



GRŴP POLISI CYMRU

CYMDEITHAS ECOLEGOL PRYDAIN

Welsh Policy Group

Newsletter

Issue 1 – June 2022

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BES Policy Groups exist to promote the use of ecological knowledge and support the involvement of ecologists in all levels of policymaking in each of the nations of the UK. They bring together BES members and people working in Welsh environmental policy to highlight and promote how knowledge can aid policymakers' with decision-making.

This is the first issue of our newsletter after the renewal of the group which began in June 2021. Since then we have recruited a new committee, drafted a new Vision and Strategy and are now starting our first set of activities.

Committee

Members represent NRW, CEH, universities, RSBP, ecological consultancy, planning and a community council. We also have regular contact with the Welsh Government. [Profiles of each member can be found on our website.](#)

Vision and Strategy

The Vision of the group is 'Ensuring policy and management in Wales is informed by appropriate ecological information and understanding', and it has set out three Strategic Aims:

1. Provide technical expertise and robust ecological evidence for policy makers and managers and advise how policy and management are impacting on ecological outcomes
2. Achieve a closer working relationship between ecological policy-makers, researchers and professionals
3. Communicate ecological knowledge and its relevance for effective policy and management to the public

The [Vision and Strategy is available online](#) and it sets out the activities we will use to meet these Strategic Aims.

Horizon Scan – We need your help!

What do you think are the big things that will affect the ecology of Wales in the next 10 years? [Tell us your views!](#)

We are currently horizon scanning for 'emerging environmental issues that may affect the ecology of Wales over the next 10 years'. Our goal for this work is to gain a better understanding of emerging environmental issues and policy in Wales, to guide the direction of the WPG's work. We hope to identify areas of uncertainty and gain insight into opportunities and threats to help us plan our resources more effectively.

We are the start of this process, and are using exercises within the WPG to identify and refine key areas. As an initial step in this horizon scanning work, we are inviting you to take part in a STEEPLE exercise. This is used to identify Social, Technological, Environmental, Economic, Political, Legal and Ethical drivers that **may shape the future of Wales' ecology over the next 10 years.** We are particularly interested in things that are novel, have potential to have high impact, or may have unintended consequences for ecology in Wales. [We have created a survey to get your input.](#)

Events

We are planning a policy training event in collaboration with the Vincent Wildlife Trust in September (possibly a hybrid online/in-person event based in Aberystwyth) and we are planning a Caffi Ecology (Pie and a Pint) event in October/November probably in Cardiff.

We will be announcing the opening registration for these events at some point over the summer and they will be fantastic for learning and environmental policy in Wales, and networking with other people with expertise and interest in the field.

Consultations

The WPG responded to two consultations in the first half of 2022.

Future Beacons: The Management Plan for the Brecon Beacons National Park 2022-2027

Over 70 years since the establishment of the first National Park in Wales, Snowdonia in 1951, the potential of these landscapes to contribute to nature preservation and recovery goals is gaining increasing attention. Conservation is part of the mission of protected landscapes, which includes 'conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage' but [they are not currently fulfilling their potential](#).

The [goal of protecting 30% of land in Wales by 2030](#) is much more achievable if protected landscapes, including National Parks and AONBs, are included. If they are, the country has very almost achieved this but if not then it only has 7 ½ years to protect 20% of its land as protected sites, including Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protected Areas, cover around 10%.

Future Beacons

In this context, the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority is finalising its 2022-2027 [management plan](#) and ran a consultation on a draft version that closed in March 2022. This revolves around a vision that 'In 2045 the Brecon Beacons will be ecologically resilient and we will be zero carbon. Our communities will be connected, collaborative and thriving. The culture, landscape and environment of the Park will have brought inspiration and joy to all who live and visit here'. Special Qualities of the Brecon Beacons are stated to be 'Special Landscapes', 'Special People', 'Special Experiences' and 'Special Nature'. Promisingly, nature is part of the first purpose in the management plan, which has the objective 'We will conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park'. The second purpose relates to 'understanding and enjoyment' of the park and the third is to 'foster the economic and social well-being of local communities'.

The BES Welsh Policy Group responded to this consultation, and we outline the main themes of our response here.

WPG response

First of all, we think that the structure of the plan, which shows how the special qualities of the park are being protected and enhance today in order to design policies that will allow the delivery of a vision of the future of the park makes it easily

understandable and possible to implement. The attempt to integrate the three purposes is commendable, and vital for success. However, whilst the document could form the basis of allowing the landscape to contribute to 30x30 and other environmental targets, we believe that it could be improved to deliver the transformative change that the nature and climate crises call for.

Not well aligned with key targets

Page 26 of the plan lays out the national policy context that it sits within. However, we suggest that the goals of the plan could be better aligned with key policies including the Glasgow Climate Pact, UN Sustainable Development Goals and national legislation. For example, The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 places a duty on the National Park to 'seek to maintain **and enhance** biodiversity'. The enhancement and/or recovery of biodiversity should therefore be a key part of the vision.

Greater ambition

National Parks cannot tackle the climate and biodiversity crises alone, but their governance structures provide the potential for them to be key carbon sinks, centres of nature recovery, and demonstrate good practice. In light of this, we believe that the management plan could be more ambitious. As well as enhancing biodiversity, the 'Special Nature' quality is valued in terms of human access, and diversity is not valued in its own right. We would suggest including another Special Quality regarding endemic species such as Ley's Whitebeam *Sorbus leyana*.

There is an emphasis on 'conserving the landscape character'. Successfully pursuing the recovery of nature may change the character of the landscape in some areas, which would conflict with this aim and should be explicitly acknowledged. We believe that the landscape policy should have a stronger emphasis on ecological complexity, biodiversity conservation/restoration and habitat mosaics. The plan is understandably focused on management within the borders of the park but could include more reference to ecological connectivity with other areas, which is a key aspect of ecological resilience.

Implementation

In general, there is very little detail on exactly how nature recovery will be supported in the proposed Future Beacons management plan. The first step in doing this will be to carry out spatial conservation planning which is not mentioned.

The threats to biodiversity that that National Park are best able to tackle come from local activity, including agriculture, development and disturbance. We encourage the emphasis on inclusivity with the local community, and integrating social and environmental objectives. Despite some positives such as the mention of the Sandford Principle and the sections on Green New Deal, Local Food, Rural Skills and Payments for Ecosystem Services, we believe that the plan is missing several key things regarding how to encourage lifestyles, industries and economies that align with nature recovery and decarbonisation targets. For example, there is no mention of mitigating the ecological impacts of industries other than agriculture and tourism.

The inclusion of people

We believe that the key purpose of improving the economic and social well-being of local communities could be better integrated with the first purpose which includes nature conservation. Approaches that give people opportunities to nurture a pro-

environmental self-identity and promote agency have been linked to pro-environmental action in other settings. [Combining governance at varying scales by integrating both top-down and bottom-up approaches is necessary to improve the effectiveness of](#) PAs. There should be a greater focus on co-design in the management plan.

Whilst the BES WPG response to this consultation contains a lot of recommendations and asks for the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, we do not mean for it to be negative. We recognise how difficult it is to draft documents like this, and the huge scope of what it is expected to include. We hope that this response is constructive, and we have strived to use our expertise to suggest how the plan could be improved to help meet goals for nature recovery.

[Ending the retail sale of peat in horticulture in England and Wales](#)

The WPG responded to another consultation in March, this time one from Defra entitled 'Ending the retail sale of peat in horticulture in England and Wales'. This stated that the government aims 'to end the retail sale of peat and peat containing products in England and Wales by the end of this Parliament and by 2028 in the professional horticulture sector'.

In our response, the WPG stated that a target of 2028 does not reflect the urgency of the global climate emergency, nor is it line with the UK and Welsh Governments' commitments to net zero and the prevention of biodiversity loss. Peat extraction and degradation are significant sources of greenhouse gas emissions, damage our more important terrestrial carbon store and remove one of our most important carbon sinks. If, as the IPCC insists, we are to limit global warming to 1.5°C then this carbon must remain locked-up in these ecosystems. Damaging them releases huge amounts of CO₂. We suggested a deadline of 2024 for ending the use of peat in horticulture.

Alternatives to peat-based compost, including horticultural coir, are available and many peat free nurseries are now operating in the UK. Better public information should be used to demonstrate how growing without peat can be successful and why such a ban is a vital part of UK climate policy. Resources such as the IUCN's 'Peat-free Horticulture: Demonstrating Success' report¹ can be used as a basis for public information campaigns.