

planning local nature reserves

John Box, Steve Berry, Ian Angus, Peter Cush and Pete Frost set out the current position on designated local nature reserves in Great Britain and Northern Ireland



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Above

Cycling in Dumbreck Marsh LNR in the Kelvin Valley, North Lanarkshire

Local Nature Reserve (LNR) is a statutory designation that is important for the conservation of biodiversity and geological features at a local level. The number of LNRs in the UK has increased from 24 in 1970 to 236 in 1990, 629 in March 1997 and around 1,500 in 2007.

LNRs are best seen as nodes in multi-functional green networks, because this sets them in a landscape context, values them as part of the environmental resources of a local authority area, and draws attention to their excellence as sites of nature conservation value.¹ Reference to specific LNRs or potential LNRs in local plans, unitary development plans and emerging local development frameworks provides a positive land use for each site and demonstrates to everyone that the primary land

use is nature conservation. Such a land use allocation helps to move away from the idea, particularly in urban areas, that nature conservation only occurs on land which has no other use.

Sustainability demands that environmental capital is not diminished from one generation to the next. The next generation will only know what it finds and will not be able to fully comprehend past losses. Therefore, important sites such as LNRs need systems which can deliver good site management in order to maintain the quality of the resource in the long term. Large sites are more likely to be able to accept multiple use without damage and can provide a greater variety of opportunities for local people to use and enjoy. But in many urban



Above

Mural adjacent to Cwmatalwg LNR on the edge of Barry in South Wales

areas the severe constraints of high land values and existing land uses mean that only small sites are practicable as LNRs. However, it is increasingly being recognised that even very small LNRs are valuable, not only in terms of their ecological and educational benefits, but also in supporting more sustainable communities – for example through their contribution to people’s health and well-being.

The current position for each of the four countries in the UK is set out below.

England – by Steve Berry (Natural England)

When the Nature Conservancy Council was wrapped up in April 1991 there were 231 LNRs in England, meaning that an average of fewer than six a year had been set up in the preceding 40 years. However, by the end of July 2007 the total had grown to 1,380 and the yearly average for new LNRs had, since 1991, risen to 78.

There were especially dramatic increases in the years 1999 to 2006, fuelled by the Wildspace! grant scheme, financed by the Big Lottery. This channelled over £7 million to encourage both more and better LNRs, through projects working for people, places and nature. A vital feature was the funding of ‘community liaison officers’, whose role included embedding reserves into the heart of local communities, particularly by setting up ‘Friends of...’ groups, later to become self-sustaining.

Since the late 1980s, LNRs have become smaller and less likely to have the status of Site of Special Scientific Interest. New reserves are now more likely to be near population centres than in rural areas. Some are run entirely by their local community, with minimal direct involvement by a local authority.

In 1996, English Nature set a target for a minimum provision of one hectare of statutory local nature reserve for every 1,000 residents² as one of the accessible natural green space standards (ANGSt) in towns and cities.³ Although this looked impossibly ambitious (or visionary!) many local authorities have since met this target. Some have even exceeded it, and it is now beginning to look achievable right across the country. *Town & Country Planning* has recently reported the findings of a survey of how the local nature reserve area per 1,000 residents has changed in 25 urban local authorities in England since 1993.⁴

In October 2006, a new organisation replaced English Nature. The indications are that Natural England, which has placed the enjoyment of nature by people at the heart of its thinking, can be expected to continue to give both encouragement and practical support to LNRs in future.

Northern Ireland – by Peter Cush (Environment & Heritage Service)

Legislation in Northern Ireland in relation to LNRs only came into effect in 1985. Since then progress in their declaration has been very slow. After 22 years there are still only seven LNRs.

However, the local biodiversity action plan (LBAP) process which began in district councils in Northern Ireland in 2004 has seen a renewed interest in LNRs, with two of the total of seven declared just last year and a further five candidate LNR sites in the pipeline. Environment and Heritage Service will publish guidance on declaration later this year. Coupled with a lot of local activity and interest in the LBAP process, this should lead to a further significant increase in LNR declaration.

As with England, Scotland and Wales, a significant development in Northern Ireland has been the promotion of LNRs as areas where people can have contact with nature rather than a full-scale emphasis solely on the nature conservation value of sites when considering suitable sites for declaration. LNRs in Northern Ireland are now being declared and promoted as areas of land designated by district councils to conserve their nature conservation, earth science and recreational value, with the primary land use being for conservation purposes. This primary land use does not, of course, rule out the very positive and proactive role that LNRs have in promoting interaction and everyday contact between people with nature. They provide opportunities for a wide range of informal recreation, are a great outdoor accessible educational resource, and have an important role in raising people's awareness of biodiversity conservation.

With a major local government re-organisation in the pipeline, the potential for more LNRs to be declared has never been greater. The vision is for LNRs to be within easy and sustainable transport distance of everyone in Northern Ireland, no matter where they live. Their localness is their strong point. As the local government led LBAP process continues to expand rapidly in Northern Ireland, the hope is that LNR numbers and distribution will grow rapidly in the next five years.

Scotland – by Ian Angus (Scottish Natural Heritage)

Scotland has 48 LNRs and a population of 5.1 million people. It is clear, therefore, that the rate of declaration in Scotland has not matched that in England, but this may be changing as sites which have been 'proposed' for many years are now moving to declaration and new sites are identified.

Aberlady Bay in East Lothian was declared as the first LNR in the UK in 1952, and was followed by a number of similar large, coastal sites. Resolving conflicts between users was a key concern in these sites, while access, education and interpretation may have been lower priorities.

By 1989 there were still only eight LNRs in Scotland, but the rate of declaration increased significantly in the mid-1990s, probably reflecting a push to declare sites in advance of local government re-organisation in 1996. The new LNRs tended to be smaller and within or closer to urban areas, and there was more focus on their educational potential.

In 2000, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) produced a guide to the selection and declaration of LNRs in association with the local authorities.⁵ Since 2002, SNH has supported a network of LNR managers and community groups promoting good practice and sharing experience. The network has supported the annual LNR celebrations, which have grown each year since their launch in Scotland in



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Above

Bog Meadows LNR in the heart of Belfast

2005. A review in 2006 showed that few LNRs have up-to-date management plans, and new guidance on management planning, developed with the network, was launched by SNH in 2007.⁶ SNH, again with input from the network, maintains pages for each LNR on the SNH website. This useful website also includes information on how to get involved in your local LNR, information on grants, and guidance on declaration and management.



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Above

Planting reeds in Telford Town Park LNR, Shropshire

The value of LNRs is increasingly being recognised in action on wider agendas – for example on access, through ‘core path plans’, and on health, through initiatives such as Paths to Health. Forthcoming Scottish planning policy is expected to require local authorities to produce open space strategies and urge the protection of LNRs as important parts of green networks.

Wales – by Pete Frost (Countryside Council for Wales)

Since 1993 LNRs have become more popular than ever in Wales – judging by sheer numbers alone. Between 1949 and 1993, 21 LNRs were designated, and by 2006 the number had grown to 62. LNRs had changed in more than just numbers though.

Following the publication of *Local Nature Reserves*, a review across the UK by the Urban Forum of the UNESCO UK Man and the Biosphere Committee,^{7,8} the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) reviewed its own guidance on the purpose and uses of LNR. This culminated in the publication of *Acting Locally on Behalf of the Environment: the Role of Local Nature Reserves*,⁹ which set LNRs in Wales firmly in the context of the prime purpose of all nature reserves (as defined in the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act) – as a place to study nature. In this document, CCW interpreted the word ‘study’ in its broadest possible sense, as any activity which devoted time and attention to acquiring knowledge – a walk in the woods to listen to bird-song or to look for wild flowers, for example.

CCW issued further guidance in 2004 reinforcing the message that LNRs are primarily place where people can encounter nature.¹⁰ We stressed that LNR did not have to be places of existing high nature conservation interest, as long as they were managed for the conservation of nature in order that people could gain access to it. We encourage LNR designation as a means of safeguarding high nature conservation interest, but we also hope that local authorities will take a more pro-active stance in creating LNR as places where people can re-connect with nature for the benefit of their physical health and mental well-being. Ultimately it is to be hoped that this will result in a culture which enjoys and respects the natural world, and is prepared to devote resources to sustaining it.

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Notes

- 1 G. Barker: *A Framework for the Future: Green Networks with Multiple Uses in and around Towns and Cities*. English Nature Research Report 256. English Nature, 1997
- 2 *A Space for Nature*. English Nature, 1996
- 3 *Local Nature Reserves: Places for People and Wildlife*. English Nature, 2004
- 4 J. Box: ‘Increasing the supply of local nature reserves’. *Town & Country Planning*, 2007, Vol. 76, May, 160-2
- 5 *Local Nature Reserves in Scotland: a Guide to their Selection and Declaration*. Scottish Natural Heritage, 2000. w: www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/lhrs/finguide.pdf and www.snh.org.uk/publications/samples/designated%20areas/LNRScotlandSamples.asp
- 6 *Local Nature Reserve Management Planning Guidance: The Process and the Plan*. Scottish Natural Heritage, 2007. w: www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/lhr/ManPlanGuidFeb07.pdf
- 7 *Local Nature Reserves. A Time for Reflection: A Time for New Action*. Urban Forum of the UK Man and the Biosphere Committee, 1998. w: www.ukmanurbanforum.co.uk/publications.htm
- 8 G.M.A. Barker and J.D. Box: ‘Statutory Local Nature Reserves in the United Kingdom’. *Journal of Environmental Planning & Management*, 1998, Vol. 41, 629-42
- 9 *Acting Locally on Behalf of the Environment: the Role of Local Nature Reserves*. Countryside Council for Wales, 1996
- 10 *A Place for Nature at your Doorstep: the Role of Local Nature Reserves*. Countryside Council for Wales, 2004