Natural Environment Vision

Introduction and Context

This document outlines the vision for the natural environment of Northumberland National Park over the next 20 years. It includes how the landscape and habitats may change over time and what things are likely to remain the same. It includes human interaction and management of the environment but does not aim to cover other linked issues such as social and economic changes and pressures within and outside the National Park. These issues and the way they interact with the natural environment and its management are covered more fully in the Northumberland National Park Management Plan. Sustainable development and management of an area needs to consider these elements together, but this document helps to put some detail and discussion about the natural environment which changes at a different rate to the usual short timescales of forward planning and political cycles. The vision will be used to help focus activities to improve the biodiversity and ecosystem services of the National Park. It will be used to target, plan and deliver habitat improvement, restoration and creation to create a connected and robust National Park fit for the future.
The Vision:
What will Northumberland National Park be like in 2035?

Northumberland National Park will continue to be a moorland dominated upland area founded on its unique and iconic geology managed in the main by human intervention including farmers and those living directly from the land. It will be made up of connected areas in which existing important habitats, such as hay meadows and grasslands, bogs, heather moorland, native broadleaved woodland and rivers and burns, which are able to cope with environmental change. Typical species of these upland habitats will be present in healthy self-sustaining populations. In addition, species that could belong, but currently don’t, may be accepted if they arrive naturally or are appropriately introduced. Some places will be less intensively managed than today and natural processes will help to develop them into different and new habitats. In other places opportunities for large-scale habitat creation or reversion for biodiversity will be embraced. The diverse geology of the National Park will ensure that different areas will retain their local distinctiveness with different habitats and species. The value of the natural environment of Northumberland National Park for all the things it provides for society will be recognised and those services will be protected and enhanced for future generations.
Actions for the future of Northumberland National Park

1. HEALTHY UPLAND HABITATS

There are already many very good quality habitats in Northumberland National Park and the aim is to keep these in good condition into the future; this includes protected areas and other existing areas of good undesignated habitat. The following sections give an indication of the vision for different habitats across the National Park and the management needed to achieve this. These habitats will be maintained not just for their intrinsic value but also for the things they provide for society, which is outlined in Section 5.

- Open Moorland
- Native Woodland
- Water & Wetlands
- Grassland
- Cultivated Land
- Plantation Woodland & Forestry
I. HEALTHY UPLAND HABITATS

Open Moorland

The vision is to retain a mosaic and variety of moorland habitats where the extent of heather cover is maintained and increased in areas where it has been lost through overgrazing, burning and forestry in the past and the quality of peatland sites is maintained and enhanced. These habitats will be managed by farming livestock and game management and will continue to cover the majority of the National Park. Landowners and managers will be encouraged to use sheep and cattle together with burning and cutting to maintain and enhance heathland on wet and dry soils. The aim is to create and maintain a mosaic on the moorlands with varied heath vegetation including species such as ling, cross-leaved heath, bell heather, bilberry, cowberry and crowberry. Burning will be well managed avoiding habitats that are damaged or do not respond well to burning including steep slopes, bracken beds, peat soils, flushes and areas with sensitive species such as nesting birds, rare plants, bryophytes and lichens. This will help retain soils and carbon as well as the species typical of moorland. Small burn mosaics will be encouraged and some areas will not be burnt at all where heather will be allowed to grow long and senesce naturally. All the peatland habitats will have high water tables and be actively growing new peat. Sphagnum mosses will dominate with species such as sundews, bog rosemary, bog asphodel, cotton grasses and cranberry common on wet raised bogs and dwarf shrubs, bryophytes and cloudberry present on higher altitude blanket bog. Drainage ditches will be blocked to retain water and peat, self-seeded conifers will be removed. No deep peat sites will be newly planted or drained. Plantations that are on deep peat and/or high quality blanket bog will be removed and restored to open moorland or restructured to create more diverse habitats. Deep peat habitats will be surrounded by a mosaic of wet and dry heath which will have expanded at the expense of acid grassland areas by grazing management and by interventions such as the addition of seed. Erosion due to recreational pressure will be minimised and proactively managed. Montane heath will be retained on Cheviot summit and may even extend due to changes in grazing regimes. Moorlands will include some areas of scrub in the form of hawthorn, gorse and juniper to add to the variation.
Native Woodland

Existing areas of native woodland will be protected and managed to improve condition, enable regeneration and prevent the spread of disease. Woodlands will be varied and will include dead wood, open space and varied ground flora. Areas of new native woodland will be planted particularly in areas that expand and join up existing fragments, but not at the expense of other important habitats or valuable farmland. The species planted will be those that occur now including oaks, birches, willows, rowan, alder, aspen, hazel, hawthorn and other shrubs. Disease may affect what species can be planted in the future and the development of resistant strains may mean that species that are restricted now (such as juniper, ash and elm) can be planted again. In the main, non-native species such as sycamore and beech will not be encouraged for nature conservation planting, but may be for aesthetic reasons or timber supply. Scots pine will be accepted in low quantities and there may also be planted areas that simulate native pine woodlands and their species mix. Connected and large areas of woodland will be prioritised, together with planting that protects water and soil resources. There will be more woodlands that are over 20 hectares in extent. New native woodland will be planted along the river valleys as well as ascending up hillsides in larger plantings with associated scrub. In many areas (particularly developing woodlands) animals will be excluded, but grazing animals in woodlands and scrub will be considered and used in suitable locations to benefit habitat diversity and to aid natural regeneration.
I. HEALTHY UPLAND HABITATS

Grassland

Enclosed land will continue to be managed for forage for stock with some of these areas being managed for hay with reduced inputs and longer periods without grazing than silage fields. Monitoring will be important to ensure that the desired outcomes for these fields are realised with changes to their management where necessary. Existing high quality meadows will be retained and their species diversity will be maintained and enhanced through suitable management for each site. Areas under this type of traditional management will increase providing more locations for flower species typical of the area including wood cranesbill, yellow rattle, Alchemillas, pignut, clovers, ox-eye daisy, knapweed and eyebright. Fields that are under good management but do not have a wide variety of species will have locally-sourced seed added to increase their floral diversity and nectar resource for insects. Sites will be prioritised that help create a network of grassland sites to maintain and enhance the value of the National Park for pollinators. The value of relatively flat open grasslands for waders will be recognised and maintained, including areas with managed rush and wetland habitats. Other areas that support species-rich grassland such as verges, flushes, whin, calcareous and andesite grassland will be maintained by selective grazing management and cutting. These areas will continue to provide habitat for locally special and more common species such as maiden pink, mountain pansy, chives, hairy stoncrop, thyme, rockrose, scabious, betony, melancholy thistle and water avens. Old grassland sites with undisturbed soil will be protected to maintain their fungal interest including waxcaps.
Water and Wetlands

The high quality of the National Park’s water and wetlands is sustained by good land management. All the rivers and burns in the National Park will be clean and meet the targets for good ecological status. Some will be considered excellent and will represent the best in the country meeting the targets for high ecological status. Populations of species indicating good and excellent condition will be present including salmon, sea trout, freshwater pearl mussel, white-clawed crayfish and water crowfoot. Siltation and pollution will not be major issues and high quality status will be maintained by ensuring land management including stock husbandry and forestry does not affect watercourses. In some places rivers and burns will flow in their natural bank and channel profile and will be allowed to move and change over time. Standing water bodies including the Roman Wall Loughs will have high water quality status and will not be adversely affected by surrounding land management; associated habitats of fen, wet grassland, reedbeds, wet woodland and watercourses will occur in the mosaic with open water. New areas of wetland such as scrapes and ponds will be created.
I. HEALTHY UPLAND HABITATS

Cultivated Land

Cultivated land including arable crops and margins will be present in some areas in the National Park producing food, but also managed to protect soils and provide habitat for farmland birds, plants and invertebrates. These habitats, mainly in the lower areas of the National Park, will form part of the connected landscape with hedgerows and stonewalls and will help link the National Park to areas outside the boundary.
Plantation Woodlands and Forestry

Non-native woodland will also be present in the National Park. There will be economically-viable managed, productive forests and woodland in the National Park, providing woodland products such as timber and woodfuel or shelter for livestock. Management options such as continuous cover forestry and re-siting of unsuitable plantations that will help conserve soil, biodiversity and provide an economic return will be undertaken. Areas will include mixed broadleaved and conifer woodlands as well as conifer plantations and will range from small woodlands managed for local use to larger commercial productive forest. These woodlands and forests will in the main have a mix of species suited to the site to help combat the spread of disease and to provide wood for a variety of uses. New woodland and plantations will not be located in areas at the expense of existing good quality habitats, landscape or archaeology. Existing plantations will be remodelled to provide benefit for the natural environment as well as being productive.
2. A WEALTH OF SPECIES

The vision for the future is to have species typical of the area across the whole of Northumberland National Park including species that should be here but have disappeared due to human or other influences. Populations of rare and important species as well as common ones are maintained and increased so they are self-sustaining. Visitors to the National Park and residents will regularly see and interact with these species. Whilst ecologically sound to create a vision for the natural environment based on habitat networks and connectivity, a more exciting and understandable way to approach the subject for many people will be to explore the presence and importance of individual species; the vision therefore includes some aspirations for iconic and common species:

- Curlew will be widespread and remain in all the current areas so visitors are able to see a curlew in the spring and summer across the National Park.
- Red squirrels are found across the National Park in broadleaved and conifer woodlands.
- A self-sustaining population of black grouse can be found across the National Park linking with populations in the North Pennines and Scotland.
- Otters and migratory fish are found in all river catchments and freshwater pearl mussel and white-clawed crayfish are present in current locations with expanded populations.
- Other more common species such as brown hares, bats, red grouse, roe deer, snipe, lapwing, brown trout, dippers, wild goats, wood cranesbill, bog asphodel and orchids are present and regularly seen.
- Barn owls are breeding in all suitable places in the National Park.
- Moorland and moorland edge birds such as whinchat, ring ouzel, raven, meadow pipit, skylark, lapwing, snipe and grey partridge are widespread across the National Park.
- Birds of prey, including hen harrier, peregrine, and merlin are present in suitable habitat and are not persecuted.
- Invertebrates are plentiful including bumblebees, butterflies and beetles with upland species such as large heath butterfly, mountain bumblebee, moss carder bumblebee and emperor moth common and widespread.

Legal predator control and invasive species management will be carried out as a tool to maintain populations of important species on sporting estates and elsewhere. Opportunities to reintroduce species that have been missing from the National Park (or parts of it) for a long time such as water vole, pine marten, various butterfly species and plants will be explored, but not at the expense of species already here and in line with international guidelines. Supplementation of species that currently have low numbers or limited populations such as hen harrier, black grouse, dwarf birch, dwarf willow and whin grassland will also be considered. Some species - more mobile ones - may move here as climate changes and they will be welcomed.

Action plans will be developed for some species that require specific work beyond habitat improvements.
3. A CONNECTED LANDSCAPE

The vision is not to have islands of good quality habitat surrounded by poor habitat, but to create an extensive habitat network across the landscape of the National Park. This could be achieved by joining up the same habitat type by extending the boundaries of existing sites, or to link different semi-natural habitats to make the National Park more permeable creating functional as well as physical connectivity. Priority habitats can be developed where there are gaps in between existing good quality habitats, but this should not be at the expense of already high quality habitats or those with potential to improve. Creating large areas of connected semi-natural habitat through all these methods will be the ultimate aim. Climate change may alter species distribution over time, but retaining a network of suitable habitats inside and outside the National Park for these species to move and adapt in will be crucial, as well as retaining specific habitats for some.

We will produce an opportunity map to help plan where habitat improvements can be made. This will include different habitats in different parts of the National Park retaining the character of each area. For example, a woodland expansion plan highlighting areas suitable for planting will be developed and is likely to show opportunities for expansion around existing woodlands particularly in the Grasslees Valley with links to the North Tyne and Redesdale. Large new native plantings will be considered in the open areas of Upper Coquetdale. The open landscapes and habitats of Hadrian’s Wall area will be retained. New meadows will be targeted in the vicinity of existing meadows by the addition of native seed and/or plants to achieve a network so no good quality meadows and grassland sites are isolated, allowing transfer of seed and a network for pollinators. River systems will be considered on a catchment basis with the Rede catchment a particular priority in addition to the designated river systems.

The National Park is not an island and just as high quality sites within the National Park should not be isolated, neither should the National Park itself, networks will be far less effective if they only occur inside the National Park boundary and habitats will be more robust if they can extend outside the National Park. The National Park will be linked to the rest of Northumberland and to southern Scotland via river catchments and continuous habitat networks on either side of the boundary. The National Park will also be ecologically linked to other upland areas in northern England and southern Scotland as a wider network of upland habitats is created over a larger scale. The spread of alien invasive species and disease may be facilitated by connectivity, so continued surveillance then rapid response will be necessary when problems arise.
4. DIFFERENT HABITATS AND DIFFERENT MANAGEMENT

Human management will continue to create and maintain some of the habitats in the National Park. The many habitats and species that already exist and are valued are the product of thousands of years of human habitation and manipulation of the landscape and this is unlikely to change in the next 20 years. The vision for the future National Park will however, include using different management regimes to create new habitats in some places. Opportunities to remove stock from some areas allowing vegetation to develop without grazing may be taken up. In these cases the aims of changing management will be identified and monitored to determine if the objectives are being met and unintentional outcomes, such as domination of species, may be managed. Other possibilities for specific habitat creation schemes such as large-scale planting or wetland creation, natural regeneration of woodland or grazing with free-ranging large herbivores will be investigated.
5. A NATIONAL PARK FOR THE NATION’S BENEFIT

Northumberland National Park, together with other upland areas, provides many vital goods and services for society including clean water, carbon storage, resources such as food and timber, recreation, jobs, inspiration and spiritual refreshment. These services, some of which may become even more important as populations grow and pressure on land increases, will be recognised and celebrated by people in and around the National Park and by the region and society as a whole. Work to retain and enhance these functions in the National Park and the wider environment will be valued and supported. Objectives for habitat management should also include maintaining and improving these ecosystem services.
6. CHECKING PROGRESS

It is important to know what habitats and species are present in which locations in the National Park and in what condition and numbers in order to monitor changes over time. There is currently a good understanding of where the main habitat types are and a reasonable estimation of their condition. It will be important to keep this information up to date, focusing particularly on areas where management has changed or where there are restoration or creation projects. It is important to monitor change in rare and common species and a programme should be developed together with other agencies and organisations working with regional and national remits as well as locally. Long term data sets help to gain an accurate picture of habitat or species change as they remove short-term variability from, for example, weather and natural population fluctuations. Every effort will be made to maintain existing datasets and set-up other long-term monitoring regimes.

In order to avoid duplication of effort and to ensure that the most up to date data are available for decision making information should be stored in an accessible manner and location. Local Records Centres fulfil this requirement at present and will be supported in the future.
7. DELIVERING THE VISION

The vision will be delivered in partnership with farmers, landowners and managers and the aspirations will be incorporated into partnership plans and targets. Future Northumberland National Park Management Plans will specifically incorporate the vision aims and contain targets to deliver outcomes.

We will develop habitat action plans for the habitats identified in the vision. Action plans will also be developed for some species that require specific work beyond habitat improvements. Specific actions for monitoring will be identified for each habitat and species.

Controversial topics will be discussed in forums or meetings with the aim of finding a mutually agreed way forward. Topics such as predator control and reintroductions may be examples of such forums.

It is anticipated that a review of the vision, achievements and continued direction will take place in 10 years' time.
Cotton Grass on Bell Crag Flow

(Front cover)
Linhope Spout waterfall, the best ecological river status in England