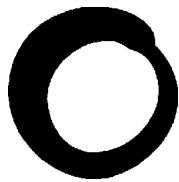


How to win

Saving wildlife sites



**Friends of
the Earth**

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Friends of the Earth inspires solutions to environmental problems, which makes life better for people.

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This is an extract

A full copy of How to win: Saving wildlife sites can be downloaded from Friends of the Earth's website.

http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/local/saving_wildlife_sites/

1 Wildlife – the bigger picture

A lot of environmental press covers the importance of ‘biodiversity’ – a big word for a reassuringly simple concept: the variety of life. As the rate of species extinction and habitat destruction accelerates worldwide, the loss of biodiversity increases. Humans depend on the benefits of biodiversity – food, energy, economy and climate stability – as much as other living things do. The sustainability of these benefits depends on maintaining biodiversity. By upsetting the balance we harm not only nature but ourselves.

The UK has a wealth of wildlife and is home to significant numbers of endangered species and habitats. Many of these have been declining, in some cases drastically. Wildlife is often given low priority in political decision-making and many habitats degrade from neglect, insufficient management, pollution and excessive disturbance.

1 Habitat loss

All UK land is influenced by human activity. The majority of land with rich wildlife is known as semi-natural habitat. These areas comprise natural communities of native species where human activities such as livestock farming have replicated the actions of wild grazing animals, for example. Semi-natural land covers about 30 per cent of the UK and has generally been subject to low-intensity use, such as rough grazing. It includes ancient broad-leaved woodland, grasslands, scrub, fens, marshes, dune systems, heaths and moorlands. These areas also record our natural and cultural heritage – they are a dynamic, living illustration of our history and the development of our society.

There are many stark statistics that show how drastically various UK habitats have declined. They are oft-quoted but shocking, nonetheless:

- 30-50 per cent of ancient woodland has been lost since 1945, primarily as a result of conversion to conifer plantation or farmland (NCC, 1984, Nature Conservation in Britain).
- 95 per cent of flower-rich meadows have been lost since 1945, mostly due to intensive agriculture (NCC, 1984, Nature Conservation in Britain).

- 80 per cent of lowland chalk and limestone grasslands have been lost or significantly damaged since 1945, mostly due to conversion to arable production or 'improved' grassland (NCC, 1984, Nature Conservation in Britain).
- More than 70 per cent of lowland heath has been lost since the early 1800s, with 40 per cent vanishing in the last 50 years. This is due primarily to intensive agriculture, urban development, afforestation and, more recently, scrub encroachment (RSPB, www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/frame.asp).
- In northern England, 45 per cent of limestone pavements has been destroyed or severely damaged, largely as a result of the removal of weathered surfaces for sale as rockery stone. Only an estimated three per cent is left untouched (NCC, 1984, Nature Conservation in Britain).
- 50 per cent of fens and coastal marshes has been lost or significantly damaged since 1945, primarily as a result of drainage and nutrient enrichment (NCC, 1984, Nature Conservation in Britain).
- 94 per cent of lowland raised peat bogs have vanished since 1945. The primary causes are afforestation, repeated burning, agricultural land 'improvement' and peat extraction (Plantlife, 1991, Commission of Enquiry into Peat and Peatlands). The remaining lowland raised bogs in England are now protected areas but peat extraction for the horticulture industry unfortunately continues on some sites.
- There has been a 30 per cent loss or significant damage of upland grasslands, heaths and blanket bogs through coniferous afforestation, hill land improvement, burning and overgrazing (NCC, 1984, Nature Conservation in Britain).

Throughout the UK, whole landscapes are changing. These large-scale changes to the UK countryside rarely happen overnight. They are a gradual process of change to small parcels of land – a 'death by a thousand cuts' for UK wildlife. A grubbed out hedgerow here, a new housing development there, or simply changes in agricultural practice. The cumulative effect has been a steady erosion in the diversity of our countryside.



Key Point

This illustrates how important it is to protect these small areas so crucial for wildlife, whether they are recognised officially or not. The tragic losses incurred make what remains yet more valuable.