



Policy Summary

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is about meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

In its founding legislation, SNH was charged to have regard to the desirability of securing that anything done to the natural heritage is undertaken in a manner which is sustainable. SNH's aims include promoting the care and improvement of the natural heritage, its responsible enjoyment, its greater understanding and appreciation, and its sustainable use, now and for future generations.

SNH's vision is that all activities which make use of or have an impact upon the natural heritage of Scotland should be environmentally sustainable, that is to say that they should not diminish the quality and value of Scotland's natural heritage taken as a whole.

Background

At the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 it was agreed that all countries should produce national sustainable development strategies. In Europe the Fifth Environmental Action Programme 'Towards Sustainability' was drafted in parallel with preparation for that conference, and the Amsterdam Treaty (1999) will incorporate changes to the Treaties of Rome and Maastricht to ensure that sustainable development becomes a higher-level objective in all European policies. A UK Strategy for Sustainable Development published in 1994 has recently been updated as 'A better quality of life - a strategy for sustainable development for the UK' (DETR May 1999). In Scotland the Government has published 'Down to Earth' (Feb. 1999) outlining progress in sustainable development in Scotland.

The UK Strategy defines four objectives for sustainable development:-

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
- effective protection of the environment;
- prudent use of natural resources; and
- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.

Through the 'Partnership for Scotland' agreement, the Government is committed to integrating the principles of environmentally and socially sustainable development into all Government policies including economic development, the introduction of Strategic Environmental Assessment and the encouragement of environmental education in schools.

SNH's Position

SNH's interests in sustainable development lie in the message it conveys about wise use of natural resources and in the belief that the quality of people's lives depends upon having a healthy and attractive environment as well as robust social structures and economic well-being. SNH has established five broad guidelines for environmental sustainability which provide a basis for its own actions and advice to others:-

- **Non-renewable resources should be used wisely and sparingly, at a rate which does not restrict the options of future generations.** Developments which affect irreplaceable assets, including geological and landscape features, should take into account the uniqueness of the resource, and the availability of alternative ways of addressing the demand.
- **Renewable resources should be used within the limits of their capacity for regeneration.** Exploitation of renewable resources for activities such as forestry, fisheries and agriculture should take into account the ability of the ecosystem to maintain levels of yield in the long-term and any impacts on the wider environment.
- **The quality of the natural heritage as a whole should be maintained and improved.** Care should be taken to avoid progressive degradation or pollution of natural heritage resources. All activities should seek where possible to generate other benefits in terms of biological diversity, an attractive landscape and recreation and access opportunities.
- **In situations of great complexity or uncertainty the precautionary principle should be applied.** Development should be restrained, or be capable of adaptation, where there is a possibility of significant environmental damage and where the complexity of the system makes accurate prediction of impacts difficult.
- **There should be an equitable distribution of costs and benefits (material and non-material) for any development.** Development should not benefit one country, or geographical area, or sector of society, while imposing the costs on another.

In seeking to apply these guidelines SNH will:-

- press for regulatory and planning policies which encourage the substitution of renewable for non-renewable resources and the development of alternative, less damaging technological options, recycling and re-use;
- promote restorative measures where resources have been damaged in the past;
- promote greater understanding and wider application of knowledge on how to improve the sustainability of farming, forestry and fishery systems;
- follow the precautionary principle when advising on developments where the risks of impact on the natural heritage are significant but uncertain;
- support extension of the 'polluter pays' principle whereby the polluter, whether developer or consumer, should bear the full costs of maintaining the quality of the environment;
- promote the inclusion of environmental studies, including an understanding of sustainability, as an integral part of educational programmes; and

- promote training in sustainable development issues for decision-makers and managers in businesses which have an impact on the natural heritage, such as those working in tourism, civil engineering and water resource management.

SNH would like to see the statutory duties of all public bodies of the Scottish Parliament and its Executive revised to reflect Government's commitment to sustainable development. SNH also consider that promoting education on sustainable development should be a high priority, among decision-makers, businesses, in formal education and for the public at large.

References:

Department of the Environment (DOE) ; and others (1990). This common inheritance: Britain's environmental strategy. (Command Paper. Cm.; 1200). London : HMSO.

European Communities (EC) (1992). Towards sustainability: a European Community Programme of policy and action in relation to the environment and sustainable development. (COM; (1992) 23 final volume 2). Luxembourg : Office for Official Publications of the European Community.

Department of the Environment (DOE) (1994). Sustainable development: the UK strategy; [and] Summary report. (Command Paper. Cm.; 2426). London : HMSO.

Department of the Environment (DOE) ; and others (1994). Climate change: the UK programme: United Kingdom's report under the Framework Convention on Climate Change. (Command Paper. Cm.; 2427). London

Department of the Environment (DOE) ; and others (1994). Biodiversity: the UK action plan [and] summary report. (Command Paper. Cm.; 2428). London : HMSO.

Department of the Environment (DOE) ; and others (1994). Sustainable forestry: the UK programme. (Command Paper. Cm.; 2429). London : HMSO.

Scottish Office (1998). Down to earth: a Scottish perspective on sustainable development. Edinburgh.

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) (1999). A better quality of life: a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom. (Command Paper. Cm.; 4345). London.

Contact:

Clive Mitchell

01738 444177

clive.mitchell@snh.gov.uk

Address: SNH, (National Strategy) Battleby, Redgorton, Perth, PH1 3EW

Date: May 2000