

National Nature Reserve Selection Criteria and Standards

Background

At their meeting in August 2012, the SNH Board agreed a vision to steer the future development of the National Nature Reserve (NNR) accolade based on three clear principles:

- The national accolade of National Nature Reserve will be applied to land and water of acknowledged significance for nature that is being managed to agreed high standards for nature and the enjoyment of nature. Nature on these reserves will be of national importance and the sites will be managed primarily for nature in the long term and for people to enjoy nature.
- National Nature Reserves will be run by a range of public, private, community and voluntary organisations; and the accolade will be managed by a partnership representing these organisations.
- This partnership will agree selection and review criteria, and set high and demanding management standards expected of a national accolade.

Principles

The first of these principles sets a clear steer as to what a nature reserve or site must be before it can be considered as a candidate to receive the NNR accolade, i.e. nationally important. This has traditionally meant that a site has to be recognised as an area of importance by its designation either as a Site of Special Scientific Interest or as an area of European importance (Special Protection Area or Special Area of Conservation). However a designation in itself is not enough. NNRs are seen as the flagships of Scotland's nature reserves and therefore they must not only be good examples of their type they must have attributes that make them special. These other attributes are difficult to define but if you are at Beinn Eighe, or Insh Marshes or Taynish then you know you are somewhere special. This is often referred to as the "wow" factor: not objective, but a good litmus test of the standard that NNRs should aspire to.

It is recognised that the designation system does not necessarily include all areas that are of high nature conservation value and it was felt that further consideration should be given to the inclusion of high quality non-designated areas as NNRs. This is developed further below.

If the second part of the first principle is considered (enjoyment of nature) it can be seen that not all designated sites are suitable. To be eligible, sites must be large enough, and robust enough in parts, to provide opportunities for public engagement. Conversely sites that are not likely to be eligible are those that are too small, too remote, too delicate, or too specialised in nature to allow them to be promoted as places for people to visit. Examples could include Claish Moss in Lochaber which is

both remote and difficult to access, or Keen of Hamar on Shetland which supports rare and unusual plants that are mainly of interest to a specialist audience.

NNRs must be good places for demonstrating the value and importance of natural features and for inspiring the public. Ideally an NNR will provide access to all for at least part of the site and will offer something to everyone so that people can experience and engage with the reserve. For some sites, such as off-shore seabird colonies, this will be a challenge and innovative ways of allowing engagement will be necessary. This can be at a general level of developing an understanding of what the reserve is for and what they can see or at a more hands on level such as taking part in general reserve activities.

Other factors were also considered such as continuity and representativeness. Long term continuity of management is important and in most people's interest but in reality this can rarely be guaranteed. Therefore although this is a desirable characteristic of an NNR it is not a defining criterion.

At a broad level of habitat classification the only current gap in the NNR suite is machair. However it has been decided that the Partnership should initially be allowed to develop without reference to representativeness but it is something that could be revisited at some time in the future. The same applies to geographical spread. Although this applies at the Partnership level it is recognised that this may be a factor that is considered by individual Partners when proposing sites for NNR status.

NNR Status and Undesignated Land

It is expected that the majority (a very significant majority) of NNRs will in fact be part of, or contain at their core, a designated area.

It would be unacceptable if undesignated sites were subject to lower or markedly different selection criteria to those of designated sites. To be eligible for the NNR accolade they must demonstrate and support the broad principles set out above, and the selection process must ensure that the natural heritage value of undesignated sites meets or exceeds the required level. Furthermore, there will be a need to demonstrate clearly that all of the principles above, and selection criteria below, are met including a full justification of why it is considered to be nationally important.

Selection Criteria

The selection process for NNRs will inevitably involve a degree of subjectivity although reference to the factors above will help to reduce the level of subjectivity. This should be viewed as an advantage rather than the converse because one of the primary objectives of NNRs is to encourage and facilitate the engagement and enjoyment of the general public with nature.

In summary to be considered for the NNR accolade a site will

1. Be nationally important¹ for one or preferably a range of natural features
2. Be very well managed to ensure the continuity and, where necessary, the enhancement of these features in the long term.
3. Be suitable for presentation or demonstration of these features in an appropriate way to the public.
4. Be likely to inspire people to value and enjoy Scotland's natural environment.

These criteria will be assessed in conjunction with the ability of the site to deliver the standards that must be achieved by each NNR, i.e. be very well managed for nature, have a clear framework for reaching visitors, and involving people.

Decision process

Sites that are proposed for consideration as NNRs will be assessed against the criteria above by a panel consisting of a subset of the NNR Partnership. This panel will not only ensure that the site is suitable to achieve the high standards that an NNR must achieve but also that there is a demonstrable commitment to manage the natural heritage features to a high standard and to provide a high level of visitor experience. This will be done by consideration of the site against the criteria above as well as how the site managers propose to meet the standards set out below.

¹ Nationally important is defined as a site designated under the Nature Conservation Act, a Natura site or considered to be one of the best sites of its type in Scotland

NNR Standards

1. Be very well managed for nature

Management Plan

All sites seeking the NNR accolade need a comprehensive management plan, based on knowledge of the features present and an understanding of their management needs. Management plans should be sufficiently detailed to set SMART objectives, describe measurable targets and contain the following elements:

Statement of Significance

The plan needs to demonstrate an understanding of the natural features present on the NNR and contain a statement of their significance. While it is never possible to acquire complete information on all aspects of a site's natural features, there should be surveys and inventories of the major components. This not only ensures that their management needs can be described but also that management for one feature does not unnecessarily damage another. In practice, levels of knowledge increase over time as more comprehensive surveys and research are carried out. The significance should be reviewed as knowledge and understanding increase.

Management Objectives

The overall management objectives will be set out, identifying how they will contribute to the conservation of the significant features of the reserve and, where there are conflicts, which objectives have priority. The default assumption should be that all significant natural features should be conserved, irrespective of whether they are designated features. Although NNRs may have a range of different types of objective, including socio-economic ones, it must be clear that long-term conservation of the natural features is of primary importance.

Management Actions

A series of management actions designed to achieve the Objectives should be identified. These require a good understanding of the threats to the significant features and their management needs, and of the constraints especially regarding visitor provision and public use. The precautionary approach should be applied, so that damage to significant features can be avoided. The actions must be realistically able to be delivered with the resources that are likely to be available, but they should also be positive and include opportunities for enhancement and for aspirational projects.

Surveillance and Monitoring

The plan should identify the surveillance and monitoring that must be carried out in order to determine whether the objectives are being achieved. Minimum or maximum parameters should be identified that will trigger a change in management actions. Monitoring should be prioritised depending on the degree of threat and level of management intervention.

Review

Management plans should be reviewed at regular intervals to ensure that the objectives are being met and that they remain valid in the light of changing circumstances and increasing knowledge.

It is self-evident that management actions must be carried out as set out in the Management Plan or as modified as a result of review and adequate resources must be provided in order to carry out the essential actions.

NNRs can provide excellent opportunities for scientific study and research both because they are home to rare and important natural features but also because they are subject to consistent and well documented management. Research on NNRs should be encouraged where there will be benefit to site management. Some research may not be of direct benefit to the site but is nevertheless important and should also be allowed where possible. In all cases the impacts of research on the important features and visitor enjoyment must be considered.

2. Have a clear framework for reaching visitors

Visitor Strategy

All sites seeking the NNR accolade need a clear framework for visitor management which shows how all of the essential elements will be delivered. It should identify audiences, describe the special qualities of the site, and demonstrate how key messages will be delivered by ensuring that the appropriate medium is used in the right places without compromising the nature conservation interest of the site. The lasting impressions of any NNR with which visitors should be left may be grouped into three categories:

Accessible

At the “visit planning” stage information providing the location and directions to the Reserve, is readily available via the internet and from printed material. Road and or footpath signage, appropriate to the size of the NNR, make travelling to the NNR a straightforward experience. The more remote the site and complicated the route/journey to it, then the more comprehensive the guidance & signage. There is adequate car parking (commensurate with anticipated visitor numbers) within the NNR or within a reasonable distance. The features within the NNR, (particularly those that contribute most to its “specialness”) are appropriately accessible.

Welcoming

Arrival at the main access point to an NNR is obvious and easily recognisable. The design and layout of car parking and the start of any path is clear and un-confusing. Signage clearly identifies it as an NNR and includes information about the NNR. Information encourages and reassures visitors of all the areas of the site that can be accessed and explored and what is appropriate for people of differing abilities.

Enjoyable/Informative

The information provided to visitors throughout the process (from planning a visit to, and subsequent enjoyment of the NNR) is consistent and accurate and therefore experience matches expectation. Enjoyment is enhanced by the provision of a combination of information that explains what can be seen (and where and when), what might be seen, and by suggestions of ways to explore and discover as an individual or in groups.

3. Involving people

This goes beyond the engagement with visitors and considers the benefits to communities through engagement at all levels. NNRs do not sit in isolation and have a proven record of providing significant socio-economic benefits at the local level. It is important to recognise this and to promote and support initiatives that provide a wide range of benefits. Unlike the first two standards no specific plan is required but before seeking the NNR accolade managers should be able to demonstrate, through a statement of intent that at least the first two elements below are in place. They are also strongly encouraged to demonstrate how the remaining elements have been considered and, ideally, will be achieved.

Ability to contact site managers

The appropriate people responsible for site management should be identified and their contact details made available to the public and local communities in order to facilitate communication about the site.

Management planning

The development of natural heritage and visitor management plans should be an open process that provides opportunities for people and communities to enter into a dialogue about site management and express an opinion on the plans. Site managers should be able to demonstrate how they have taken account of these views and provide feedback to those people and communities involved and how this will continue into the future.

Promote and provide volunteer opportunities

NNRs can offer excellent opportunities for learning, skills development and volunteering: consideration should be given to how these can be developed.

Look for opportunities to integrate with the local economy

Support services and goods should be sourced locally whenever possible. This will not only benefit the local economy and develop links with other suppliers but may help reduce the carbon footprint for the site.

It is anticipated that one of the successful outcomes of the Partnership will be NNRs managed by individuals or groups who are not Statutory Bodies or NGOs. It is therefore likely that the aspirations of these groups will vary but nevertheless they still need to demonstrate that they will meet the standards set out above.