



The one-hundred-and-fourth meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee to be held at 0915 hours on 8 September 2015, Natural Resources Wales, Ty Cambria, Cambria House, 29 Newport Road, Cardiff, CF24 0TP

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Joint Nature Conservation Committee

JNCC's work on standards and advice

Paper by Paul Rose, Jessa Battersby, Richard Ferris, Vin Fleming, Jane Hawkrige, Diana Mortimer, Mark Tasker and Tony Weighell

1. JNCC's current role

1.1. JNCC's standards and advice work builds consensus and finds solutions when there is a benefit from cross-border working across the countries of the UK. A degree of shared approach and commonality is often required to meet a shared obligation or need:

- because of compelling economies of scale;
- to reduce significant risks caused by divergence;
- because it makes delivery partnerships less complicated; or
- to achieve greater ecological coherence.

1.2. JNCC provides a forum for the four UK countries to work together to produce scientifically robust standards and methods. JNCC's independence and overview of nature conservation policy and practices at all geographic scales is unique and places it in a very good position to undertake UK standards and advice functions on behalf of the country conservation bodies.

1.3. The principal functions that JNCC undertakes are:

- Assessment* to interpret and communicate evidence in a format and manner that informs environmental management and reporting;
- Reporting* to meet obligations in European directives and multilateral environmental agreements;
- Technical standards* (guidelines, common standards, methods and principles) that assist devolution by providing cross-border coordination or consistency;
- Development and application of *new science and technology*;
- Technical *advice* to on global, European and UK matters where a joined-up UK position is needed;
- Operational delivery* of functions where it is cost-effective or otherwise beneficial for JNCC to undertake the role.

1.4. These functions are described in more detail in Annex 1.

2. The strategic context

2.1. JNCC's work on cross-border standards and advice is incorporated within three objectives in the draft strategy:

- facilitate joint working to deliver shared solutions in a devolved United Kingdom;

- ii. play a lead role in applying science and technology to meet new challenges and opportunities;
 - iii. advise on sustainable use of natural resources.
- 2.2. JNCC's draft strategy is built around the recognition of four major challenges and opportunities that face nature conservation in the UK. All of these are relevant to JNCC's work to provide standards and advice.
- 2.2.1. Devolution of nature conservation started with the break-up of the Nature Conservancy Council and the creation of JNCC in 1990. Since this time, common approaches, standards and cross-border advice have been core JNCC functions, and continue to evolve to reflect the specific requirements of each country in the most efficient and least prescriptive way. The challenge of increasing devolution requires further evolution and review of the way JNCC has traditionally delivered standards and advice but the importance and value of the work might even be heightened as the level of divergence between countries inevitably increases.
 - 2.2.2. New knowledge and technology provide an opportunity for JNCC to improve the effectiveness and uptake of the tools, guidelines, principles, approaches and other products it provides to facilitate cross-border working, and to adjust these to reflect higher levels of devolution. Some of these revisions might also reduce costs of implementation (largely costs for the country conservation bodies) and development. For example, technology might provide cheaper solutions to coordination, sharing and communication tasks. Citizen science developments and social media are good examples of new developments that JNCC could incorporate more into its solutions.
 - 2.2.3. It is unlikely that savings achieved through use of new technology will be timely enough or large enough to fully meet the challenge of budgetary pressures but they could be a useful contribution. Cost savings derived from application of new science and technology are potentially large but typically need initial investment before being applied widely. Collective investment by the conservation bodies and possibly others is often the most efficient means of realising these longer term benefits.
 - 2.2.4. JNCC's standards and advice will need to consider the increasing recognition within government and elsewhere of the value of the natural environment alongside more traditional nature conservation activities. This might mean considering entirely new types of guidelines and standards, for example relating to natural capital.

3. The future

- 3.1. There is a heavy timetable of standards products being produced over the next few years (Annex 2). Much of the work is quite dated (15-25 years old), there are very pressing needs for country bodies to reduce the costs of implementing the guidance and standards, and there is a lot of new technology and evidence that was not available when the standards and guidelines were originally developed. Increasing devolution also poses

questions for the standards and ideally requires a more flexible approach that manages the risks of divergence without being too prescriptive.

- 3.2. In parallel with implementing this work programme, a priority over the next 2-3 years will be to align JNCC's standards and advice role with the new strategy and ensure that it is providing maximum benefit to the four countries of the UK. This will require JNCC to:
- i. identify the portfolio of existing products used to facilitate cross-border cooperation and assess them against current and emerging requirements;
 - ii. be fully aware of the benefits countries expect to gain from cross-border working and keep these at the heart of the solutions developed. This will require JNCC to be highly cognisant of country priorities, policies and budgetary pressures;
 - iii. ensure that levels of consistency and standardisation are appropriate to achieve the economies of scale, risk mitigation and benefit sharing required by countries, while retaining flexibility for countries to implement solutions in their own way;
 - iv. wherever possible, develop solutions that can be aggregated and disaggregated. This supports working at all geographic scales and is particularly relevant for evidence products and for reporting. JNCC already has considerable experience in this way of working;
 - v. build on existing work in the countries, as the starting point for shared solutions and best practice;
 - vi. identify potential beneficiaries of the work (beyond the country conservation bodies) at the outset;
 - vii. ensure there is a clear justification for any differences in approach between the terrestrial and marine environments, and standardise approaches if appropriate;
 - viii. assess JNCC's future role in providing standards and advice in relation to natural capital (see paper for the September Committee meeting);
 - ix. engage the country conservation bodies in advising on priorities and approaches for EU and international obligations;
 - x. review products to ensure that new science and technology is incorporated. Identify where there may be benefits in JNCC playing a lead role in developing new scientific thinking;
 - xi. prioritise rigorously to make the most of available resources. Seek opportunities for cost savings and to secure new sources of funding (through making standards and advice are applicable to a wider customer base).
- 3.3. Successful implementation of the work described above will require:
- i. good engagement with the country conservation bodies;

- ii. clear strategic direction;
 - iii. a systematic process for ensuring appropriate sign-off of key outputs.
- 3.4. The Joint Committee and the inter-agency Chief Scientists Group will have crucial roles to play in this respect, working closely with JNCC staff.

Annex 1. JNCC functions relating to standards and advice

Assessment

Assessment is the interpretation and communication of monitoring, research and knowledge in a format and manner necessary to inform environmental management. The same outputs can also be used as a basis for reporting. Indicators are often used as a means of presenting the information simply.

Marine assessment is a clearly demarcated function within JNCC's work. Marine assessments are undertaken to meet the requirements of international obligations, EU directives and national legislation. Assessments also provide advice on the status of protected habitats and species, the effects of human activities on the environment, and the implementation of management measures both in protected areas and the wider environment. JNCC coordinates and undertakes, where appropriate, marine biodiversity assessments and reporting for national reports, for example to meet the requirements of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Habitats Directive and OSPAR Convention. Assessments of offshore features are also undertaken. Being involved (at different levels) in all major marine assessments and other coordination activities gives JNCC a strong and unique overview of potential areas for streamlining and potential pitfalls in future work. This overview also makes JNCC an ideal organisation to coordinate and undertake marine assessments for the UK.

JNCC has no terrestrial operational delivery role, as this resides with the country conservation bodies. Consequently the terrestrial assessment function is subsumed within JNCC's evidence functions on the one hand and reporting functions on the other. The much greater volume of evidence terrestrially also makes the assessment function different to the marine equivalent. The long-term objective is for data to be made accessible and analytical tools developed to allow assessments of the state of the terrestrial environment to be made by whoever needs them. JNCC would undertake assessments itself when these are needed for reporting, indicator development or to fulfil specific advisory roles. State of nature reporting is increasingly becoming both a country-led process and an NGO-led process to which JNCC contributes evidence.

International assessment and associated indicator development is carried out by international groups of experts, some of which JNCC leads (e.g. in OSPAR). International groups and committees set standards and perform evidence quality assurance.

Reporting

Reporting is undertaken to meet the obligations in European directives and multilateral environmental agreements. JNCC coordinates and undertakes the collation of results that are predominantly provided by country bodies. Sometimes it is appropriate for JNCC to provide the content of the reports, for example when the information is organised and collected at a UK scale (e.g. for mobile or widespread species), when there are compelling economies of scale such as regional seas reports (e.g. for OSPAR), or where data are collected by volunteers and it is more cost-effective to manage data collection at UK level. However, most reporting exercises benefit from having content provided at a country level as this can provide a higher resolution of information (i.e. locally relevant) and ensures best use of the available evidence.

Technical standards

When countries require a degree of cross-border coordination or consistency, devolution can often be assisted through the development of a variety of products that JNCC has

traditionally referred to as standards. These include shared guidelines, common standards, methods or principles and even very simple things such as the sharing of best practice. Levels of prescription can be varied to achieve the desired levels of consistency. Where a fully consistent UK approach is required JNCC will often lead work, but always with significant input from all countries. It is much more common for JNCC to develop approaches that are flexible and give each country as much freedom as possible in implementation.

JNCC maintains a number of high profile, longstanding sets of guidelines that have underpinned UK nature conservation for more than 25 years. These are:

- i. guidelines for the selection of SSSIs, which are currently undergoing a major review;
- ii. guidance for the monitoring of protected areas which are regularly updated and are currently scheduled for major review in the near future;
- iii. lists of species and habitats that are part of GB wildlife legislation and need to be reviewed according to their legal requirements for update, e.g. five-yearly reviews of schedules 5 and 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 that deal with threatened plants and animals, and periodic review of schedule 9 of the Act that lists non-native species.

All of these pieces of work help to apply science and evidence in a consistent and justifiable manner to meet nature conservation legislation and policy priorities. Other smaller pieces of work can be just as important and are undertaken when needed. The completion of Standard Data Forms for Natura sites, designated to meet the conditions of the Habitats Directive, is one such task that benefits from JNCC coordination and the level of consistency that it brings to work in each country. The guidelines for industry to minimise disturbance to marine mammals from seismic activity are another example that are world-renowned and have been widely copied/adapted.

Scientific methods are also developed to improve efficiency, exploit new evidence and take advantage of innovation. It is often cost-effective to develop these methods once before divergent evolution and application in the different countries of the UK. Examples include the development of methods for improved marine biodiversity assessments, and rapid assessment of the possible biodiversity impacts of ash dieback.

Indicators are developed to assist assessment, reporting and the communication of headline messages from research, monitoring and recording of natural resources. They are a technical standard for bridging the gap between the science and its communication in a consistent, transparent, repeatable and justifiable manner. JNCC develops indicators for use within the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and UK indicators for reporting against the global 2020 biodiversity targets (Aichi targets).

Applying new science and technology

For big new issues of nature conservation importance, exchange of views between the statutory conservation bodies and input from experts is often a beneficial first step before the issue is considered operationally. JNCC is well placed to convene and lead this work when the issues are European or global in nature or particularly related to one of JNCC's key strengths. Horizon scanning to identify emerging issues could also be a part of the function but JNCC does little in this regard at present.

JNCC has convened discussion on the changing role of protected areas in nature conservation as a pilot to try and shape the nature of the science leadership role and to

identify where it can add most value. JNCC was in a good position to lead this discussion given our independence from implementation, at least terrestrially, and our ability to step back and take an objective UK overview.

JNCC has also worked with SNH to look at Scotland's potential impact on biodiversity overseas by analysing the flows and origin of biomass (food, timber, biofuels etc) imported into the Scottish economy. This was an international issue that benefited from specialist expertise within JNCC. The work also developed a technical standard for assessing the footprint of biomass imports.

Advice

Governments need technical advice to defend and promote policy lines in European and global negotiations. Technical advice is also needed on domestic policy issues. JNCC provides advice on international and some European issues where a joined-up UK position is essential and on domestic policy issues that have clear UK-scale components (for example, air pollution and dealing with UK-scale legal obligations).

JNCC provides advice to Defra and others to engage with, and support implementation of, multilateral environmental agreements, European directives and regional agreements. JNCC typically leads for the UK at EU and international scientific meetings. The work is done by a small core of staff that draws on a wider range of expertise within JNCC and the country conservation bodies. Increasing devolution requires stronger input of country positions.

Delivery functions

In a few cases JNCC has a UK-wide operational delivery role. This includes advising on the granting of import and export licences as UK CITES Scientific Authority (Fauna) which benefits enormously from JNCC's wider technical knowledge of CITES. Other pieces of work include bird licensing and the coordination of cold weather shooting bans.

Annex 2. Planned work on standards and advice

1. Guidelines for the selection of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, part II chapters (two of 20 chapters have already been signed off by Committee)
2. Common Standards Monitoring of protected areas (currently comprising 18 chapters)
3. Amendments to Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (non-native species)
4. Quinquennial Review of Schedules 5 and 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (protected plants and animals)
5. Assessment techniques for offshore marine protected areas
6. Indicators (UK biodiversity indicators published annually and new indicators developed regularly)
7. Species Red Lists – ongoing quality assurance by JNCC
8. Classifications, e.g. updating the definitions of marine habitats
9. UK reports for EU directives (Habitats, Birds and Marine Strategy Framework Directives) and multilateral environmental agreements (e.g. Convention on Biological Diversity, Convention on Migratory Species)
10. Coordination of Standard Data Forms for European Natura Sites
11. Completion of the terrestrial SPA review
12. Assessment of the sufficiency of marine SPAs (including the development of methods)
13. Revision of guidelines for marine industry (e.g. seismic guidelines and piling and explosives guidelines)