

## **Launch of Regional Biodiversity Strategy**

Thank you to Yorkshire Wildlife Trust for inviting us all to their wonderful nature reserve here at Potteric Carr to celebrate the region's rich natural environment.

The history of the area around Potteric Carr is many ways symbolic of the story of the natural environment in England. Where we stand today, once formed part of a huge wetland system that stretched for miles around and would have been home to a huge diversity of wildlife. Using records of the great feasts of kings of England we know that storks cranes and bitterns were readily and locally available for the table indicating extensive and productive wetlands.

It shared the fate of the vast majority of our wetlands and was drained in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and was then used for transport, for mining and agriculture.

This story is repeated across the country, leaving only these small and isolated fragments of once spectacular wild landscapes. And today even these remaining vestiges of our once great wetlands are still under threat in places, from excessive water abstraction and pollution, and are poorly placed to meet the future challenges of climate change.

Here at least the wetland is thriving once more and this excellent visitor and education centre offers the people of nearby Doncaster a remarkable opportunity to enjoy and experience Yorkshire's native wildlife including reed bed, woodlands, warblers, waders and waterbirds. Even the bittern has returned.

And like so much in the natural world wetlands are not just an added luxury, or recreational resource. They play an important role in the lives of everyone in this country, whether they are nature lovers or not and whether they realise it or not.

They provide a range of vital public services that are currently undervalued - upland and lowland peats store climate changing carbon; wet meadows and grazing marshes can help manage flood waters naturally; and wet woodlands and reedbeds help improve water quality.

And as we enter a generation, at least, of climate unpredictability the natural environment becomes ever more important.

The people of towns throughout South Yorkshire driven out of their homes by floods in 2007 can testify to that.

### **The Regional Biodiversity Strategy**

We are here today to launch an important document, the region's biodiversity strategy. I hope that this will serve as a master plan for restoring more of this region's rich natural heritage and provide the impetus and inspiration for a step change in the protection of the natural environment in the region, and help provide greater security for people in the region for the impacts of changing climate.

.And I want to recognise the work of the Forum partners involved in producing this document. On their behalf, I thank all of you for your input into the consultation process. But this is just the start.

As we approach the 2010 deadline to halt biodiversity loss agreed by European governments at a summit in Gotenborg way back in 2001 we need to take stock.

The environment sector needs to raise its ambitions — why should we be satisfied with halting the decline? What we should really be aiming for is to reverse losses, to restore lost habitats and bring the natural world back into our towns and cities for people to enjoy and benefit from in their day to day lives.

It is vital that we elevate our sights – we shouldn't content ourselves with stopping the rot, we need to fight for a real renaissance in nature conservation and in the process enrich people's lives.

I am pleased to say that this *is* an ambitious document – with an ambitious vision - which spells out the call for action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

It is the Yorkshire and Humber's contribution to the England biodiversity strategy and UK Action Plan. But to really succeed it is vital that this strategy stands alongside other regional strategies and is incorporated into the integrated regional framework. We must now work together on the actions.

### **State of the environment in Yorkshire and Humber**

Recently, and as the deadline looms, the Environmental Audit Committee published a report on progress towards the 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss. The committee concluded that while some progress has been made, in spite of our efforts biodiversity loss continues apace, particularly outside protected areas.

In the Yorkshire and Humber hard work by a number of partners has delivered considerable improvements in the management of our nationally important SSSIs - there are 384 in the region - from the wetland restoration works in the Humberhead Levels (which we will hear more about later this morning) to hay meadow restoration in the Pennine Dales.

Rare and important habitats like lowland heaths have also been significantly improved thanks to the Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Natural England's agri-environment money.

There is no denying that our protected sites and our habitat and species action plans have been important, but they have not been enough.

We need better integration of biodiversity into all sectors of society – an ecosystem approach -to secure a healthy natural environment.

Quite simply we need to do so much more. The changes to our natural environment that we experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot continue in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Take our farmland for example - today only 3% of our grasslands remain rich in native plants. In the Yorkshire Dales 36% of flower rich grassland was lost in six years in the 80s and 90s.

Wildlife rich chalk grassland, which covered most of the Yorkshire Wolds, is now reduced to only 1.3% of the area. And the effects of drainage and water abstraction for agricultural activities is affecting both lowland wetland landscapes and carbon storing blanket bog in the uplands. A staggering 94% of raised mire in East Riding has been lost to peat abstraction and drainage.

### **What does this mean?**

As our natural wealth is squeezed into ever shrinking green enclaves by pressure on land for agriculture and development, wild spaces like this become ever more important – providing refuges for wildlife and special places for people to enjoy, to get away from the stresses and strains of modern life.

The regional biodiversity strategy has an important role to help safeguard the natural environment from mounting pressures, and to help our natural environment adapt to a changing climate. And if we maintain and restore healthy green spaces, we will secure the wide range of services that the natural environment offers everyone.

The strategy also tackles the decline of the marine environment.

The Marine and Coastal Access Bill, currently on its voyage through Parliament will hopefully provide a strong legal framework for action – offering us to a once in a generation opportunity to put in place of system of protection that will safeguard the wealth of life that lives under our seas. Here in Yorkshire and Humber, Natural England are working to set up a North Sea Marine Protected Area which will establish a coherent network of Marine Protected Areas in the English North Sea by 2012. The project covers an area three times bigger than the Yorkshire and Humber region and nearly 1000km of coast line.

### **The future challenge**

The challenge for the environment sector is to transform the way we talk about the natural environment – we need to show people that it is their natural environment. That is what is so special about places like Potteric Carr on the outskirts of Doncaster, surrounded by motorways and a trainline, a real oasis of nature for local people to enjoy.

We need to do demonstrate the role that our natural environment and the wildlife it supports play in boosting people's health and show how it helps them lead happier lives.

Ultimately we will only win the fight if we are able to show people how the natural environment makes a real difference to their lives.

And we need to get on with it.

### **Economic contribution**

The natural environment also has a huge economic role to play in the region. Studies have demonstrated that thousands of jobs depend directly on the quality of the environment. It makes a significant contribution to the region's economy and helps attract millions of visitors from both the UK and around the world.

There are already some excellent initiatives combining nature conservation and local economic development like the Dearne Valley Green Heart project where a partnership of the RSPB, Environment Agency and Natural England is working for an improved landscape near Barnsley. The RSPB has boosted the local economy with an award winning visitor centre, restaurant and shop. Several thousand school children have already benefited from the initiative.

I hope that the Humberhead Levels Partnership proposals, which we will be hearing about later this morning, where plans are afoot to develop a visitor centre, education facilities and cafe adjacent to England's largest raised bog complex, will provide a similar boon to the local economy.

### **The danger of relying too much on a strategy**

The strategy process has achieved a great deal and there is a lot to be proud of, but when all is said and done it is just a piece of paper.

We need action to follow.

Under the UKBAP, there are 436 UK Species and Habitats Action plans containing over 6300 actions, with a mind-boggling 38 000 additional actions in local plans. Many of these have never been carried out.

The UK BAP list review resulted in an increase in the number of priority habitats from 45 to 65 and an increase in species from 577 to 1149.

We have been successful then in identifying the biodiversity that is at risk – the B in BAP, and in the vast majority of cases we are good at the P, the planning, the process.

But we are still not so quick with the A, the action. One of the aspects of the recently launched England Biodiversity Framework, which supports this

Regional Strategy, and that I am therefore personally most committed to is the greater accountability for action that it will bring.

I wanted to talk about some of the contributions Natural England will make to delivering its aims.

Our largest financial contribution will inevitably come through Environmental Stewardship. The increases in species richness in arable fields revealed by Countryside Survey 2007 demonstrate that these agreements can deliver gains for wildlife in our farmed habitats, though it is important to note that this survey preceded the recent loss of set-aside. We have worked with many of you and the organisations that you represent to develop targeting maps for the Higher Level Scheme. So that we can get the right schemes in the right places, sending money where it will buy most environmental gain.

These maps aren't the end of the process – they are just the beginning. We will need your local knowledge and expertise to help identify those places most in need of support.

But we are also contributing knowledge, skills and time of our staff in taking leadership for the environment. We are working with partners at national and local levels to develop more truly landscape scale projects. You may have heard about the Great Fen – we want more of these ambitious schemes that deliver for biodiversity and for people, through providing the ecosystem services upon which we depend. Through the Wetland Vision work, regional priorities for wetland creation within the Yorkshire and Humber have already been identified and over the coming year we will be identifying landscape-scale projects across the regions.

As a broad conservation partnership we need to do our part by coordinating our efforts much better and actively seeking the new partnerships and better engagement that we know we need.

Today is an important step towards that, and I look forward to hearing more from other speakers and from the rest of you in our ongoing discussions about how we can succeed.