

# The Lawton Review - bigger, better, more joined up.

The Lawton Review<sup>1</sup>, published in 2010, was requested by Hilary Benn, then Environment Secretary. It was chaired by Sir John Lawton, and aimed to review how England's wildlife and ecological network could be improved to help nature thrive in the face of climate change and other pressures. The review fed into production of the Natural Environment White Paper<sup>2</sup>, published in 2011, which ensured a Government commitment to implementing the principles set out.

The review concluded that England's wildlife sites, despite their diversity, did not comprise a coherent and resilient ecological network even today, let alone one capable of coping with the challenge of climate change and other pressures. To address this, a step change is needed in nature conservation.

## Why are ecological networks important?

As well as having intrinsic value, natural habitats and the species that live in them form a fundamental support system that underpins our own survival, through delivery of clean water, food, fuel, protection from flooding and extreme weather. Yet wildlife is declining around the world, despite the designation of protected sites and nature reserves over the last 100 years.

Isolated nature reserves are not enough. In a landscape fragmented by human activity like

development and intensive agriculture, and subject to rapid change, such as climate change, species are unable to move or adapt quickly enough. Action is needed across whole landscapes to reverse the effects of fragmentation and environmental degradation. The Lawton review cites the importance of ecological networks, suites of high quality wildlife sites containing biological diversity, with connections between them enabling species, or their genes, to move.

Establishing a coherent and resilient ecological network will help wildlife cope with change, but will also improve the ability of the natural environment to provide for us.

## What does this mean for HS2 and woodland?

Large infrastructure developments like HS2 are potentially a threat to delivery of the vision set out in the Lawton review. HS2 will destroy valuable habitat and lead to further fragmentation.

Since the Government made a commitment to the Lawton principles through its Natural Environment White Paper, HS2 Ltd is under an obligation to build them into proposals for ecological mitigation and compensation.

HS2 will destroy and fragment ancient woodland. Ancient woods are irreplaceable and form part of



the invaluable reservoir of biodiversity that Lawton refers to, the existing sites where wildlife needs to be secured.

Where loss is deemed unavoidable, compensation must be put in place. This compensation should not simply be new woodland, equivalent in area to the ancient woodland lost. A more meaningful approach would be to look at the opportunities in the surrounding area to deliver the Lawton vision.

This might mean, for example, creation of new areas of native woodland, used to buffer and extend areas of ancient woodland and other semi-natural habitats. It should also include creation of new corridors and stepping stones, both woodland and areas of other habitat where this will deliver connectivity.

It might also mean restoration of degraded habitats in the ecological network, for example restoration of ancient woodland planted with conifers, restoration of hedgerows, and planting of new open-grown trees to form a new generation of ancients in parkland or wood pasture landscapes. The Lawton Review sets out a clear vision, moving away from the idea of wildlife contained in isolated reserves and towards whole landscapes that are vibrant, wildlife-rich, and ecologically functioning.

Large developments like HS2 create a tension, but it is therefore essential to use the Lawton vision to maximise any positive opportunities that arise.

## Improving ecological networks

To do this, Lawton says, we need to make our network of sites bigger, better, and more joined up. This means:

- Protecting what we have while improving its quality with better management;
- Increasing the size of wildlife sites;
- Enhancing connection by creating new wildlife corridors or stepping stones;
- Creating new sites;
- Reducing pressure on wildlife by improving the wider environment including through buffering wildlife sites.

This means building on work already done to improve our most important sites, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, as well as improving protection and management of those that do not have statutory protection.

It also means planning ecological networks, including areas for restoration, and becoming better at deriving multiple benefits from land-use, for example by natural solutions to flood threats, such as habitat creation, restoration and management.

## References

1. Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hilborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J.,

Tew, T.E., Varley, J., & Wynne, G.R. (2010) *Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network. Report to Defra.*

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>

2. Defra (2011) *The Natural Choice: Securing the value of Nature.*



WOODLAND  
TRUST