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FAO
Ms Alison Burtenshaw
Wildlife and Countryside Directorate
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Dear Alison Burtenshaw

REVIEW OF THE JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE 2001: STAGE 1 REPORT

The New Renaissance Group (NRG) is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the Review document enclosed with Sophia Lambert's letter of 16 March. Perhaps I should point out that although I am listed as an individual consultee or contributor in the Annex to the Review Report, I was acting in my capacity as Chairman of the NRG, whose views are acknowledged in paragraph 6 of Chapter 23 of the Report. I should explain that, although the NRG is primarily concerned with the future of humanity in harmony with nature, our membership includes those who between them have been responsible for the leadership of the Nature Conservancy, the NCC, and IUCN for substantial periods during the last fifty years and more recently for high level scientific and policy advice within the Department on these matters.

As explained in the memorandum, which NRG submitted to the JNCC's own internal review and then to the Government's external reviewer, an informal group which we had convened as result of a conference in 1999 at the Royal Society of Edinburgh to celebrate the 1949 National Parks and Countryside Act identified a clear need to strengthen the scientific underpinning for and international impact of the UK's official and voluntary conservation effort. The role of the JNCC is central to these issues and the setting up of the review was, therefore, highly opportune in our view.

We welcome the thorough and comprehensive nature of the study carried out by Mr Baldwin and commend the independence of his analysis. For the first time a clear picture has emerged of the extent of the JNCC's role in providing scientific advice to the Government on UK-wide and international nature conservation issues and its pivotal position in carrying forward the monitoring, database and other aspects of the

UK Biodiversity Action Plan, in addition to the work it does for its parent bodies. The report shows that, as foreseen by Carver, the main focus of the JNCC is quite separate from that of the three country agencies, thus undermining the case for control by them.

We agree with the finding that the present statutory arrangements, which require these vital functions to be delivered by a Committee and staff support unit who are not independent and who are not funded directly by the Department to whom they are chiefly responsible, constitute a grave handicap and have not worked well in practice. The result has been that, at a time when international nature conservation obligations and opportunities have grown enormously, mainly in consequence of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the EU Habitats Directive, the UK has been achieving much less than its potential. This is unfortunate, given the strong public support which conservation enjoys and our excellent scientific capability.

We therefore strongly support the recommendation that legislation should be introduced to transform the present JNCC into an independent body charged with broadly the same functions and funded directly by DEFRA as lead Department for UK and international aspects of nature conservation and biodiversity. In view of the fact that the latter term is more all-embracing and to emphasise the UK's commitment to the CBD we suggest that the new body might possibly be named the UK Biodiversity Advisory Council, rather than the UK Nature Advisory Council as proposed by the Report. We would want its remit to remain as defined in s.131(6) of the EPA 1990.

Our views on the role and tasks of the JNCC or the new body to replace it are largely set out in paragraphs 2 to 13 of Chapter 23 of the Report and there is no need to repeat them here. We do, though, emphasise the importance of its strategic role in thinking ahead for Departments on the direction which biodiversity conservation, both globally and in Europe, will need to take over the next 10 to 20 years. This will mean formulating and co-ordinating the relevant research and monitoring programmes in partnership with policy-makers and the scientific community in governmental, academic and ngo institutions. Such programmes will need largely to focus on what is happening outside strictly protected areas by addressing the major uses of land and sea, such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry and mineral exploitation. Naturally the body would not be expected to carry out the bulk of this work itself, but through its Council members and staff it should have the capability to take a broad overview of what is required.

In view of this we propose that the research role we have outlined should be added to the matters on which the body is expressly required to advise Ministers. We also believe that it is vital to restore the link with the principal Research Council institution devoted to the natural environment, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH), and accordingly recommend that CEH be given a specific seat on the council of the new body.

We do not think it necessary to comment on some of the detailed points summarised in paragraph 20, such as how the Department organises its sponsorship role, though it would be advantageous if well in advance of each planning year Whitehall customers and country agencies could clarify and co-ordinate their requirements

from the JNCC and its replacement. While the body does not need to be large, it should be scientifically high-powered and the chief officer grading needs to reflect this.

We agree completely with the Report that all the alternative options to the present position which it considered are unsatisfactory or (in the case of re-integration with the Department) unrealistic as permanent arrangements. Nor do we consider them satisfactory on an interim basis. Since any legislation may be delayed for some time we make some suggestions as follows as to how matters might be improved in the meantime:

- i) Departments and the agencies should clarify their needs, subject to day to day flexibility, for JNCC services over a reasonable forward period and agree a statement of strategic direction on the lines of that annexed to the Report;
- ii) The financial allocation to the JNCC should reflect this and not be left as a residual to the discretion of the agencies after satisfying their own requirements, the funding formula being amended accordingly;
- iii) The chief officer of the JNCC should be given maximum management discretion over the staff of the support unit in order to improve morale and to reward responsibility and good performance;
- iv) To add to the scientific breadth of the Committee an advisory panel of UK scientists with expertise in global and European biodiversity issues should be recruited.

Above all we recommend that the Department should strengthen its links with the JNCC at ministerial and senior official level and fully acknowledge its vital contribution to the UK's efforts to play a leading role in biodiversity matters.

We should be pleased to develop any of our proposals in more detail. We are happy for this response to be made available to the public.

Yours sincerely

Robin Sharp CB
Chairman