

SENCE AND SOAR GREEN WEDGES

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CONTEXT

1a: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examined the landscape character, recreational use, land use and ecology of the Sence and Soar Valley South Green Wedges. The study area is mainly of agricultural land, for the most part intensively managed, but with large areas of recreational land, especially at the margins.

The green wedges area is valued by local people in terms of its openness, and at particular points is well used. However, as a whole it is not perceived as having a coherent identity and does not meet its potential.

The study divides the area into nine 'local landscape character areas'. These fall into two broad groups; the areas that are flat and associated with the river valleys and the rising or elevated parts, which are more distant from it. Pressures on each set of character areas are different.

The river valleys have the greatest nature conservation value, which declines towards the west of the study area. Development, and to a large degree use, is concentrated in the Enderby hillside areas. The main medium term threat to the landscape character of the study area is an increase in traffic, primarily from the proposed widening of the M1 motorway to the north and south of the Green Wedges area.

Across the wedges area access is the primary issue to be addressed. Links beyond the wedges area are also important to preserve and extend, as well as enhancing those in existence.

In the west, the development pressure and severance are the key issues. These portions are well used to the point of over-use, whereas in the river valleys accessibility and bio-diversity enhancement potential are the main factors to address.

At local landscape character area level, initiatives should be based on good examples of landscape management practice, and the capacity for new initiatives to be delivered. A main aim should be to conserve and enhance local character.

Any strategy for overall land management would be greatly assisted in being put into practice, by knowledge of land ownership. This has been difficult to discover within the remit of this study.



1b: INTRODUCTION

The Stepping Stones Countryside Management Project represents a partnership that aims to improve access for all, enhance the environment, improve people's awareness and encourage community participation in the countryside around Leicester.

Leicestershire County, and several District borough councils fund the Stepping Stones Project. The project covers a number of Green Wedge areas, identified within relevant District Local Plans and County Structure Plan. The Sence and Soar Valley South Green Wedges are two of these. It is the intention of the Stepping Stones Project to prepare management plans for all the Green Wedges.

Loughborough Ecologists and Munro + Whitten Limited were appointed by Stepping Stones Countryside Management Project to carry out a study of the Sence and Soar Green Wedges.

The purpose of the study is to formulate an overall strategy, which can be adopted by the local authority partners, and used to guide the future management. It should lead to consideration by Blaby District Council as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

The work was carried out between March and October 2003, with the field-work being completed from April to August 2003.

Several meetings were held with the Sence and Soar Valley South Green Wedges Management Strategy group to guide the process and to ensure that the resulting report was of a form and with a content that would be of most use to the maximum number of stakeholders.

The report includes a number of pull out maps, which can be referred to while reading text on different pages.

The study and report have been presented in a form that is deliberately rich in graphics. It is believed that this approach is most appropriate for a study of this kind, reflecting both the nature of the subjects and the importance of accessibility to a general readership.





METHODOLOGY

1c: GENERAL APPROACH

A desk-based study was carried out to gather background information on landscape, access, local plan designations, wildlife and archaeological records. This information was received either from the Stepping Stones Project Officer or from other local authority (Leicestershire County Council or Blaby District Council) sources. This was then collated into the report.

A list of sources and references is contained on the accompanying Supplementary Information Compact Disk.

Landscape

For the landscape character assessment, the study area was divided into parcels that could be walked in a day using publicly accessible routes. At the same time as recording the landscape character, and taking photographs, the condition of access routes was also recorded.

Talking to people when carrying out fieldwork, as well as observing behaviour, was seen as an important means of assessing use and also perceptions towards the landscape. Fieldworkers were therefore encouraged to talk to members of the public whenever possible.

Landscape character assessment was carried out based on the Countryside Agency's 'Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland (April 2002)'. This format was modified to make the survey form more suitable to the relatively small scale and detailed nature of this study. Space for recording path condition and other access information was also included.

The report contains an overall analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) of the landscape character of the wedge as a whole, together with SWOT analyses for each of the local landscape character areas. Following the SWOT analyses, an overall management strategy for the study area was formulated. This was then refined to address each local landscape character area.

Ecology

Field ecologists surveyed the whole extent of the accessible land within the study area in the period June and July 2003. Particular landscape features, such as field boundaries were noted and land use patterns were recorded. Note was made of the general nature conservation value.

The Leicestershire Environmental Resources Centre has provided location details of the statutory and non statutory nature conservation sites in the green wedges. Non statutory nature conservation sites are evaluated as being significant at a Parish, District or County level. These designations are gradually being replaced with the term wildlife sites. The non statutory Sites are also referred to generically as sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs).



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Consultation

Blaby District Council and Parish councils provided some details of landownership. Telephone contact was made with land-owners wherever possible, to explain the purpose of the study and to obtain permission to access their land. Otherwise survey was carried out from publicly accessible points or routes, especially rights of way.

Limitations

By far the greatest limitation to the field survey was the lack of overall knowledge about up-to-date land ownership. On occasion, when ownership was known, access was sought but refused, with resulting gaps in the study area data.

Mapping

All field data was collated and mapped using Adobe *Photoshop* software (in the case of the landscape management information) and *VectorWorks* software (in the case of ecological survey data), on Apple Macintosh machines, to produce the results in either .jpeg or, if required, dxf data formats. All text is included in the Supplementary Information Compact Disk in Microsoft Word format.

