

Natural Greenspaces in Towns and Cities

Scope of this policy

This SWT policy covers the quantity, quality and use of natural greenspaces in parks and public open space including community woodlands, Local Nature Reserves, local Wildlife Sites, wildlife corridors, ponds, rivers, canals and wetlands, Neighbourhood Nature Areas, Green Wedges, and other natural greenspace areas not recognised by designation.

Natural Greenspace is defined by SWT as “space associated with human settlements where wildlife can flourish”. Human Town and City settlements are defined as those with a human population of more than 3000.

Policy Headline

Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that people in urban settlements in Scotland should have access to a network of high quality natural greenspaces, that are no more than 300 metres from residence or workplace.

Background

Many parts of towns and cities are extremely valuable for wildlife in their own right. They often contain species or habitats which are nationally or locally rare. For example, the once common water vole has shown a decline in recent years and has received protection through the Wildlife and Countryside Act in recognition of loss and destruction of habitat in recent decades. SWT field research in Glasgow has shown the value of urban greenspaces to the water vole and the importance of appropriate land management for people and wildlife alike.

Peatbogs are a declining habitat, yet both blanket and raised bogs have managed to survive within the urban settlements of Scotland. This habitat supports rare species such as Bog Rosemary and offers a valuable insight to nature conservation for settlements fortunate enough to experience the insectivorous plants which are indigenous to the habitat of the local area. Peat bogs also act as carbon sinks.

The "urban jungle" of concrete and tarmac can have a very harsh environment - often suffering from extreme conditions of temperature, drought pollution and flooding. A healthy natural component in urban areas helps to reduce these extremes, giving a much more pleasant environment for people to live in.

Contact with the natural world in day to day life helps to relieve stress and adds to the intangible "quality of life". The wildlife of our towns and cities is often the only first-hand experience that people have of the natural world.

There is now much direct evidence of the health benefits for urban dwellers able to access natural

greenspace during their everyday lives. Research [e.g. in 2] has shown that: within 20 minutes of going into a quality greenspace, stress levels and toxins are reduced substantially, blood pressure and heart rate are reduced, and also stress level tension in the muscles is reduced. There is growing evidence that environmental quality is linked to social behaviour (known as the 'Biophilia effect'), which suggests that close contact with nature on a regular or even casual basis reduces stress, anxiety and aggression.

Independent research has shown that that people randomly assigned to a nature walk feel happier than walking for the same period of time in a safe urban area or reading magazines or listening to music.

When people were asked to name the settings they sought when they feel depressed or stressed, 75% cited outdoor places with natural views, Greenspace makes us happy.

One hectare of urban park, with trees, shrubs and grass, can remove 600kg of carbon dioxide from the air in a 12 hour period [5].

Greenspaces in heavily built up areas can absorb sources of pollution such as trapping airborne dust particles; lessen building-enhanced wind speeds; hold water run-off and act as heat sinks. Everyday contact with wildlife and natural open space is particularly important for children - either for informal exploration and play, or for formal environmental education - using urban greenspace as an outdoor classroom.

Despite their huge potential as a resource for both wildlife and people, urban greenspaces rich in wildlife are constantly being damaged by development, inappropriate management, or simple neglect.

The UK Strategy for Sustainable Development, published in response to the Rio Earth Summit held in 1992, drew particular attention to urban environmental initiatives as a key part of achieving sustainable development in the UK. All local authorities in the UK were obliged to produce local sustainable development strategies (under the title "Local Agenda 21") by 1996, with urban nature conservation a major part of these strategies.

Since that time, greenspace has enjoyed a higher profile in environmental and planning policy, with the recognition of environmental justice and sustainable development by the new Scottish Parliament, the formation of Greenspace Scotland, the recognition of greenspace targets in Biodiversity Action Plans and the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, and the development of the Open Space PAN by the Scottish Executive. In particular, the concept of environmental justice lies at the heart of greenspace.

Greenspace Scotland describes it as follows:

"The environment begins at people's doorsteps. Communities define themselves and others define communities by the condition of their environment. The desirability of housing, job prospects and even people's opportunities to obtain credit can often be determined by the appearance of the local environment.

"Too many of Scotland's urban communities are scarred by the lack of care and attention given to the environment. Houses built on greenfield sites with no thought given to landscaping, derelict land left to blight an area, burnt out cars left to rust and litter left blowing in the wind. For the regeneration of local communities to succeed resources have to be directed at the local environment as well as at local housing and job creation.

Greenspace Scotland website, 2003

Despite a much greater awareness of the importance of urban wildlife and urban greenspace, there is a strong need to ensure that these areas are retained and enhanced for people and wildlife alike. Changes in housing patterns and the resulting infrastructure will radically change our landscape in the foreseeable future; it is important to ensure adequate provision of natural

greenspaces before valuable areas are destroyed. Through prosperity, housing need and infrastructure changes and planning policies, the natural greenspace areas of Scottish settlements have never before been under such a threat of replacement of green jungle with concrete jungle.

Issues of greenspace and crime must be approached positively. Accessible natural greenspaces can be designed to avoid potentially threatening circumstances or dangerous areas in an urban context. Moreover, security planting (spiny native species, etc) can be used in strategic locations for dissuasion / protection whilst benefiting the natural heritage.

New natural greenspaces can be designed, and existing ones managed, in a way that minimises public perceptions of untidiness (e.g. mowing of narrow verges). However, nonetheless, such areas can catch litter, but this is a human problem and not an ecological one. Any space in the urban context needs to be managed; public involvement and ownership of these spaces is what makes natural greenspace a success and overcomes such problems.

Policy Statement

1. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that every person living in an urban area in Scotland should have easy pedestrian access to at least one local area of green space which is intentionally managed to allow people to experience nature at first hand.
2. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that every Scottish urban area should have a network of natural greenspace which is:
 - actively protected from damaging development and harmful neglect;
 - positively managed to enhance its value for both people and wildlife;
 - used as a framework around which to create new urban wildlife habitats and expand the network;
 - promoted as part of a published open space or nature conservation strategy.

This network should ensure that no person should live more than 300m from their nearest area of natural greenspace¹. In addition, where available in the urban environment, SWT believes that there should be at least an accessible 20ha site within 2km from a person's home; there should be one accessible 100ha site within 5km and there should be one accessible 500 ha site within 10km².

The natural greenspace areas need to be accessible not just in terms of physical constraints but taking into account social and cultural factors as well.

These figures are benchmark aspirational targets that local authorities should be encouraged to work towards as local standards to ensure both environmental and social justice with regards accessible natural greenspace and the biodiversity gains of having such a network in accordance with Local Biodiversity Action Plans and the need to have monitorable targets to help measure progress. The 300m target is probably achievable in most urban areas of Scotland, where it is desired by and with the active involvement of local communities, and can stem from forthcoming Local Authority Open Space Strategies and reviews [3]. The hierarchy of larger sites may only be achievable where the resources currently exist and are managed as such.

¹ This figure is based on a calculated straight-line equivalent to 400m actual walking distance taking into account such factors as safe home ranges for children and major road 'barriers'.

² These figures are proposed as a hierarchy of standards based on research by English Nature in 1995 [1] and confirmed by a recent review [2].

3. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that urban natural greenspace should be managed to at least minimum environmental standards by:
 - avoiding the use of harmful chemicals and other environmentally damaging products and avoiding the use of horticultural peat through use of peat alternatives;
 - scheduling work and employing management techniques which minimise direct damage and disturbance to wildlife.
4. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that the wildlife value of all urban greenspaces should be enhanced by appropriate habitat creation and active management. Retention of wildlife areas should be sought before new habitat creation schemes are promoted. Public gardening and landscaping projects should be designed and carried out with nature conservation in mind from the start.
5. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that design and management of greenspace areas should work with, not against, natural processes: e.g. natural plant succession. A general principle should be to 'make visible the processes that sustain life'. Locally appropriate native species should always be used in new plantings. It is particularly important to consider natural processes with hydrology: use of natural hydrology can enhance wildlife habitat as well as control storm flows at peak loads.
6. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that urban greenspaces should be managed, promoted and used as an environmental resource for education and informal recreation - wherever possible promoting a sense of community participation and "ownership". Quality greenspace has an important role to play in urban renewal / regeneration and social inclusion. The wildlife value of private and communally owned gardens, and their links to wider public greenspace, should also be recognised within the community.
7. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that greenspace forming wildlife corridors should be intentionally managed to increase the ecological resilience of urban plant and animal communities by allowing wildlife to move through the city (although this must be combined with invasive species management where necessary). Wildlife corridors and other greenspace should link in with landscape and aesthetic elements and routes for cyclists and pedestrians, forming multi-purpose networks.
8. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that as plant successions on 'wasteland', including temporary vacant land, or 'unmanaged greenspace', can contain rare or threatened species and support unusual faunal assemblages (e.g. burrowing Hymenoptera), any major development on a brownfield site should be preceded by an environmental assessment which assesses the biodiversity value of the site and recommends mitigating measures. Temporary greenspace sites can make a significant contribution to the accessible natural greenspace network in urban areas and this needs to be recognised.
9. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that greenspace components within the urban fabric should also be recognised and maximised for biodiversity: for example, street trees, roof gardens and bird boxes. New development design guidelines from local authorities should include planning for biodiversity in the greenspace areas around the buildings, and this can include biodiversity elements within or upon the built surfaces themselves [4].
10. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that urban greenspaces which are of particular importance for wildlife, amenity or environmental education should receive particular official recognition, attention and protection as either Local Nature Reserves, urban Wildlife Sites or as sites of nature conservation importance in local authority strategies. Links should be made with local Biodiversity Action Plan priorities wherever possible.

11. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that urban and greenspace biodiversity deserves a high profile within the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, which has a specifically Urban component. Related actions in this Strategy require well-funded and well-coordinated implementation throughout the various functions of public bodies in Scotland.

SWT Priorities for Action

12. One of SWT's central aims has always been to promote the conservation of wildlife for the benefit of people. As most people spend most of their lives in an urban environment, SWT's commitment to conserving wildlife for people has brought us increasingly into urban nature conservation. SWT works closely with other members of the Scottish Greenspace Forum (previously the Scottish Urban Wildlife Partnership), Greenspace Scotland and SNH, and with other similar interests throughout the UK.
13. The importance of urban greenspace is reflected in Scottish Wildlife Trust's Corporate Strategy, and a number of actions have been identified to further our work in this important area, through wider countryside work, policy and campaigns.
14. There are also important links to other areas of the Corporate Strategy, particularly **Wildlife Reserves**. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that centres of Urban Wildlife excellence at Cumbernauld, Jupiter and Irvine offer a unique opportunity to retain and enhance area for wildlife and people and will continue to work with the communities in these areas to fulfil this aim.

Cross-reference to other related SWT policies

15. This policy should be read in conjunction with the following SWT policies:
 - Access to Wildlife Reserves
 - Wildlife Sites
 - Peat

References

16. English Nature (1995) Accessible natural greenspace in towns and cities: A review of appropriate size and distance criteria. Research Report No 153.
17. English Nature (2003) Accessible natural greenspace in towns and cities: a review and toolkit. English Nature Research Reports no. 526. Example health benefit reference within: ULRICH, R.S., SIMONS, R.F., LOSITO, B.D., FIORITO, E., MILES, M.A. & ZELSON, M., 1991. Stress recovery during exposure to natural and urban environments. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 11: 201-230.
18. Scottish Executive (2003) Planning and open space. Planning Advice Note 65.
19. English Nature (2003) Green Roofs: their existing status and potential for conserving biodiversity in urban areas. English Nature Research Report no. 498.
20. Evidence to the 20th Report of the House of Commons Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs – 'Town and Country Parks' 1999, quoting Landscape Design, February 1994.

Policy approved by Council

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