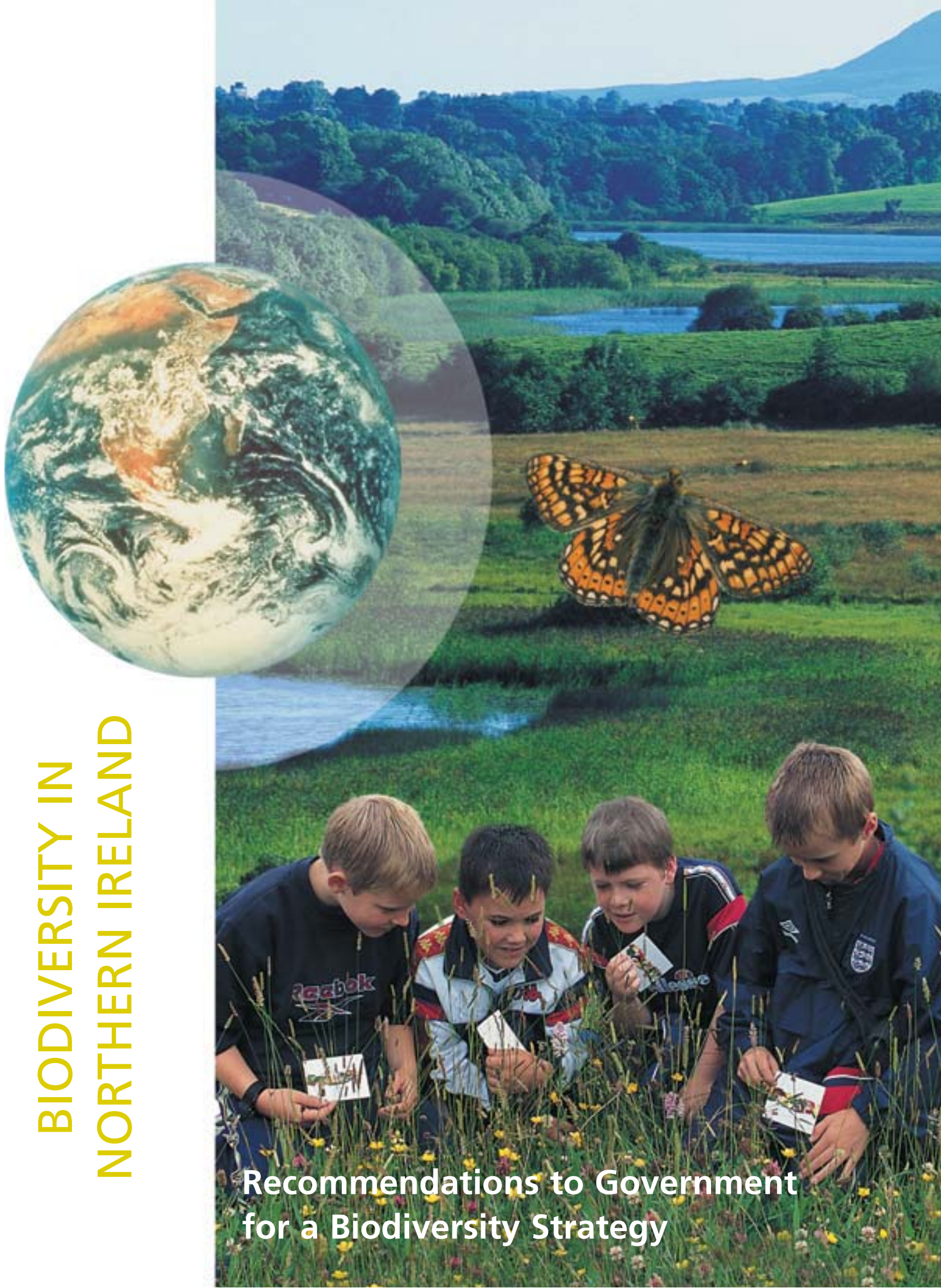


# BIODIVERSITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND



**Recommendations to Government  
for a Biodiversity Strategy**

# **Biodiversity In Northern Ireland**

## **Recommendations to Government for a Biodiversity Strategy**

**Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group**

**October 2000**

## FOREWORD

The UK Government, along with over 150 others, is committed to the conservation of biodiversity: the total variety of all living things. To assist in this, four advisory bodies - one in each part of the UK - were set up.

The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group was established after nominations were sought from the key sectors: local government, the business and farming communities, the voluntary sector and central government.

The Group has carried out a widespread consultation into its proposals (published in 1999) for conserving biodiversity in Northern Ireland. We received many helpful and encouraging comments, as a result of which we have significantly revised our original proposals. We very much appreciate the contribution from those who have commented.

This Report to the Government sets out our recommendations on how best to sustain our biodiversity. We attempt to describe the importance of the diversity of our habitats and species in both local and international terms. We look at the everyday activities which affect our biodiversity; and we suggest the steps which should be taken to deal with those issues.

The Group hopes that this Report will be the basis for action to protect our biodiversity, not only by statutory bodies but also by the wider community. We think that it is vital that this asset is looked after for the benefit of everyone living in Northern Ireland today and for future generations.

Richard Rogers  
Chairman  
Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group

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## Summary

### Introduction

1. This strategy contains 76 recommendations. The recommendations are being put to Government in Northern Ireland in order that it might:
  - adopt them as its own strategy for biodiversity conservation;
  - establish an implementation plan including timescales;
  - agree to the monitoring of this plan;
  - continue the partnership between Government and other sectors.
2. They are not directed solely at Government. There is a wider responsibility on society as a whole - its various sectors have an important part to play.

### People and biodiversity

3. Biodiversity is the total variety of all living things, ranging from the complex interactions which occur within habitats and landscapes to the level of genetic variation. We all benefit from biodiversity. It facilitates natural processes, provides food, clothing and medicines and inspires artists.
4. Biodiversity is enormously affected by our actions. In Northern Ireland, changes in land use and life styles have resulted in rapid declines in traditionally managed and wild areas and the species they contain. Over fifty species of plants and animals have become extinct in the last century.
5. The responsibility for looking after biodiversity for future generations lies with all of us. All sectors of society affect biodiversity to a greater or lesser

extent including government, landowners and industry.

### The need for a Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy

6. The threats to world biodiversity resulted in 156 countries, including the UK, signing the Biodiversity Convention in 1992; this committed them to develop national strategies for its conservation. A UK Biodiversity Action Plan was published in 1994 and a UK Biodiversity Steering Group was established which produced a report, subsequently endorsed by Government in May 1996.
7. The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy has been prepared by a cross-sectoral group, the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group. It is intended to inform policy and promote action on biodiversity conservation in Northern Ireland by:
  - describing the main features of biodiversity in Northern Ireland
  - identifying the main issues affecting biodiversity, including institutional, political and legal issues
  - proposing measures to support the conservation of biodiversity for the period 2001-2016.

### Northern Ireland's Biodiversity

8. Improved agricultural grasslands in small fields dominate the lowlands. Wetland habitats (such as lakes, fens, bogs and wet grasslands) and coastal and marine habitats (such as sand dunes and the littoral and sublittoral habitats found in sea loughs) are very well represented. Native woodlands are of limited extent. The total number of species occurring in Northern Ireland is thought to be over

20,000 and there are also unique genetic varieties of some species (such as the pollan and Irish hare). The bryophyte and lichen flora associated with the mild, wet climate is particularly rich.

### Issues affecting biodiversity and recommendations

9. The assessment of all policies and programmes for their impact on biodiversity and better co-ordination of work on biodiversity are identified as key recommendations.
10. This strategy identifies the following 14 main issues affecting biodiversity in Northern Ireland:
  - **Agricultural systems and support-** Past and current changes in agricultural practice such as specialisation and intensification have affected a large number of habitats and species. Recommendations include (a) implementing environmentally sensitive farming measures contained in Agenda 2000, (b) developing, monitoring and enforcing of environmental conditions attached to EU support payments and (c) improving the targeting of agri-environment schemes.
  - **Forestry and woodland management-** Many of Northern Ireland's terrestrial species are dependent on woodland, although it is one of the least wooded areas in Europe. Recommendations include increasing broad-leaved woodland cover and improving the protection and management of existing woodland for biodiversity.
  - **Coastal and marine management-** Coastal and marine habitats comprise a large part of the biodiversity of Northern Ireland, although the submerged habitats

are hidden from view. The coast and coastal waters are affected by potentially conflicting uses. Recommendations include the establishment of mechanisms which help integrate coastal uses and develop sustainable fisheries.

- **Water use and management-** Northern Ireland's wetland habitats and species are being affected by nutrient enrichment (eutrophication). Rivers are also affected by conflicting potential uses. Recommendations are made for the implementation of a eutrophication control strategy and the formulation of a river conservation strategy. The impending Water Framework Directive will have a significant impact.
- **Construction and development-** These can have both direct and indirect effects on biodiversity. Recommendations are made to ensure that biodiversity priorities are fully addressed in development plans and to strengthen the protection of sites of nature conservation importance.
- **Tourism and recreation-** For the most part tourism and recreation are compatible with biodiversity and rarely conflict. However, there have been some cases where developments and activities have impacted on biodiversity. Recommendations are made to ensure that any future potential growth in these sectors does not adversely affect biodiversity.
- **Peatland management-** Upland blanket bogs and lowland raised bogs are well represented in Northern Ireland. Past drainage, over-grazing and continued peat cutting have reduced the area and quality of these habitats and it is

recommended that the peatland conservation strategy is revised to address these problems.

- **Introduced species-** Introduced species can present particular problems on islands such as Ireland with a naturally limited range of native species. A number of habitats and species are severely affected by introduced species. It is recommended that this issue is addressed at an all-Ireland level.
- **Protecting special areas for biodiversity-** Many habitats and species are concentrated on a few sites and therefore the protection of sites is especially important. Recommendations are made to develop a more effective site protection network, particularly by reviewing the effectiveness and efficiency of current protection and if necessary, making legislative changes and seeking the positive and beneficial management of sites.
- **Protecting priority species and habitats-** For those priority habitat and species identified in the UK Biodiversity Report, the UK habitat and species action plans will continue to be implemented. Recommendations are made for the preparation of Northern Ireland habitat and species action plans.
- **Conserving genetic biodiversity -** A wide range of livestock breeds and plant varieties have been used in Ireland. Little is known of the current status of some of these. A review of the conservation arrangements for plant cultivars and livestock breeds in Ireland is recommended.
- **Research and monitoring-** Inadequate information is likely to be one of the factors limiting the effectiveness of biodiversity conservation. Recommendations are made to improve information on such groups as lichens, bryophytes and some marine taxa and habitats
- **Knowledge, understanding and participation -** The success of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy depends on the involvement of people and groups in undertaking or supporting action. However, there is at present a low level of awareness of the concept of biodiversity and conservation by individuals, groups and Government. To improve this situation, recommendations are made to strengthen biodiversity education, increase awareness of local biodiversity and encourage wider participation in conservation work.
- **Local action-** Local involvement is seen as a critical part of delivering biodiversity conservation. Recommendations are made to enhance the role of District Councils and community groups in biodiversity conservation, particularly under the auspices of Local Agenda 21.

### Priority Habitats and Species

11. 40 habitats are identified as priorities for conservation action in Northern Ireland. 213 species or groups of species were provisionally identified as priorities in the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy: proposals June 1999. However, for some taxonomic groups such as lichens, mosses, insects and some groups of marine invertebrates, information is poor. For these groups, the priority is to find out more about where they occur,

how common they are and how their populations are changing. Provisional list of species which are considered as UK or Northern Ireland priorities for conservation action are presented.

### **Implementation and Review**

12. A wide range of sectors and institutions are identified as having a role in delivering one or more of the 76 recommendations. Although government departments will take a lead on many recommendations, most require contribution from several sectors or institutions.
13. The monitoring and review of the implementation of the Strategy will be critical for its success.

### **Further information**

14. Further information about the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy and developments associated with it can be found at Environment and Heritage Service's website [www.ehsni.gov.uk](http://www.ehsni.gov.uk).

# 1

## INTRODUCTION



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The conservation of biological diversity is central to the principle of sustainable development. This is development which strikes a balance between the environment, economy and society (see Box 1 below). Sustainable development is central to The UK Government's strategic thinking and forms the basis of policy documents such as Northern Ireland's Regional Strategic Framework.

### Box 1 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development Principles relating to sustainability

#### Principle 1

Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

#### Principle 3

The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.

#### Principle 4

In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it.

#### Principle 8

To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies.

The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group (NIBG) was established in late 1996 to assist Government in conserving biodiversity in Northern Ireland. The group consists of individuals representing the key sectors involved in the conservation of biodiversity in Northern Ireland.



Many of the comments made on the 1999 Biodiversity Strategy proposals have been incorporated into this document.

The NIBG recognised that a regional strategy for Northern Ireland should facilitate the implementation of the UK action plan in Northern Ireland, whilst paying considerable attention to local needs and the all-Ireland context. The clear commitment from the UK Government to put the environment at the heart of all its policies would enable the delivery of the objectives on biodiversity.

In addition, there are a range of issues and obligations that can only be addressed at a EU or international level, such as climate change.

A Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland enables the identification of those priority habitats and species identified by the UK Steering Group for which Northern Ireland has a special responsibility. It was also seen as desirable to address biodiversity in Northern Ireland from an all-Ireland perspective. The Strategy identifies all-Ireland priorities and when setting targets for action takes into account the abundance, distribution and status of species and habitats in the Republic of Ireland.

The Strategy does three things:

- it describes the main features of biodiversity in Northern Ireland;
- it identifies the main factors affecting biodiversity;
- it proposes measures to support the conservation of biodiversity for the period 2001-2016.

This Strategy and its recommendations are based on the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy: proposals June 1999 but include a number of changes made as a result of the public consultation and further consideration by the NIBG. The recommendations are being put to the Government in order that it might:

- adopt them as its own Strategy for biodiversity conservation;
- establish an implementation plan including timescales;
- agree to the monitoring of this plan;
- continue the partnership between Government and other sectors.