

Wetland Biodiversity Integration Group Meeting

**Venue: Large Blue Butterfly Room
Northminster House
Natural England Offices,
Peterborough**

**Date: Tuesday 20th January 2009
Time: 10:30– 15:45 hours**

Minutes

Present:

Alastair Burn (AB) NE-Chair
Iain Diack (ID) NE
Andy Brown (ABr) NE
Andy Williams (AW) DEFRA
Margaret Street (MS) NE
David Robinson (DR) EH
Megan Ellershaw (ME) NE
Catherine Weightman (CW) NE
Dawn Isaac (DI) Pond Conservation
Martin Fuller (MF) EA
Carrie Hume (CH) WWT and Wildlife Link

Apologies:

Paul Wilkinson on behalf of The Wildlife Trusts
Anne Skinner -EA
Rob Cunningham - RSPB
Amanda Wright NE - on maternity leave
Vanessa Straker - EH

1. The minutes of the previous meeting were confirmed as an accurate record of that meeting.

The only item that needed further mention is the DEFRA Peat Reduction Target (90% reduction on use of peat for horticultural purposes by 2010). This target is being re-evaluated by DEFRA, with interim milestones to be set, to see what is being achieved by the HAPs and SAPs.

Roger Meade (consultant) is to undertake a short study looking at the likely benefits for biodiversity of a 90% reduction on use of peat for horticultural purposes by 2010.

There will be 2 elements in the study:

- i) The link to the England BAP
- ii) The wider consequences for biodiversity of peat extraction in a global and European context.

The completed report is due at the end of April 2009.

English Heritage will have a major interest in this project. The next meeting of the NE Peatlands Strategy (of which this target is a part) will be in March 2009.

2. Discussion of composition of membership of the Wetland BIG Group

It was recognised that several organisations are not represented on the BIG – e.g. CLA, NFU, Internal Drainage Boards.

Agreed BIG would benefit also from further technical wetland specialist input, including wider species coverage.

It was agreed that a small subgroup would be formed to look at group membership and which work with Pete Brotherton over the next two months.

The subgroup will be chaired by AB with ID and CW as group members. The subgroup will look at future membership of the Wetland BIG and at groups that are not currently represented. It may not be necessary to for all members to attend every meeting.

Action Point 1: AB to set up membership subgroup with ID and CW

Action: AB

New BIG posts – 3 or 4 new posts are currently being recruited to assist with BIGs at national, regional and local level. The posts will cover all the regions and BIGs between them.

3. Detailed work programme for the BIG (AB)

AB circulated a draft outline of the work programme, based on the requirements of the England Biodiversity Strategy.

Three main areas in work plan:

- i) Communication
- ii) Research and Information
- iii) Guiding and Assisting Delivery.

3.1.Ensure good community of practice in each region

3.1.1 National liaison

The presence of communities of practice for wetlands and levels of activity vary between regions, as do the activities of LBAPs

Two types of group are proposed:

- i) NE Group
- ii) Wider Group – will be the responsibility of the new BIG posts

There is a recognised need for better dissemination of information and communication, with regard to freshwater habitats, between national, regional and local levels.

Focussing work where it is needed requires two-way communication between BIG and regions.

3.1.2 Communicate policy requirements to EBG

There is a need to communicate policy requirements to EBG. Agreed BIG will be an important mechanism for feeding back on policy blockages for resolution by EBG, but this was considered a less urgent priority for the BIG work programme at present.

3.1.3 National liaison The relationship between the EBG and the Wetland BIG and between wetland and the other BIGs needs to be formalised. Agreed the links to freshwater and agricultural groups are of key importance to the wetland BIG.

Action Point 2: National liaison to be undertaken by AB assisted by new BIG posts. **Action: AB**

3.1.4 Dissemination of advice locally

Agreed that the development and maintenance of a website, possibly as part of the UKBAP website is essential and a priority for the BIG. Currently the UKBAP website is under review

Action Point 3: ME to enquire about possibility of placing Wetland BIG website within UKBAP website. **Action: ME**

A Wetland BIG website would need to:

- i) Explain who the Wetland BIG is
- ii) Explain what the Wetland BIG does
- iii) Showcase links to other websites
- iv) Act as a forum

Getting Wetter for Wildlife – originally written by Roger Meade for LBAPs etc
Agreed this document would benefit from being fully reviewed and updated.

Action Point 4: MF to re-circulate current draft version to the group for fuller discussion at next meeting **Action: MF**

A paper on Reporting Responsibilities is currently being drafted by NE biodiversity team.
Action Point: AB to follow up progress and update the group.

3.2 Research and Information

There is a need to identify the research blockages to the progress of BIG work.

4 main areas were proposed for research:

3.2.1 Understanding landscape scale requirements

There is a need to increase understanding of landscape-scale schemes. How important are habitat links – what are the best types of linkages and best designs for both species and habitats? What factors are the most important to enable movement of wetland BAP spp across a landscape (having determined that this is desirable) e.g. plant communities or structure, water quality?

3.2.2 Wetland HAP management requirements

We need to identify gaps in understanding of habitat management for creation / restoration of wetlands, and have a role to play in ensuring research is undertaken

3.2.3 Integrating species work

The scope of species work needs to be decided - should species work be on a very fine scale that is wetland-related or should we look at big gains e.g. birds and select priority species?

3.2.4 Inventory work

Agreed that the current inventories need to be updated as a priority.

Much information such as the Wetland Framework either already exists or is soon to be published. Such information needs to be disseminated and used to address blockages to practice.

Group agreed that the outline programme for the group should encompass::

- i) Review of progress against current BAP targets
- ii) Incorporate new areas e.g. landscape scale work
- iii) Identify where the key research gaps are at present

Action point 5: ID and AB to scope current situation and further refine priorities, (excluding species, for which the current plans are all new) and develop this aspect of the work programme for the next meeting.

Action: AB and ID

3.3 .Guiding and assisting delivery

3.3.1 Setting regional targets

A paper by Gavin Measures divided new habitat targets amongst regions, who fed back to GM.

At an EBG meeting in December, Pete Brotherton reported that David Henshilwood had agreed the targets for the regions – this needs to be clarified (action AB).

Action point 6: AB to clarify that targets for regions have been agreed

Action: AB

The current BAP targets as reported against in the 2008 reporting round may no longer be relevant or may have already been exceeded in some regions.

The BIG group does not know how the aggregated regional targets have been arrived at and it was reported that some regions are insufficiently aware of what their priorities are or where to target their efforts.

There is a need to align regional priorities with landscape projects and tactical planning. There is a need also to understand decide how the targets have been set and the criteria they are based on.

The group agreed that the current disaggregated regional targets need to be reviewed.

Action Point 7: AB and ID to determine next steps with CW Action: AB and ID

3.3.2 Ensuring local delivery

There is a blockage in relationship between local and national BAPs in terms of resources and time

Agreed we need to better understand the role of the BIG in terms of local accountability and seek stronger direction on this from NE national BAP team

3.3.3 Funding programmes

Agreed development of a coherent coordinated funding programme for wetlands is an area of work where the BIG needs to develop and promote good practice; it links to the Wetland Vision and landscape-scale work.

Action Point 8 : AB to amend draft work programme, in the light of the group's discussion and will also indicate priorities and set timescales.

Action: AB

4. Landscape scale schemes (AB)

Four major areas have been identified by the wetland Vision steering group for developing further as landscape scale wetland mosaics (and for targeting NE wetland vision funds) for this financial year;

1. East Anglian fens (as a whole)
2. Humberhead Levels
3. Cumbria to Lancs coastal arc
4. Midlands Meres and Mosses

The project in the East Anglian fens is working with the IDB, National Trust, Environment Agency, WWT, RPSB and the Wildlife Trusts. The Environment Agency are planning to interact with this project at local level. Other schemes were described by AB in outline.

The four landscape schemes and the criteria for determining projects and schemes as laid out in the section of landscape scale schemes using Natural England's wetland vision funding were agreed by the group.

Action Point 9: AB to discuss involvement of the EA and other wetland vision partners, both with this project and with the other landscape scale proposals with Alastair Driver

Action: AB

5. Presentation by Rob Cathcart on Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) and Wetland Conservation

The work of the IDBs is being reviewed with a new structure based on a sub-catchment basis (and the aim of having fewer better funded IDBs) by 2013.

The IDBs have a target of producing BAPs by 2010, including actions for the wider environment and outside designated areas. Outcome measures for IDB BAPs have been set by the DEFRA Flood Management Division.

Guidance has been produced for the production of the IDB BAPs by DEFRA and is available on their website. The Drainage Channel Biodiversity Manual was launched in September 2008

Actions required by LBAPs:

- i) There is a need to help the IDBs understand how they can contribute to the wetland biodiversity targets and how the species and habitat work they undertake can contribute to national targets.
- ii) The BIG should engage with the IDBs and encourage them to be pro-active in biodiversity conservation.
- iii) A representative of the IDBs should be invited to attend the BIG –they could be useful advocates in terms of working with farmers.

Action Point 10: AB investigate IDB involvement in BIG. CW to discuss further with Rob Cathcart, the role of regional and local BAP groups in helping IDB progress against their outcome measures **Action: AB and CW**

6. Reflection on Wetland HAP 2008 Reporting and Wetland inventories (ID)

In the 2008 Reporting Round, England had provided the most substantial data of the four countries but it was by no means complete. Many targets were exceeded in terms of area. There was very little information on condition and a number of biological indicators are still declining e.g. breeding waders, grazing marsh ditch species.

In summary:

For wetland habitats:

Fens are still declining, with 70% of habitats in unfavourable condition.

Lowland raised bogs are stable.

Reedbeds – the major issue is habitat loss in coastal areas

The following actions were identified as priorities:

- i) There is a need for improved monitoring.
- ii) There remain substantial issues in terms of non-statutory sites and site boundaries.
- iii) There is an urgent need to address the failure to maintain hydrological integrity.
- iv) There is a clear need for an accurate inventory – at present there is no baseline

Additional data sources were discussed:

1. The 2010 target for reedbeds and the Breeding Waders Survey may provide some good quality information.

2. Regional Coordinators are now bidding for funding for inventories – in North-East and Yorkshire and Humberside. The East of England region has already got the money.

Both (1) and (2) could be used as additional data sources for the inventory but the regional projects (2) above) are only desk studies. Collation of data is a first step and the second will be a ground survey.

The group agreed that along with its role in driving forward the four landscape scale schemes, ensuring development of an accurate, reliable wetland inventory was a key priority for the work programme

Action Point 11: ID asked the group to consider what is required in terms of inventory work and also in terms of data on habitat quality. Also requested were views on constraints and how we take this forward for future reporting rounds.

Action: ALL

7. Species Actions

7.1 Overview of requirements and progress to date

ID summarised the Wetland BIG Species Integration Report by Jon Webb (November 2008) Three key attributes are identified, in terms of species requirements for wetland habitats.

- i) Water quality
- ii) Structural diversity
- iii) Water levels

Gavin Measures and Alan Drewitt will tidy up the report into a publishable form for the BAP community but there remains a lack of clarity with regard to how this will be taken forward.

7. 2 Linking Species and Habitats

ABr described the work by the Bird Expert Group to assign new Bird BAP actions to BIGs

59 priority species have been identified, each with up to 6 actions each.

11 species have been allocated to the Wetland BIG including black-tailed godwit, lapwing, bittern, Bewicks swan, grasshopper warbler, white-fronted goose and starling.

The group was reminded that, there is an intention by the England biodiversity Forum for taxon-based groupings to run alongside BIGs.

The BIG endorsed the approach taken by the Bird Expert Group as appropriate for wetland bird spp, and recommended that its feasibility for other spp be considered by other taxon expert groups.

Action Point 12: ABr will put together some information on species implementation for birds.

Action: ABr

Other taxa – currently the actions are not attributed to a species group but to individual species. The BIG agreed the need to better understand how the Wetland BIG should be linked to delivery for these species and provide support for groups who are already undertaking implementation. Some actions may require money, some monitoring and others the endorsement of the EBG.

Therefore the Wetland BIG needs to:

- i) Understand what other species groups have done/are doing
- ii) Use paper by ABr, when complete, to make recommendations to NE BAP team for consideration of its application to other groups relevant to wetlands
- iii) Pull together species information that is currently available
- iv) Define our approach to species for EBS – currently the focus is very ornithological

Action Point 13: ABr to draw out plan of action and circulate with short paper, initially for comment by AB and subsequently for input from the group

Action: ABr and ALL

6. Buglife Grazing Marsh Ditches project (MF)

Martin Fuller gave a brief PowerPoint presentation about this project and referred to a number of future projects that are likely to follow on from this.

Action Point 14: AB to speak to Stewart Clarke, who is on the project steering group, regarding the project and future proposals

Action: AB

7. Any Other Business

There was a brief discussion about the role of the Water Framework Directive in relation to achieving wetland BAP targets and how the planning process will work. This is currently unclear and it was agreed that this should be a brief item (led by Ann Skinner (EA)) for the next meeting.

ABr gave a brief presentation entitled 'Boom and Bust' based on a paper to be published shortly in 'British Wildlife'.

The meeting closed at 15:45 hours.