

Advantage – identifies the need to promote economic activities that will also help to afford appropriate protection to the environment and natural resources’.

As well as the usual habitat and species accounts and action plans, the Plan also includes a ‘Framework for Action’ – an excellent context setting section which should serve as a model for other plans. It covers the need to conserve biodiversity, the characteristics and history of, and current trends affecting, the biodiversity of Birmingham and the Black Country, legislation, partnerships and resources, and themes for action. There are also overarching ‘Issues Action Plans’ for site and species protection, species and habitat management, maintaining biological records, and environmental education.

The urban environment and its green space network in the West Midlands conurbation is evident in the ‘vision for main habitats and land-uses’ which, as well as the expected focus on habitats like woodland, grassland and wetland, includes sections on urban ‘wasteland’, parks, playing fields and public open space, gardens and allotments, and buildings and the built environment.

SUSTAINABLE MAINTENANCE

The management of urban greenspace should be sensitive to natural features and seasonal changes, physical attributes, the needs of wildlife, current and potential land use, the local community’s needs, and the strategic position of sites in the local network of open spaces. All urban greenspace requires resources for its management, restoration or development. The provision of these falls upon the owner and/or manager,

whether they are in the private, public or voluntary sectors. Understanding the land’s environmental properties, functions, and relationships to the local community is essential to effective and efficient application of the resources.

Not understanding or acknowledging this has led to a decline in, for example, parks and gardens over the past forty or so years. A Countryside Agency report (2001) for the Heritage Lottery Fund estimated that there are 27 000 parks in Britain, and that although £630 million is spent on them each year, this is far less than twenty years ago. The cumulative loss of revenue is estimated at £1.3 billion. The situation has been made worse by the frequent separation of the social management of parks and open spaces (involving for instance rangers, wardens and play leaders) and their physical management. The latter has generally suffered from the contractor/client split within local authorities, and the contracting out of closely specified but inflexible and badly supervised management activities.

Crucial to sustainable land management is understanding the various functions of the land in question. Where these functions conflict (for example, dinghy sailors may want wind-blocking trees cut down around a lake, whereas nature conservationists may want them retained), then managers will need to exercise social skills to achieve an acceptable solution. This is where a consideration of the strategic position of the site might be important. If this is the only water in the area suitable for sailing, then that may have to take precedence. Alternatively, if the wetland fringing the lake is a priority habitat in the LBAP that might be more important.

Maintenance costs are, of course, dictated by end use. Ornamental landscaping usually

requires intensive and relatively expensive maintenance, whereas more informal, semi-natural treatments tend to incur lower costs. Judicious tree planting, management of existing features such as grassland or wetlands, protecting natural watercourses, and working with the grain of nature rather than against it is likely to result in economic, social and environmental benefits. Water courses are particularly important. They connect to other sites, provide a linear habitat, and are part of the local flood prevention system. Channelling and culverting in one place may well cause increased flows or flooding elsewhere.

A FRAMEWORK FOR A SUSTAINABLE CITY LANDSCAPE

Modern lifestyles in the developed world mean that many people can choose where to live and work. Increasingly during the second half of the twentieth century this has meant commuting between town and country, getting the best of both worlds. The main plank of urban policy now is to halt and, if possible, to reverse this trend by making towns attractive enough for people to want to live in them. Hence the talk of an urban renaissance and the need to develop sustainable communities.

In order to succeed in this endeavour, many changes in thinking, action and perceptions are needed. This chapter concentrates on just one aspect of the problem, the provision of high-quality and varied open spaces. In relation to this, the West Midlands Wildlife Trusts suggested in their submission to the Examination in

Public of Draft Regional Planning Guidance for the West Midlands (2002) that the desired urban renaissance should ensure that towns and cities:

- Are managed with some understanding of ecology and environmental systems and functions.
- Provide a sense of health and well-being to their populations.
- Should be integrated with the surrounding countryside, not separated from it.
- Should be moving towards self-sufficiency and reduction of their ecological footprint.
- Contribute not just to people's welfare but to that of the natural world.
- Contribute to the integration of social progress and equity, environmental improvement and protection, and economic development.

Starting from these, or similar principles, it is possible to develop the vision and values needed to provide a policy context for the provision and management of green networks. When appropriate policies have been devised, some of the tools and mechanisms outlined above can be used to secure the necessary resources and carry out the work. Monitoring and evaluation will then examine achievements and progress against various standards, reference points, targets and indicators. These should be embedded into local, regional and national plans and strategies. These may include BAPs, regional spatial strategies, the new local development frameworks and community strategies.

It is important to recognize that providing, managing and maintaining an accessible network of urban open spaces is always going to be more about process than