BIODIVERSITY

Biodiversity is generally accepted as being the number and variety of plants, animals and other organisms that exist. The richness of biodiversity depends on climatic conditions and the area of the region. Rapid environmental changes typically cause mass extinction. In world terms this can be catastrophic. In neighbourhood planning terms we need only be concerned with conditions in the parish and nearby areas.

The NPPF generally sets great store by preserving and wherever possible enhancing biodiversity. Chapter 11 'Conserving and enhancing the natural environment' is the main source. Paragraph 109 says that the planning system should minimise impacts on biodiversity and provide net gains where possible, contributing to the Government's commitment to halt the overall decline in biodiversity, including establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures. Paragraphs 110 to 112 say that the aim should be to allocate the least versatile land with the lowest environmental or amenity value.

Paragraphs 113 and 115 say local planning authorities should set criteria based policies to protect wildlife or geodiverse sites, respecting the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites, so that protection is commensurate with their status. The Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are one of the classifications given the highest protection in the NPPF: 'great weight' should be attached to them, and planning permission should be refused for major developments in these designated areas except in exceptional circumstances where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest (para116).

Paragraph 117 then goes on to enumerate the various ways that planning policies should minimise impacts on biodiversity and geodiversity. Paragraph 114 affords protection to stretches of undeveloped coast, and particularly those areas defined as Heritage Coast. . These probably the most relevant paragraphs for our neighbourhood plan and will be discussed further below.

Finally, the footnotes in paragraph 14 exempt AONBs and Heritage Coasts from being subject to the presumption in favour of sustainable development, both in plan-making and decision taking.

The South Devon AONB Management Plan considers the ecosystems of the area in some detail and is particularly strong on estuary and coastal management. This is relevant to the Bantham bank of the Avon estuary and the whole of the coastal area in the parish from the estuary to Leasfoot beach.

At a District level the Natural environment and Rural Communities Act clearly sets out that planning policy should contribute to conserving and enhancing the natural environment and provide net gains in biodiversity wherever possible. The Council must have regard to

biodiversity in all it does. There are opportunities to achieve net gains through the use of planning obligations or other biodiversity targets.

The Neighbourhood Plan should consider what could be the possible gains and targets from such measures to the parish and specify them in the plan. It should seek to preserve habitats where ever possible and where this is not possible, should seek to mitigate and provide the right environment for habitats to re-establish as soon as possible after any disturbance due to development.

There are four broad areas in the parish for consideration:

- the Avon estuary and the coast
- woodland,
- farmland
- the built environment in the parish, including domestic gardens and other curtilage uses.

The Avon Estuary and the coastline in the parish qualify as a Coastal Change Management Area as the whole area is likely to be affected by physical changes to the coast. The whole area is subject to a policy of no active intervention. At the same time, all of our coastline is Heritage Coast and is overwashed by the AONB and thus benefits from several layers of protection from development. The area is incredibly rich in biodiversity, especially the shoreline and tidal rockpools. The softer areas of cliff are under constant attack from the sea and during heavy storms large quantities of sand can be washed away from the beaches, making the sea incursions even more damaging. Thus in the last few years there have been considerable damaging changes on Leasfoot, Yarmer and Bantham beaches, where the sea has washed away considerable chunks of dunes. At the same time, stabilisation of the Ham at Bantham over the last thirty years or so has been successful and both sea grasses and wild flowers have colonised the dunes with attendant wildlife and insects. Rotational slumping along the coast as the cliff bases are attacked is a continual problem, and the retreat and diversions to the coastal path are constant. The links golf course is very well established and the areas of rough are havens of xalophitic plant species and fauna, as are the cliff faces themselves.

The main area of woodland in the parish is Stiddicombe wood, but there are numerous smaller areas at Clanacombe and along the north-west facing slopes of the Avon estuary and the Buckland valley. It is important for biodiversity that undergrowth is not too rigorously cleaned out and that at least some fallen wood is left in situ so that a variety of species, but in particular fungi and invertebrates, can flourish. The brackish and largely wooded estuary banks provide specialised habitats. Tree growth is often stunted there by the excessive amount of salt in the air, but many of these areas have been largely undisturbed for years because of their relative inaccessibility. It is important they remain so.

Most farmland in the parish is pasture and many areas are very steep, but there are arable fields in some of the flatter areas. The wetland meadow at the foot of the Mead in Thurlestone is a County Wildlife area. It was first drained in the sixteenth century by Dutch engineers, and then the dyke across the back of Leasfoot beach with the culvert under was improved by French prisoner of war labour during the Napoleonic wars. Suffice it to say that the wetland is well established with the aggressive advance of the reeds more of a problem than a blessing. The recent successful works to the culvert have stopped extensive flooding, but the area is still very wet in winter and is an ideal stop over for migratory birds. In other areas the hedge banks and headlands provide rich wild life havens. Farmers should be encouraged to leave wide headlands to provide wildlife corridors. Fortunately most already do this. Pollution from chemical fertilisers needs to be watched very carefully, especially where it can wash off into any watercourses.

Even domestic gardens can be biodiversity havens. It is important that hedges are retained, and that green corridors, where they exist, are preserved. Many domestic orchards in the parish have been lost in the last century. Old orchards are wonderful havens of biodiversity of all sorts, so extra efforts should be made to retain any remaining orchards, and even the odd old fruit tree in a back garden, however overgrown and unproductive of fruit they may be. Just as farmers should be careful with artificial fertilisers, so householders should be careful to use phosphate-free dishwasher and laundry products for the same reason. This is of particular importance in Bantham, where there is no mains drainage and where waste water, although filtered, will still hold the phosphates in solution that will drain into watercourses heading eventually to the estuary and the sea. Any new housing schemes in the parish in future years should include sustainable urban drainage schemes on-site, and take advantage of any swales or dry ditches to encourage biodiversity areas to compensate for the disturbance in the developed part of the site.