The Lawton Report, Five Years On

In the autumn of 2010 the report ‘Making Space for Nature: A review of England’s Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network’ (the Lawton Report) was submitted to the Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The report was chaired by Professor Sir John Lawton CBE FRS and looked to investigate ways of better connecting England’s wildlife to strengthen ecological networks and encourage nature to thrive against the pressures of climate change and increased rural development.

The Lawton Report concluded that isolated nature reserves across England are not sufficient to maintain ecological connectivity because species are unable to move, or adapt quickly enough, in landscapes fragmented by development and intensive agriculture. To reverse the effects of environmental degradation, the Report recommended action at a ‘whole landscape’ level, interconnecting sites of high quality, which are biologically diverse, and to allow species to move between them.

Establishing a coherent and resilient ecological network was identified as being integral to helping wildlife to cope with change, as well as improving the ability of the natural environment to provide for people’s needs. The key tenets of the Report was a call for more ecological networks and for them to become bigger, better and more joined up.

The results of this investigation were fed into the Natural Environment White Paper in 2011, the purpose of which was to make progress towards restoring nature’s systems and capacities and ‘to strengthen connections between people and nature, to the benefit of both’ (Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs).

Although the White Paper committed Government support to protecting and enhancing the environment, the House of Commons Select Committee expressed concerns about how that support might be implemented without proper integration into Government transport and planning departments. In total, the White Paper contained 92 commitments to realise Lawton’s key tenets. However, without an over-arching strategy for delivery and very little information with regard to time-tabling of effective implementation, the Committee found that there was very little evidence to indicate whether targets could be met in the future.

The Lawton Report – Results?

Five years after the publication of Making Space for Nature, and with a different administration in power since May 2015, there is sadly little evidence to suggest political appetite to deliver Lawton’s key tenets. Defra’s last implementation update report (October 2014) noted that ‘Many of the “completed” commitments represent initial steps, albeit important ones, towards these ambitions and we are putting in place important foundations for the future’. Since then, Select Committee’s concern about failure to actively embed the objectives of the White Paper in all development policy, has proved to be prophetic. Despite the evidence behind the White Paper that England’s natural capital is worth billions of pounds to the economy, it is still under growing cumulative pressure from intensive agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and urban sprawl. A substantial volume of relevant policy is in place, but the lack of integration between sectoral policies prevents intelligent implementation.

Capturing the value of the environment

With this in mind, it is important for all parties to make a determined effort to plan for development which is sympathetic to the environment.
At the Landmark Practice we strive to maximise any positive opportunities that arise by encouraging joined up thinking between our ecology, landscape and planning teams, integrating this into our Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) wherever possible. We look to protect and manage areas not under statutory protection wherever possible and to plan to connect wildlife sites to ecological networks, including areas which require restoration.

Simple, low cost and easily delivered examples include:

**Planting Palettes**

By planting flowers rich in nectar and pollen we can help to arrest global decline in bees and other pollinators, to ensure that garden plants continue to reproduce through seed and fruit and vegetable crops successfully set fruit.

**Landscape Management Plans**

Landscape Management Plans establish a routine schedule for site maintenance which help our clients to budget and plan for essential tasks. Establishing regular landscape maintenance routines avoids costly largescale maintenance interventions and protects the site from severe weather, disease and pests.

**Wildlife Corridors**

Wildlife corridors allow for interconnectivity of wildlife populations which are obstructed by human development. Landscape design measures can be used to support the maintenance of ecological processes, often in tandem with amenity and recreation areas, that support movement of animals and maintenance of viable populations.

We actively look to derive multiple benefits from land-use, for example, by using natural solutions to resolve common EIA issues such as flood threats through habitat creation, restoration and management, or by creating biodiversity gain through clever use of landscape planting.

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