

# Title: Next steps for Scotland’s National Nature Reserves

**Date: 23 August 2023**

| **Purpose:** | Decision |
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| **How does this link with our corporate priorities of improving biodiversity or delivering nature-based solutions to climate change:** | Scotland’s 43 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) contribute to nearly all of our corporate plan objectives to protect, restore and value nature and to deliver action on climate change. The 29 NNRs that we own and/or manage also bring with them specific responsibilities for people and nature as a land manager and employer. |
| **Summary:** | Scotland’s NNRs make an exciting and largely under recognised contribution across a range of our corporate plan objectives. The new SBS and Delivery Plan place further emphasis on the role that NNRs can play as catalysts for habitat restoration, as building blocks for nature networks and for thinking about new National Parks. Building on recent examples, we see great potential for further exploring the contribution of NNRs to landscape scale working and, with the NNR partnership of management bodies, have refreshed the vision and objectives for NNRs to help deliver this. |
| **Recommendations:** | Board are asked to:   1. discuss and provide a strategic steer on the  * future direction and key opportunities for NNRs set out in this paper; * how we can strengthen and increase joint working by the Partnership; * opportunities and barriers for realising the potential of our own NNRs.  1. agree to  * retain decision making on declaration of new NNRs or de-declaration of existing ones; and * delegate decision making on changes to boundaries of existing NNR to the PAC and lead Director. |
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| **Appendices**: | Appendix 1 – Extract from ToR for the NNR partnership  Appendix 2 – Contribution of NNRs to the corporate plan  Appendix 3 – Current process for NNR declarations and making changes to boundaries of existing NNRs |

## Purpose

1. This paper has been prepared to provide an update on the strategic direction for Scotland’s National Nature Reserves (NNR). It explores the future role of Scotland’s NNRs and how, as part of this, NatureScot can show leadership by using its own NNRs to deliver more for nature and people. It also proposes changes to the current procedural arrangements for Board involvement in NNR declarations and boundary changes.

## Background

1. NNRs are an accolade designation, internationally recognised as some of the best sites for experiencing nature and protecting some of a nation’s most important wildlife and landscapes. In Scotland, NNRs are declared by NatureScot and the majority of the land within them is underpinned by national and international designations. Land declared as NNRs is under permanent or long-term management for nature. In addition, NNRs also have a range of high-quality visitor facilities designed, promoted and managed to ensure that people can actively experience and learn more about nature on NNRs without harming or disturbing the wildlife that lives there.
2. Scotland currently has 43 NNRs, covering 154,250 hectares or 2% of Scotland’s land – see [the Scotland's NNRs website for a map.](https://www.nnr.scot/index.php/Search_by_Map) Of the 43 NNRs, 35 are managed by an individual organisation and eight are jointly managed by one or more partners. NatureScot currently owns and/or manages 29 NNRs, with other managers including the National Trust for Scotland (8), Forestry and Land Scotland (5), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (5), Scottish Wildlife Trust (1), Woodland Trust (1), South Lanarkshire Council (1), Private estate (1) and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority (1). Like NatureScot, most of these bodies also own and manage other land as nature reserves. In order to work more effectively across these organisations and attract others to seek NNR status, we set up and chair the NNR partnership of the organisations who own and manage Scotland’s NNRs.
3. Circa 2 million visits are made each year to NNRs, though most of these are focused on relatively few NNRs – Glen Coe, Loch Lomond, Loch Leven, the Great Trossachs Forest, Clyde Valley Woodlands and St Cyrus. Several NNRs have faced increased visitor pressures[[1]](#footnote-1) in recent years requiring a much stronger focus on visitor management including improvements to facilities and additional staff resource, drawing down additional significant funding from Scottish Government including the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund, the Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund and the Better Places Fund.
4. Despite these challenges, the public perception of NNRs remains broadly positive, with national survey data from 2022 indicating the following findings:

## A positive vision for Scotland’s NNRs

1. The new Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and forthcoming implementation will place new emphasis on the role that all NNRs can play as catalysts for habitat restoration, as building blocks for 30x30, nature networks and for thinking about new National Parks. Building on the examples of landscape scale working focused on NNRs within Cairngorms Connect, the Great Trossachs Forest, the Wester Ross Partnership and Glen Affric, there is great potential for further developing the contribution of NNRs as a whole to:

* A range of **species recovery work** (e.g. Species on the Edge; nesting tern populations; beaver releases; action for capercaillie; seabirds colonies and avian flu; INNS work at the catchment level etc);
* **Nature restoration at landscape scale**, including
  + native woodland expansion including restoration of the Scottish rainforest and the rewilding of Southern Scotland;
  + peatland restoration across our land holding and water management to alleviate flood risk;
  + coastal habitat restoration at Tentsmuir and the Solway;
* **Connecting new audiences to nature** and promoting key messages about the climate and nature emergencies;
* Developing and promoting the **best practice and skills** needed to manage nature in a changing climate; and
* The practical development and implement of frameworks for **ecosystem and biodiversity credits and blue carbon**.

1. To realise this positive vision for NNRs for both nature and people, we have been working with the NNR partnership to refresh the vision and objectives for NNRs around three key pillars - **the very best of Scotland’s nature; inspiring gateways to nature connection; and key building blocks for a nature positive Scotland -** see Appendix 1. A shared work plan has also been developed, including the following actions:

* Identifying opportunities for extensions to existing NNRs and the scope to develop new ones to support habitat and species restoration
* Using NNRs proactively to develop landscape scale working partnerships
* Reviewing opportunities for private sector funding by mapping key elements of the NNR “offer”
* Developing a more strategic approach to developing the role and profile of NNRs for demonstration and research
* Assessing the implications of climate change for future management of NNRs
* Developing a common approach to visitor management measures on NNRs
* Developing and implementing outreach and inclusion strategies for our NNRs

1. While the emphasis of this paper is on National Nature Reserves, similar approaches will be relevant to all of Scotland’s circa 350 nature reserves, including those owned and managed by NatureScot, eNGOs, local authorities, communities and private landowners and we are keen to explore this further through the Partnership.

## Next Steps for NatureScot’s NNRs

1. The corporate plan provides a positive vision for our NNRs in keeping with this strategic direction.

*We want our 29 National Nature Reserves to be great examples of the future we want to see. These will be places where nature is protected, restoration advanced, networked across Scotland with communities valuing the importance of these special places. National Nature Reserves, and other special places, are the best places to increase climate nature knowledge and build lifelong connections with nature.*

1. While allocated to the “inspiring people” corporate plan objective, our NNRs make an exciting and largely under recognised contribution of different scales across a range of corporate objectives to protect and restore nature – see Appendix 2.
2. In 23/24, NatureScot has circa 40 FTE staff deployed on NNR planning and management and is investing some £1.8 million (revenue and capital) on their upkeep and improvement, including circa £200k of income. These are historically low figures and have required us to make some difficult decisions over on the number of NNRs we own and manage. In recent years, we have sold Glencripesdale to RSPB Scotland and Dunnet Head to the Dunnet Forestry Trust (Community Asset Transfer) and have actively explored transferring others to local communities to manage them. Following the community transfer to the community trust in 2010, we have also sold land on Rum for a new schoolhouse.
3. We are actively considering ways to unlock new sources of private finance to invest in our NNRs, and the recent award registration of our first carbon credit for the peatland restoration work at Ben Wyvis is a first step in this direction. Visitor generated income (including voluntary donations, charges for car parks and sales of venison) also has a growing role to play. We also need to continue to make the most of existing opportunities for external funding for both nature and visitor management.
4. We have a significant review of how we manage our NNRs underway in order to make sure we have identified the staff and project resourcing we will need over the corporate plan period and also to release some capacity for the work we need to undertake to deliver the strategic direction for NNRs set out above. As part of this, we also need to do more to recognise the potential of NNRs for helping to deliver across our corporate plan objectives.

## New NNRs

1. NTS are looking to declare their landholding at Torridon as NNR. They already own and manage land within Beinn Eighe NNR and their wider landholding is contiguous with this reserve and brings an extensive area for woodland restoration and upland habitat management together. NTS are actively considering NNR status for other sites.
2. The Wildfowl and Wetland Trust have expressed interest in joining the NNR partnership and extending Caerlaverock NNR to include their land. This is an exciting opportunity to extend the NNR into new areas focusing on coastal restoration, biodiversity gain and work more collaboratively on nature and people. It will enhance the overall visitor experience.
3. The current process for declaring new NNRs and making changes to existing ones is outlined in Appendix 3. As agreed in 2014, the Board currently has a formal role both in the declaration of new NNRs and de-declaration and boundary changes for existing ones. To make best use of the Board’s time and strategic role, we recommend that the Board retains its role for declarations of new NNRs and de-declaration of existing ones, but delegates decision making on boundary changes of existing NNRs to the PAC, who in turn may wish to delegate minor boundary procedural changes to the lead Director.

## Conclusions/Recommendations

1. This is an exciting time in the evolution of our approach to NNRs and we welcome the Board’s ideas in developing their contribution to our mission to protect, restore and value nature further.
2. The Board are asked to:
3. Discuss and provide a strategic steer on the

* Future direction and key opportunities for NNRs set out in this paper;
* How we can strengthen and increase joint working by the Partnership;
* Opportunities and barriers for realising the potential of our own NNRs.

1. Agree to

* Retain decision making on declaration of new NNRs or de-declaration of existing ones; and
* Delegate decision making on changes to boundaries of existing NNR to the PAC and lead Director.

### **Appendix 1 – Extract from the Refreshed ToR for the NNR Partnership**

### **Aims**

The **NNR partnership** will work to ensure that the suite is managed and promoted as:

* showcasing the very best of Scotland’s nature;
* inspiring gateways for connecting people with nature; and
* key building blocks for a nature positive Scotland.

### **Objectives**

The Partners will deliver these aims in collaboration under the following themes.

**Being the very best of Scotland’s nature**

* Championing the NNR accolade and raising awareness of its importance with policy makers and the public.
* Maintaining the credibility of the accolade through policy development, guidance and the development and demonstration of best practice.
* Supporting existing and new managers of NNRs and inspiring others to seek NNR status.
* Securing new sources of public and private sector funding.

**Inspiring gateways to nature connection**

* Encouraging greater diversity in the people visiting NNRs to ensure everyone has the opportunity to experience these special places.
* Developing the potential of NNRs as the shop windows for increasing climate and nature literacy and positive action by the public.
* Developing national approaches to engaging people and local communities in learning, volunteering and science on NNRs.

**Key building blocks for a nature positive Scotland**

* Strengthening the contribution of NNRs to the vision and outcomes of the new Scottish Biodiversity strategy to protect nature by 2030 and restore it by 2045.
* Increasing the contribution of NNRs to nature restoration at the landscape scale by identifying opportunities for expansion of existing NNRs or the designation of new ones that can contribute to 30x30, Nature Networks and new National Parks.
* Adapting the planning and management of NNRs in response to the impacts of climate change on nature.

As well as managing bodies, other members of the partnership include SL&E and Community Land Scotland and in time we hope to extend NNR management to some of these members. Given their engagement in the management of NNRs, we have also recently extended membership of the partnership to include both National Parks.

### **Appendix 2 - Contribution of NNRs to corporate plan objectives**

| Delivery Plan | Contribution of NNRs | Selected Examples |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. 30x 30 | * New NNRs/extension to existing NNRs * Contribution to new National Parks | * Potential extension to Caerlaverock NNR with the Wildlife and Wetland Trust joining the NNR Partnership * Proposed Torridon NNR from the National Trust for Scotland. |
| 1. Deer and other wildlife management | * Best practice * Demonstration * Knowledge and learning | * Demonstration and training events for land managers, tertiary education and eNGO staff at Creag Meagaidh NNR covering all aspects of deer management. * Site visits with land managers to upland NNRs to explore habitat restoration and deer management * Working in partnership with Forestry Land Scotland (FLS) and others to deliver qualifications for externals, staff, volunteers, and placements. |
| 1. Planning | * Best practice * Demonstration * Knowledge and learning | * Sensitive development of renewable energy at several of NNRs |
| 1. Marine Management | * Exploring the potential of blue carbon investment in NNRs and NRs on the Solway |
| 1. SBS and 2. Nature Restoration (Fund) | * Landscape-scale working * Best practice – habitat and species management; climate adaptation * Demonstration – habitat restoration; species reintroduction * Knowledge and learning | * Building blocks in Cairngorms Connect, the Wester Ross Partnership and Scottish Rainforest Alliance working to deliver large scale habitat restoration of native woodland. * Loch Leven catchment scale works to improve water quality and work collaboratively to reduce phosphorus loading. * Restoration of wetlands and removal of Invasive Non-native Species to improve diversity at Loch Lomond, Loch Leven. * Management of coastal habitats at Tentsmuir, Forvie and St Cyrus to improve diversity. * Active management for terns at Forvie and Isle of May using different approaches to improve productivity. * Management of habitats for rare invertebrate species. * NRF funding awarded to NTS and WWT for Glen Coe and Caerlaverock respectively |
| 1. Peatland Action | * Best practice – peatland management, carbon credits etc * Demonstration – peatland restoration * Knowledge and learning | * Restoration of peatlands and upland habitats at Ben Wyvis as part of a landscape partnership to manage water and flooding downstream. Peatland works registered for carbon credits. * Peatland restoration at Flanders Moss, Cairnsmore of Fleet, Kirkconnell Flow, Moine Mhor used to share and demonstrate experience and practice with land managers. * Working with universities to host equipment to measure impact of works on peatland sites. |
| 1. Land-use transformation | * Best practice * Demonstration * Knowledge and learning | * Demonstration of low density cattle management, including use of collars. * Development of wider thinking on nature networks in the forest estate |
| 1. Private investment | * Demonstration – investment portfolio | * Peatland restoration work at Ben Wyvis registered for carbon credits. * EoI registered with Palladium for native woodland restoration on Rum * Development of biodiversity metric for carbon plus code using Cairnsmore of Fleet. |
| 1. Inspiring people | Climate-nature literacy  Outreach programme  Best practice – SOAC and visitor management  Knowledge and learning | * Working with equality groups to engage with and diversify audiences visiting the countryside. * Hosting the Cairngorms junior ranger programme, John Muir Awards, Scout and Guide groups. * Leading site visits for education groups from nursery through to tertiary. * Hosting events, talks and open days to provide insight into aspects of reserve management. * Testing the effectiveness of local access guidance in managing people in sensitive locations. * Employing seasonal staff to engage with visitors and promote responsible behaviour. * Engaging with audiences through media and interpretation. |
| 1. Skills and capacity | * Training and volunteering programmes * Links to and engagement with training colleges and university courses | * Providing regular volunteering groups with a focus on practical and survey work at Tentsmuir, Loch Leven and Stirling NNRs. * Working with National Parks and Scottish Countryside Ranger Association to deliver training for seasonal staff. * Working in partnership with Forestry Land Scotland, University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) and others to deliver qualifications for externals, staff, volunteers, and placements. * Providing placements for the UHI ranger training qualification. * Programme of placements and modern apprenticeships in wildlife management and nature conservation. * Supporting and contributing to research programmes and dissertations for tertiary education. * Working with tertiary education to support skills and practical experience for students. |

### **Appendix 3 – Current process for NNR declarations and making changes to boundaries of existing NNRs**

NNRs are declared under Section 19 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and Section 35 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Under the current procedure, the NatureScot Board makes the final decision to declare or de-declare an NNR. This is done with the recommendation of staff and Senior Leadership Team through a Board paper. The Board then authorises the Chief Executive to sign off the relevant declaration / de-declaration document.

In 2014 an evaluation panel was created, as a subset of the NNR Partnership, to assess applications for new NNRs and provide recommendation to NatureScot. It was agreed the formal declaration process would remain a matter for the Board but should be reviewed in the longer term. (see SNH/14/5/A1274122 - [Board meeting 8 May 2014](https://naturescot.nexus.objective.co.uk/documents/A1274883/details)). Currently the Board approves all matters relating to the full or partial declaration or de-declaration of an NNR.

### **Proposed New National Nature Reserve**

* An evaluation panel, a sub-set of the NNR Partnership group, manages the initial assessment of any proposal to create a new National Nature Reserve.
* Applicant seeks informal advice from NNR Partnership group before submitting a pre-application to the group.
* NatureScot and representative of the Evaluation panel visit site, if required, and provide feedback.
* Formal application to Partnership Group assessed by the Evaluation Panel.
* Evaluation panel provides feedback on whether meets NNR criteria and standards.
* If recommended for approval pass to NatureScot.
* NatureScot prepares maps and supporting papers.
* NatureScot Director for NNRs submits proposal to Board for approval.
* Board authorises the Chief Executive to sign off the relevant declaration document.
* Declaration papers posted on NatureScot and [Tellmescotland](https://www.tellmescotland.gov.uk/) websites.
* Communication and promotional materials issued jointly by NatureScot and NNR owner.

### **Boundary amendments**

* Manager of NNR proposes change to NatureScot
* NatureScot prepares maps and supporting papers.
* If no issues perceived, Director for NNRs submits proposal to Board for approval.
* Board authorises the Chief Executive to sign off the relevant declaration document.
* Re-declaration papers posted onNatureScot and [Tellmescotland](https://www.tellmescotland.gov.uk/) websites.

1. [H.09 Board of NatureScot - 25 August 2021 - NNR Visitor Management Support (A3530825)](file:///C:\Users\inmt\Downloads\2023%20BOARD%20%20Paper%20-%20Next%20steps%20for%20National%20Nature%20Reserves%20-%20draft%20paper%20for%20August%20board%20-%202023%20%20-%20final%20draft%20-%20July%202023%20(A4139589).docx).

   Or [Link to board papers on NatureScot website.](https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-board-meeting-25-august-2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)