

# Foreword

Our understanding of our natural environment and how it underpins our wellbeing and prosperity is growing all of the time. However our natural world is both magnificent and complex and there is a great deal that we still do not know or fully understand about it.

Natural England was established in October 2006 as an independent expert body to advise on the natural environment. We are committed to ensuring that our advice is based on the best available evidence and knowledge.

This *State of the Natural Environment 2008* Report, brings together for the first time the evidence we have about the current state of our natural environment. By integrating this evidence and presenting it in this way we are able to ensure that both Natural England and other organisations have evidence at their fingertips, that can inform policies, priorities and decisions which may affect the natural environment.

The Report covers the natural environment, by which we mean our landscapes, flora and fauna, freshwater and marine environments, geology and soils. The Report therefore complements reports of other organisations such as the Environment Agency covering other environmental issues such as water and air quality.

In compiling the Report over the past 12 months we have not commissioned new evidence to fill gaps in our knowledge. Rather, we have presented and analysed existing data in new ways which we hope will be informative and useful. In putting this Report together we have, however, been able to see the gaps in our knowledge more clearly, which will help both Natural England and others to shape priorities for future research.

The Report has been compiled by a team of Natural England's specialist staff with input from a wide range of stakeholders. A number of specialist organisations maintain excellent data on particular aspects of the natural environment and we are particularly grateful to these organisations for their input and contributions.

The Report demonstrates that the natural environment in England is much less rich than 50 years ago and remains under pressure from a significant range of threats. It illustrates the impact of those threats on our landscapes and biodiversity.

Although we are broadly maintaining the character of England's landscapes, with only 20% showing signs of neglect, nevertheless within our landscapes there are significant problems. For instance, lack of woodland management is causing a 50% decline of our native woodland butterflies – the wood is still there but the butterflies aren't.

Other habitats are also deteriorating – only 3% of our grasslands remain rich in native plants, and declines in wetland quality have led to losses such as the virtual extinction (90% decline) of breeding snipe from lowland England outside nature reserves. We are seeing signs of stress from climate change, both on the coast, where habitats are being squeezed between our sea walls and the rising sea (25% saltmarsh loss from the south east of England), and on land, with a range of species moving northwards and upwards.

However, where we target action we can make a difference. The long-term decline in many of our farmland birds is slowing thanks to more environmentally friendly farming. The overall condition of our most important wildlife sites (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) has improved dramatically in the last 10 years. Species such as the red kite are recolonising their former range after successful reintroductions, and heathland birds such as nightjars and woodlarks are increasing thanks to better management of our heathland.

Finally, there are more opportunities for people to enjoy the natural environment, and there is growing evidence of the benefits for people from increasing access to and engagement with the natural environment.

This report provides a baseline against which future progress can be measured and importantly draws attention to areas that are in urgent need of action.

Thank you to all of the contributors to the Report and we look forward to your feedback and suggestions for the next edition.



Sir Martin Doughty  
Chair

Dr Helen Phillips  
Chief Executive