scale conservation to be considered a luxury, only about 10 years after it first started finding its roots, then I believe we will have failed as a sector. For if we lose our vision and scale back our ambitions, we will lose ground. When we set ourselves 20, 30, 50 year local visions, did we really mean it? Austerity is testing our resolve.

In considering the future of landscape-scale conservation, the nature conservation sector has a choice. If the landscape-scale agenda is left to wither, we will end up with our big-picture visions fading into the past, and a dwindling number of disconnected, time-limited projects simply muddling through in the wider countryside.

The other option is to promote strong national leadership from within the conservation sector, and maintain a vision for landscape-scale conservation which is



A hedge management workshop for landowners in the North Devon NIA.
Photo: Devon Wildlife Trust

nationally visible, and fast-moving and adaptable in its local implementation. If this vision is not going to be provided by government, then the third sector organisations will need to collectively provide this leadership under a united banner. The promotion of a Health and Wellbeing Act by the environmental NGOs continues. At an English policy level, I suggest that our faith in continuing to realise the Lawton vision of expanded conservation and connectivity rests firmly in this camp.

Environmental charities still enjoy a large membership and a great deal of potential for activism. The landscape-scale agenda is a shared agenda by its very nature, and therefore a sustained level of activism at local and national levels is needed that makes nature tangible, compelling and personally relevant in the national mindset. In the meantime, after significant development work the Northern Devon NIA continues, with four active projects, a further two in the wings, and detailed plans through to 2020. What will the climate for landscape-scale conservation be like by that time? Much of that is up to us.

Reference

1. Schneidau, L. (2012) 'Landscape-scale conservation in the South West. Notes from the frontline' *ECOS* 33(3/4) 50-55

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