PRIORITISING THE SCALE OF CONSERVATION APPROACHES IN SCOTLAND

EVENT BRIEF

The British Ecological Society - Scottish Policy Group (BES-SPG) organised an in person *Pie and a Pint* policy roundtable on October 6th 2023 to discuss how to prioritise the scale of conservation approaches required to tackle direct and indirect drivers of biodiversity loss. The workshop operated on Chatham House Rules[1], and this briefing provides a summary of the discussion held during the event. Please note this is not intended to be a literature review or an explanatory guide**: it is a reflection of the discussion held during the workshop.**

Effectiveness of Species-Focused and Ecosystem-Focused Approaches in Addressing Drivers of Biodiversity Loss

Recognising the different benefits of both species and ecosystem approaches will contribute to successful conservation. An ecosystem approach is more effective for addressing climate change and other direct drivers of biodiversity loss. A species-focused approach could be effective at dealing with indirect drivers as it resonates with the public, which could help to change attitudes to nature among other things. [2]

Constructive communication between stakeholders with different views will help build common ground and understanding as to how to combine these two approaches to deliver for nature.

Landscape designations for example National Parks, could play crucial roles as facilitators, convening key stakeholders and acting as hubs for spreading conservation efforts. This could also create a unified voice that will help policy makers, funders and other stakeholders. For example financial support for national park species-focused initiatives could attract funding from the public and ecosystem-focused ones could draw support from government and philanthropists.

Key elements of both species and ecosystem conservation include, data availability, and measuring indicators at different scales, monitoring genetic diversity, population abundance, water quality, connectivity, soil health, and keystone species across trophic levels.

[1] Participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the participants is disclosed.

[2] For more on direct or indirect drivers please see: https://www.ipbes.net/models-drivers-biodiversity-ecosystem-change

Which approach is more effective in the context of climate change?

The ecosystem-focused approach is capable of addressing multiple issues simultaneously, which is essential for adapting to climate change and restoring natural processes. This makes it more resilient and holistic when compared to species-focused approach.

While ecosystem-focused approaches theoretically align better with ecological principles, practical considerations often favour a species-focused strategy, particularly due to funding priorities. Public understanding of concepts like peatlands is often simplistic, which results in a need for "hooks" (species or features that help to engage with the public). The ecosystem approach might be perceived as challenging due to the complexity of communicating with the wider stakeholders such as funders or the public. However, its benefits include encouraging discussions on trade-offs, integration of communities and the potential for working at scale.

Maintaining ecosystem integrity and avoiding shifting baselines will be crucial, and a combined species-ecosystem strategy, acknowledging the advantages of both approaches, may present the most effective approach. The communication challenge lies in conveying the nuances to diverse audiences, ensuring collective understanding and support for comprehensive conservation efforts. This all needs to be considered alongside the challenges of short-term political timescales.

Challenges

Grant limitations are identified as a challenge for conservation management, as are conflicts between different land uses. For example, the tension between wader conservation and woodland creation highlights the challenge in managing conflicting interests, in this case maintaining open ground for waders versus promoting woodland growth. The importance of spatial planning at the landscape scale underscores the need for coordinated efforts to address diverse ecological objectives.

While species-focused approaches might be more manageable at smaller scales, ecosystem-focused initiatives demand broader collaboration and support. Engaging landowners in large-scale management initiatives can be challenging, as it requires effective communication and strategies to secure buy-in. This highlights the importance of building partnerships and addressing shared concerns in landscape-level conservation efforts.

Opportunities

There are case studies that demonstrate a successful blend of ecosystem and species approaches. For example, beavers showcase the potential benefits of integrating species conservation with broader ecological considerations. However, there is a challenge in determining appropriate timescales for case studies. An adaptive management approach that continually monitors and adjusts strategies will be key going forward.

The effectiveness of species-focused or ecosystem-focused approaches in tackling drivers of biodiversity loss are context specific. The key lies in embracing a flexible and adaptive conservation model that harmonises both approaches. A nuanced blend, tailored to specific circumstances and stakeholders, fosters the most effective and sustainable outcomes. Collaboration, transparent communication, and a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between species and ecosystems should be promoted.

Recommendations

1. Prioritise engaging stakeholders by considering what is most relevant to them, and balance this with the most effective outcome. Provide individuals and local communities with opportunities to contribute to conservation. This will enhance a sense of personal connection and responsibility.

2. Utilise species conservation as a gateway to introduce and communicate broader ecosystem considerations. Using charismatic or flagship species or features as focal points makes it easier to draw attention to and generate support for larger-scale ecosystem conservation.

3. Recognise the value of both species-focused and ecosystem-focused approaches, understanding that they are interconnected. The ultimate goal should be the conservation and restoration of ecosystems.

4. Expand the concept of protecting nature beyond protected areas and National Parks. See them as incubators and good examples of communication and partnership that facilitate the spread of biodiversity into surrounding regions.