

**Review of the UK-MAB Urban Wildlife  
Award for Excellence  
Commissioned by the UK-MAB Urban  
Forum  
prepared by the  
London Wildlife Trust, May 2002**

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## **1.1 Introduction – “Ten Years On”**

The UK-MAB Urban Award for Excellence has been established for ten years.

'Ten years on' is a good milestone to reach and a good time to write a review of any system or process.

To be established for this length of time will mark a 'certain maturity' attained – a time for successes and failures to be measured and lessons to be learnt. A robustness and resilience will have been proved and sufficient time will have elapsed in order to formulate views on possible changes and investigate potential developments enabling future investments of time and resources to be balanced against differing demands.

The decision to commission a review of the UK-MAB Urban Wildlife Award for Excellence came out of discussions held during 2001. The purpose was fourfold:

- To gain an understanding of where the scheme now fits in to the current conservation scene.
- To undertake research in to the perceived 'added value' (beyond the use of the logo) of the scheme to date by contacting representatives from award winning sites and payments.
- To provide options on the potential development of the scheme.
- To investigate potential sources of funding in order to resource the scheme in the future.

## **1.2 The Organisations**

**The Urban Forum of the UK Man & the Biosphere** was established in 1987. It's main work has been publishing papers, preparing comments on national issues and policies, generating new concepts, guidelines and research, organising conferences and seminars and networking with other expert groups.

**The London Wildlife Trust** was established as a charity in 1981. It is part of the UK-wide Wildlife Trust network (RSNC). The Trust's activities encompass environmental education, land management, campaigning, the encouragement of community involvement, biological recording & survey and the influencing of London's decision-makers to achieve a city richer in wildlife.

Graham Turnbull (the author of this review) has been the Director of the Trust for the last 12 years.

## 2. Setting the Scene - Context

### How the present scheme has worked in practice <sup>(a)</sup>

*“As long as you’re on the side of parks you’re on the side of the angels”*

**Robert Moses (1888-1981)**

#### 2.1 ***The background to the award***

The UK-MAB Urban Wildlife Award for Excellence was established in 1992 at a time when urban green spaces were steadily gaining credibility and being valued for their contribution towards the natural biodiversity of our towns and cities. The award scheme set out to establish a recognised, international standard that would prove the worth and value to the community of sites and projects (including ‘ground breaking’ publications) where none had existed before. It was envisaged that the scheme would function as a tangible outcome and practical contribution towards the international Man and the Biosphere project on urban areas.

The Award directly arose out of a programme that was running in the United States that targeted urban gardens <sup>(b)</sup>. George Barker (at that time Urban Advisor to the UK Government’s Nature Conservancy Council subsequently to become English Nature) on a visit to the States had seen this scheme in action and had thought that this could be replicated in the UK. From the first, two additional themes would be added.

- The importance of networking opportunities. It was envisaged that the award winning projects would function as examples of good practice and be used to gain valuable experiences, both positive and negative, to ensure that workable solutions could be replicated with the minimum of learning time and mistakes avoided.
- The Award scheme would extend beyond purely site-based projects and would be used to commend projects (publications, strategies, case studies) that could make a difference and were seen to lead the field.

#### 2.2. ***The Award Making Organisation***

The Urban Forum was established in 1987 as one of six international MAB project areas. These in turn had grown out of the Man and the Biosphere initiative that originated in the International Biological Programme and the Biosphere conference organised by UNESCO in 1968.

The UK-MAB Urban Wildlife Award for Excellence works alongside of the Forum’s main work which includes the publishing of papers, preparing comments on national issues and policies, generating new concepts, guidelines and research, organising conferences and seminars, and networking with other expert groups. The award scheme’s aim has been to work towards the creation of a network of key “demonstration” projects. This aptly bears out one of the Forum’s key roles to use a networking and a multi-disciplinary approach to enable new insights to wider audiences.

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#### Notes:

(a) Grateful thanks to Chris Gordon for his review document ‘High Quality Nature Reserve Projects (1998)’

(b) Extracted from George Barker’s introduction to workshops at the URGENT Conference (Birmingham, 2002)

### 2.2.1. **The Selection Process**

Differing methods have been used in order to consider projects for the scheme. The geographical spread and interdisciplinary nature of the Forum members has meant that potential projects have either been identified by the members and invited to apply. Or, through the networking nature of the scheme, projects have applied in their own right for consideration.

The process of selection involves (when site based) a site visit by either one or at most two members of the Forum. This is followed by a written report to the full Forum with recommendations. At this stage the Award for Excellence can either be made or, as has happened with a site-based candidate an Award for Excellence can be offered conditional on certain of the key criteria being achieved. In many ways the conditional nature of the Award can be used as a lobbying tool in order to ensure that the site can be brought up to the standards expected. Such a method is especially useful for local authority owned sites where 'blockages' in funding can often be released if an external body has demonstrated an interest in the area.

### 2.2.2. **Criteria**

The criteria for selection that have been devised are extremely comprehensive covering all potential uses for which a site may be used. The criteria (see appendix 2) cover:

Having nature conservation (wildlife and/or earth science) in urban areas as a main objective in management.

Have a major element of at least two of:

Curriculum-based environmental education

Site interpretation

Enjoyment of natural feature by local people

Act as a focus for nature clubs or similar

Art in the environment

Have reasonable visitor facilities and accessibility

Involve the local authority, Wildlife Trust, local residents, schools and organisations – The involvement of central government departments or agencies, national or regional organisations, colleges or universities and business or industry would be bonuses.

Have site management plans, background material on the history of the site in an easily accessible format.

Have a guaranteed continuity for at least 10 years

Be able to easily meet visitors on site

Be of high quality in terms of their social or educational uses and/or their nature conservation values.

It was clearly felt from the outset that sites so selected should be classed as UK flagship projects – but it was also accepted that quality was not always synonymous with neatness or a 'professional' gloss

On receiving the Award for Excellence nature reserves and conservation areas are entitled to use the international MAB logo on literature, letters, signage, etc

### 2.2.3. **Sites – Awards to date:**

- Saltwells Wood Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Dudley (1992)
- The Severn Gorge Countryside Trust, Ironbridge (1995)
- The Kingfisher project, Birmingham and Solihull (1996)
- The Jupiter Project, Grangemouth (1996)
- Sutton Ecology Centre, London (1997)
- Sydenham Hill wood (1997)
- Bradlaugh Fields Northampton (1997)
- Chorlton Water Park, Manchester (1997)
- Parc Natur Penglais, Aberaeron, Ceredigion (1997)
- Waldbridge Fell Country Park & Cong Burn Wood LNR Durham (1998)
- Hawthorns Urban Wildlife Centre (1998)
- Lewes Railway Lands LNR (1998)
- Shibdon Pond LNR, Gateshead (1999)
- Dalton Bank LNR, Huddersfield (2000)

#### Publications

- UWP's "Urban Wildlife News" (1989)
- Gerald Dawe's "Urban Nature" (1992)
- London Ecology Units publication "Building Green" (1992)
- Cardiff City Council's Nature Conservation Strategy (1997)

Two important objectives made this scheme unique. From the first it was determined that there should be a good geographical spread to the sites receiving the awards. To some extent this has been achieved with projects stretching from the lea of the South Downs in Sussex to Grangemouth in Falkirk. Although it could be argued that there's a great deal of Scotland further north including sizeable centres of population around Perth, Inverness or Aberdeen, plus obvious gaps in the southwest (no Bristol, Plymouth or Truro) and only one representation in Wales or Northern Ireland.

The second was to recognise that the receiving of an award *should not* mean that the project does not have its share of problems. To quote from the criteria for selecting projects, "Since an objective is to help others learn, the project organisers must be prepared to be frank to serious enquirers about any problems encountered or mistakes made". Not something that is always encouraged from award winning projects!

### 2.2.4. **Potential Pitfalls**

Part of the success of the scheme and also one of the potential problems has been the need for assessors (members of the Urban Forum) to make site visits. The advantage to the site manager (one that was highlighted during much of the research amongst site managers) was that a visit would take place from an expert in their field. They in turn would act as a consultant to the manager looking at both the successes and the potential problem areas of the project. In terms of being able to pay for such a service the sites would find it very difficult. This has inevitably proved to be a limiting factor to the extent that the scheme could be promoted. It will also remain as a limiting factor unless additional funds can be sourced.

### 2.2.5. **Conclusions**

The scheme, during its first 10 years, has had to some extent to be self-limiting in scope due to restricted resources both in terms of finance and personnel available to service to scheme.

### 3. The Present Scheme I

#### Research amongst existing award holders and those involved in wider urban conservation areas (c)

*“One of the most important aspects of nature conservation in towns and cities is its accessibility to people.... natural areas allow people to identify with nature, notice the seasons and feel a sense of freedom”.*

*“Wildlife in Towns & Cities (English Nature 1991)*

#### 3.1 **Method**

The rationale behind this part of the research was to establish the 'on the ground' benefits, beyond the immediate gains spelt out in the application process by the actual practitioners. It was originally hoped to cover all 14 of the sites that had received the award but in the end the comments were so similar that a representative selection was chosen.

#### 3.2 **Responses to direct telephone interviews**

There was a good understanding of the scheme once the interviewee had been reminded of the logo and the connection with the site (without the reminder it is likely that recognition would not have been so strong). Except for the most recent awards the respondent was not the member of staff who had been in post at the time of the award. We can therefore assume that they would not have been the ones who applied for the award originally

However a number of common themes emerged:

##### 3.2.1. *International recognition*

“The UNESCO link is immediately recognised” and “the logo makes a good conversation opener”. Both of these points were made time and time again throughout interviews. By implication this would lead to the understanding that the project was part of a larger (global) network, it therefore helped to explain that conservation issues extend beyond the confines of their own neighbourhood. The UNESCO kite marking enabled work that was taking place locally to be placed in a wider national and international context.

However set against this were statements “It’s a very nebulous award... we have difficulty in saying why we received it” and “My Director didn’t know what it was but he was very pleased to receive it”. Obviously it is virtually impossible to spell out why an award has been received beyond the initial launch date. It shouldn’t be underestimated how much publicity is needed in order to impact on most people’s everyday lives in order to gain such understanding. However the overall effect is that it has been perceived as something worth acquiring and something that has a value.

##### 3.2.2. *Valuing of Community Effort*

The positive effect on the morale of site staff and volunteers has been very efficient. The phrases used were that it was a "prestige award", "it recognises the value of our work", and "boosting confidence". All involved with community conservation will appreciate that the value of an external endorsement goes way beyond the words used in the citation.

##### 3.2.3. *Add on value*

An unexpected outcome, which is almost impossible to quantify, was the ‘warmth’ engendered from the scheme (certainly something that this particular researcher had not expected). It could only be described as a ‘family feel’ in the responses received, particularly amongst volunteers, a real feeling of willingness to share the successes of the project in which they were involved and to explain many of the hurdles that had been faced or were still a problem.

Looking back at the original criteria for selection of sites this intangible aspect to the making of the Award has triumphantly been achieved and would seem to need an outlet through some means beyond the scope of this piece of research. ((1) Following the URGENT Conference held in Birmingham in 2002, Peter Dogse (the UNESCO-MAB Programme Specialist from Paris) has suggested that a signed certificate originating from UNESCO could be made available to reinforce the global dimension.)

#### 3.2.4. **Wider Uses**

A number of the projects had used the gaining of the Award as part of the bidding process for grants "it provided a useful international link". Mention was particularly made of bids for the various national lottery boards. Media exposure including photocalls, particularly when first awarded, had also featured. An unexpected use occurred in one local paper when a bout of vandalism on site yielded the banner headline in a local paper "Internationally recognised site vandalised".

The MAB logo tended to be used in internal and external publications – particularly those targeted towards volunteers. Other uses cited were in credits on interpretation boards and site visitor leaflets. However all mentioned lack of profile for the scheme as one of the main hindrances for the wider use of logo for other purposes.

Two of the project representatives interviewed particularly mentioned that shortcomings identified from the initial site visit could be used to lobby local councillors and council officers (on local authority owned sites) to make additional funding available in order to qualify for the Award for Excellence.

#### 3.2.5. **Conclusions**

One of the great advantages of the scheme has been that it reaches two distinct areas relatively easily "grassroots", in other words site based volunteers and staff and to the other extreme, but just as valuable, is the recognition of the award at the political level. Also see note Wildlife one above.

## 4. **The Present Scheme II**

**What other schemes are there out there – what niche does it occupy?**

*"... the attachment to animal pets or even to plants, testify to the persistence in humankind of biological and emotional hungers that developed during their evolutionary past and that cannot be outgrown. Saving nature in both its wild and humanised aspects is thus an essential part of urban planning"*

**René Dubos, speech UNESCO Biosphere Conference, Paris (1968) (d)**

#### 4.1 **"Not sure what it is, but pleased to get it"**

Throughout the interview process the lack of recognition and understanding of what the award represented continued to be a common concern amongst respondents.

This would lead one to believe that such lack of recognition was due to the high profile of other open space awards. However on questioning those interviewed it was obvious that apart from the Green Flag award, very little impact has been made by any other scheme and certainly no other scheme which has an international dimension to it.

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Notes:

- (d) This seminal conference which, "...showed extraordinary insight and foresight concerning environmental issues which were already recognised as approaching scales without precedent in the history of humanity" (Celica 2002), was organised 24 years before the UNCED Rio Conference of 1992, only six years after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Delegates attended representing 63 countries.

#### 4.2 ***Will this Situation change in the Future?***

Currently the Green Flag Award, administered by the Civic Trust, is perceived to have a focus on public parks with a particular emphasis on amenity areas. Whilst these categories are certainly included awards have been made to areas with a conservation interest.

The Green Flag categories are also being extended to include a Green Pennant Award which will together with further categories, which will take the scheme into children's activity areas.

The scheme, which is funded through annual fees payable by the sites and the Civic Trust has an annual application process to ensure continuity of standards. A Green Flag/Pennant award one-year would not automatically mean that the award would be made in subsequent years. Teams of adjudicators have expenses covered.

There is also the potential for Cities and districts to run schemes. In London the new Greater London Authority (GLA) will under the Mayor's Strategic Plan (2002/3) be recognising excellence in conservation practice for open spaces.

#### 4.3 ***Conclusions***

At present it is difficult to see a scheme that occupies a similar niche to that of the MAB Awards for Excellence. Green Flag has good coverage but at present simply recognises open spaces that carry out the work that they were designed for in a suitable manner. Biodiversity/conservation issues are not a key element of the process.

If the decision is taken to continue the M&B Awards Scheme the niche for the scheme still remains, as it did ten years ago.

### **5. Options for the way forward, promotion of the scheme Potential funding sources and Partnerships that could be established**

Four clear options emerge from the review

- 5.1 The scheme has achieved a great deal over its 10 years of existence. The award citations remain in place. The opportunities for networking, and learning through good practice are still accessible through application to the Secretariat of the UK-MAB Urban Forum, but the site based elements of the scheme cease leaving the option to continue with the kite marking of publications through an annual selection process.
- 5.2 Additional funding is found through commercial and or charitable foundation sources. Preliminary enquiries with a commercial contact *"saw very little advantage to our organisation in terms of potential publicity that could be generated. We would find difficulty in matching the geographical spread of potential sites to our operational centres to ensure that staff could participate"*.

A small number of foundations were also contacted to establish potential interest. One, with an international bias felt that *"the UK focus would hamper us"*. In view of the continuing nature of the funding it would be unlikely that this would be a realistic option in the short term. Profile of the scheme will also remain as a problem.



5.3. Discussions are opened with other organisations:

- a) The Civic Trust (The Green Flag/Pennant Award) to establish if a way can be found to integrate a urban-based conservation category into its current remit.
- b) English Nature together with its sister organisations.

Discussions have been opened with English Nature to investigate potential linkages to their programmes designating Local Nature Reserves (LNR's) and their newly launched *Wildspace* grant programme.

Potential areas of commonality exist between these programmes and the MAB Award for Excellence as far as site based projects are concerned. English Nature's concerns surround the continuity of standards of LNR's once they have been declared. The Urban Forum's needs are for more resources to run an Award Scheme. The needs of both organisations could be complementary to each.

5.4 A mid way route

- a) An annual networking event for site based awards is held and sites are annually reviewed to ensure that they continue to reach the required standard.
- b) The above is linked to an annual conference where an urban award for excellence is made to a project or publication that is seen to be advancing the cause of urban conservation.

5.5 **Conclusions**

The potential exists to relaunch the Award for Excellence Scheme or adapt the framework to continue its relevance to community conservation organisations. Initial discussions have been opened, further discussions with either of the bodies concerned however would be beyond the scope of this initial review document.

Following the presentation of the above review document at the May 2002 MAB Urban Forum Meeting held in Liverpool members of the Forum established a small working group comprising Chris Gordon, Pete Frost, Mathew Frith & Graham Turnbull to open discussions with the relevant organisations concerned in order to take 5.3 forward.

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