

Urban Biodiversity: Successes and Challenges: Nature in the city

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Urban environments are often thought of as human environments. After all, our towns and cities are home to over 80% of Scotland's population. But urban environments are so much more than this. Each town and city has its own unique mosaic of habitats and ecosystems. Gardens, parks, allotments, brownfield sites, industrial sites, rivers, ponds and even graveyards all provide different niches for the thousands of species that share our urban landscape.

With all these different habitats on the doorstep it isn't surprising that urban environments are where most people have the opportunity to experience the natural world. But while this is obvious to us here today, it is not always so clear to other people living in urban environments – less than half of Scots get into the outdoors at least once a week. This is something that needs to change.

Being outdoors and around nature brings so many benefits. It can reduce stress and improve physical and mental health. In short it improves residents' quality of life. It is the Greenspace in our cities that can provide people with a quick and easy escape from the hubbub of city life. This is why SNH are promoting the Simple Pleasures these areas can bring. This is a new campaign aimed at getting the public out and about in their cities and introducing them to the wildlife within it. Over 20% of Glasgow is green space so the opportunities to experience nature really are on your doorstep.

As part of the Simple Pleasures campaign SNH have identified routes and suggested places to visit in and around Glasgow. Similar materials are being developed for other cities and I hope they become a useful resource for those of you working with the public. I understand that this conference is also linked to the publication of the book 'Wildlife around Glasgow', so the materials are out there that can help introduce people to the wonders of nature without the need for expensive equipment or extensive planning.

Of course, these opportunities only exist if the networks of green and blue space are properly managed. The ecological footprint of any city extends far beyond its boundaries and development pressures within the city limits can cause conflict. There is no easy solution to these pressures but planning and

managing urban environments in the right way can have significant positive impacts. Connecting cities with the environment around them through habitat networks and limiting the impact of development on the surrounding ecosystems are vital parts to this. Climate change will add new pressures to the urban environment and working with the biodiversity that supports our ecosystems is one of the best ways of adapting and mitigating against its effects. We're promoting such policies through initiatives like the Central Scotland Green Network which is a priority under the National Planning Framework. This is already enhancing greenspaces, promoting healthier lifestyles, greater biodiversity, stronger communities and economic opportunity.

Many of you will be involved in making this a reality on the ground in many different ways. For example, Sustainable urban drainage (SUD) schemes help mitigate against flooding and provide habitat for a variety of species. Promoting local food growing engages local people and helps reduce our overall carbon footprint. Householders can do their bit too by growing wildlife friendly plants, avoiding invasive non-native species and carefully composting what they can. When the impact of all these different initiatives is added together we end up with rich urban environments which benefit all the species that live in them. Not least the human community.

I've briefly touched on a few themes which I know you will be discussing in more detail over the next couple of days. As you might know, discussions have also been ongoing recently in Nagoya, Japan about the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. I know such high level debate can often seem far removed from the day to day delivery of biodiversity conservation and it is easy to be cynical about the process. But these discussions included a specific focus on cities and biodiversity. And while it's too early to have fully digested the outputs and what our response will be to it, I'm sure those aspects of the discussion in particular will be of interest to all of you.

Unfortunately, due to other commitments, I am not able to stay for the rest of the conference but from looking at the agenda and field trips I am sure you will have an interesting and productive two days.

(This is the formal version of the speech that the Minister delivered at the opening of the Conference).