

Policy Summary

Environmental Justice and the Natural Heritage

Environmental justice is concerned with the *'rights and responsibilities of all people in society to have a healthy environment'*. Issues which stem from this include the improvement of poor quality environments, better environmental accountability, the empowerment of communities to address local environmental issues, community involvement in decision making and rights of access to information.

SNH's vision is for everyone to enjoy a good quality local environment including access to local greenspace; for communities to be involved in the care of and in decisions affecting their local environments; and for them to have better access to environmental information relating to it.

Background

The term 'environmental justice' was originally coined in the USA where it was used to refer to the disproportionate impact of pollution sources on poor communities. The term embraces two basic premises:

- Everyone should have the right and be able to live in a healthy environment with access to enough environmental resources for a healthy life; and
- It is predominantly the poorest and least powerful people who are missing these conditions.

Addressing environmental justice requires actions across a number of policy areas including social justice, freedom of information, environmental planning and management and community capacity building. The use of the term is now associated with aspects of quality of life and community confidence and empowerment in addressing environmental concerns.

The need for action on environmental justice in Scotland was given prominence by the First Minister in his speech on 18 February 2002. He stressed the need to address the social effects of environmental degradation within a framework of sustainable development and the need for a shift in public perception away from the view that environmental concerns are a luxury of the rich. He identified the biggest challenge of the 21st century as the combination of economic progress with social and environmental justice and sought better relations between communities and local industries with greater commitment to good neighbour agreements and to corporate social responsibility.

The Aarhus Convention 1998 imposed upon governments a number of obligations regarding '*access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters*'. It aimed to promote greater accountability and transparency in decision-making.

SNH's position

SNH contributes to the environmental justice agenda through work on greenspace, access, recreation, and environmental education, and work with disadvantaged groups in both urban and rural areas.

SNH will contribute to the government's environmental justice objectives by developing understanding of the relations between environmental and social justice by:

improving poor quality landscapes and environments close to where people live through:

- Our Greenspace for Communities initiative to improve the management of urban greenspace, and our work to improve access opportunities; our delivery of the New Opportunity Fund's '*Transforming Your Space*' programme in Scotland through the Fresh Futures partnership; and other community grants;
- Working with the Scottish Executive to take forward planning advice on openspace audits, planning and management;
- Promoting the role of biodiversity in improving the quality of life in towns and cities including the development of Local Nature Reserves and other local sites of importance for nature conservation;
- Encouraging the adoption of appropriate planning policies on derelict land, opencast mining and landscape restoration projects; and
- Supporting the Central Scotland Forest and urban forestry initiatives.

involving people in decisions concerning local environments through:

- Improving community engagement and involvement in the designation of SSSIs and in the management of LNRs and NNRs;
- Contributing to key actions under the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy;
- Developing our own working practices in relation to communities; including support to voluntary and volunteering sectors and community groups to encourage involvement in local environmental actions; and
- Partnership work with other bodies at the national level and with community planning partnerships, local rural partnerships and social inclusion partnerships at local levels.

improving access to environmental information by:

- Ensuring that SNH's holdings of data and information are made available in an appropriate format for external audiences.
- Reviewing our own data management facilities and developing a proactive approach to the dissemination of information on the natural heritage in view of the revised regulations on access to environmental information; and
- Ensuring policy proofing for environmental justice of major policy developments and responses.

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