

# NATURAL ECONOMY NORTHWEST

## **Unlocking the economic potential of the natural environment** Report from the Natural Economy Northwest launch, 14 June 2007

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### **A spectacular surrounding**

Hosted by Natural England, the Northwest Regional Development Agency and the SITA Trust, the launch of the Natural Economy Northwest programme took place in the stunning surroundings of one of Manchester's newest landmark buildings, the Hilton Hotel.

The floor-to-ceiling windows of the Hilton's 23<sup>rd</sup>-floor bar open out onto a spectacular view. The urban landscape of Greater Manchester - broken up by canal, park and river – eventually gives way to the countryside beyond. It formed a fitting backdrop for an event that brought together some of the major players in the environment and economic sectors from across the region.

As well as marking the official launch of the Natural Economy Northwest programme – more on which follows later – the session aimed to raise the question of whether we can do more to align the environment with the region's future economic, social and cultural prosperity. It examined how we can engage the business and economic sectors, and how we can 'prove' the bottom-line value of investing in our environment.

It called on those who attended to join a new network – the Natural Economy Network – and to get involved in a major business-to-business communications campaign that will raise the profile of the contribution the natural environment makes to the region's economy, culture and communities.

Did the event manage what it set out to do? Read on, and make up your own mind.

## **What we said... introducing Natural Economy Northwest**

Natural Economy Northwest is a three-year programme that maximises the economic benefit from existing and new investment in the region's natural environment. A partnership led by Natural England, the Northwest Development Agency and the SITA Trust, it draws on the expertise of specialists working in tourism, business development and the environment sector. It cuts across sectors, organisations and the region and works in a genuinely collaborative manner.

### **Revolutionising economic development**

Natural Economy Northwest nurtures natural environment projects that, with the right investment, will deliver economic, social and cultural benefits across the Northwest. Partnership working is crucial, and a key part of this £2.8m programme is to work with existing organisations to leverage the funding, training, intelligence and support to see individual projects through – and thus revolutionise the economic contribution of our natural environment.

### **£2.6bn reasons to take the natural economy seriously**

A well-managed natural economy underpins the social, cultural and economic prosperity of the region. The environmental economy already generates £2.6bn GVA within the regional economy every year, and employs 109,000 people. But the value of a high quality natural environment stretches much further than that.

Businesses rely on quality of life - of which a major factor is access to high quality green space – to attract and retain workers, while a stunning natural landscape can vastly improve the perception of the region. This, in turn, can lead to higher levels of inward investment. There are other benefits, too. Property developers recognise the allure of green space - studies prove that homes close to parks, woodland and water command higher prices – while the environment is central to regional development policies. The Regional Economic Strategy and Regional Spatial Strategy, for example, both stress the importance of the natural environment to the region's economic development.

### **Direction, delivery and dissemination**

Natural Economy Northwest works in three ways. It provides direction and leadership. It facilitates delivery on the ground, through new approaches to project planning, training and joined-up funding across the region. And it disseminates information, from economic studies and training to best practice, with this data easily available to practitioners.

The programme also involves mapping the socio-economic benefits that the region's natural environment delivers; creating methodologies for quantifying and reporting economic benefits; supplying training and skills guidance; integrating natural tourism within the wider visitor economy; marketing and communications; and facilitating projects in areas as diverse as biodiversity, wetlands, coast, woodlands and Green Infrastructure.

Specific projects include SITA Trust's Enriching Nature biodiversity scheme; the Natural Benefits for Business Conference; the Marketing of the Natural Environment report; and the 100 Days Campaign, which launched at this event.

### **The Natural Economy Northwest team**

Because Natural Economy Northwest is a partnership programme, its team is spread across a range of economic and environmental organisations, who in turn are spread across the region. The team is:

- Will Williams, Programme Director
- Katie Read, Natural Tourism Manager
- Peter Wilmers, Green Infrastructure Manager
- Gareth Richards, Business Manager
- Susan Clark, Communications Team Leader/Natural England
- Joe Woodford, Marketing Account Manager/NWDA

## **What our speakers said... Sir Martin Doughty, Chair, Natural England**

'The challenge facing our natural environment has never been greater,' said Sir Martin Doughty. 'Yet the willingness on the part of Government, business and the community to meet the challenge has also never been stronger.' Climate change has made businesses and the public realise just how intertwined the economy is with the natural environment. We need only look at the Stern Review for a bleak economic picture if we don't take action now to safeguard the environment and protect against climate change. 'It is vital,' said Doughty, 'that the value of the natural environment is factored into all levels of decision-making. This means there is an urgent need to look at new solutions and new ways of working together.'

### **A healthy natural environment.**

'To ensure that future generations can enjoy England's rich geology, landscapes and biodiversity means we must significantly improve the protection and management of what we have today,' said Doughty. 'Natural Economy Northwest's emphasis on maintaining and improving biodiversity will result in enhanced delivery of regional and local biodiversity action plans - and a better strategic fit between these plans and the regional socio-economic agenda.' Doughty stressed the economic importance of biodiversity by outlining the contribution that natural tourism makes to the regional economy. 'The economic case is clear,' said Doughty, 'But generating additional spend from the natural environment will require investment to ensure habitats are managed, restored and enhanced, as well more effective marketing to visitors.'

### **Health and recreation**

Natural England is also working to get more people out into the great outdoors. 'We all know getting out into the natural environment makes us feel good,' said Doughty, 'but people still need to be encouraged to value and actively care for it.' Some 1.26bn trips are made to the countryside or open space every year, generating £9.7bn for the UK's economy. Beyond this economic spend, however, improved access to green space can deliver health benefits to the seven out of ten people who currently don't take enough exercise to benefit their health. 'By enhancing services and facilities at key sites and offering more opportunities to be active,' said Doughty 'we can help reduce the cost of physical inactivity, which is estimated at £8m per annum.'

### **Sustainability**

Developing the natural economy will only deliver results if it focuses on sustainable development. A balance has to be struck, for example, between the demand for homes and jobs set within a high quality natural environment and protecting that same environment from over development. This balance has already been met in some areas of the Northwest. 'I've been told about a regional example where developing sustainable business has brought significant benefits for the environment, local communities and businesses,' said Doughty. 'A report by the District Valuer of work completed at Bold Colliery, St Helens, provides compelling evidence of how a regeneration initiative that included the planting of a community woodland enhanced property values by £15m.' Developing a green infrastructure can generate sustainable development. 'We will work with you,' said Doughty, 'to ensure that any work to regenerate the natural environment addresses these issues in an integrated way and strengthens the economic engagement in Green Infrastructure.'

### **A secure environmental future**

'Social and economic development – along with environmental change – will have significant consequences for the natural environment,' argued Doughty. 'These consequences need to be understood and considered within decision-making if the natural environment is to be protected and enhanced.' Doughty pointed to the role that habitats play in addressing climate change. Upland peat bogs, for example, act as a carbon sink, reduce flooding and minimise water treatment costs. 'With the Northwest home to the largest concentration of lowland raised bogs in England, maintaining the peatlands must be at the forefront of our efforts to counter climate change.'

### **Strengthening investment.**

Natural Economy Northwest has already identified that additional funding – via the Objective 2 Tourism and Environment Fund – could be used to develop natural tourism. But, said Doughty, 'I would like to challenge you to suggest how we can strengthen investment further. Together we can explore new approaches that challenge our way of doing business. Now is the right time to work together to ensure that the funding is used to achieve the greatest overall outcomes for the environment and the economy.'

## **What our speakers said... Peter Hensman, Board Member, Northwest Regional Development Agency**

### **A sustainable regional economy**

Sustainable development is the key to region's prosperity and is at the heart of the Regional Economic Strategy,' said Peter Hensman. The Regional Economic Strategy (RES) has identified the natural environment as a priority, with the RES underpinning the entire Natural Economy Northwest programme. And sustainable development increasingly chimes with business practice. Projects such as Environment Connect, for example, support regional businesses, helping them become greener and more efficient. 'Through Environment Connect, we have helped companies like Tullis Russell Coaters Ltd, a paper product manufacturer in Cheshire,' said Hensman. 'Tullis Russell already had a sustainable approach to their business: they make paper for stamps and recycled much of their waste. But their market changed with the introduction of sticky-back stamps, which are much harder to recycle, meaning a large amount of waste had to go to landfill.' With advice from Environment Connect, the company was able to save £70,000 a year, as well as improve the sustainability of their business. 'Just this one example shows how placing the environment at the heart of regional business makes sound business sense,' said Hensman.

### **Developing and supporting tourism**

Elsewhere, a protected natural environment generates good quality of life – as well as contributing to the £7bn regional visitor economy. 'This equates to 7% of the region's economy,' pointed out Hensman, 'and supports an estimated 400,000 jobs. Natural tourism is a big opportunity for the region and the Natural Economy Northwest programme.' But any development within the tourism sector has to be sustainable, and the NWDA is developing a practical sustainable tourism framework to support it. 'One of the key goals of the Regional Tourism Strategy,' said Hensman, quoting directly from it, 'is for all activity related to tourism and the visitor economy to be based on the principles of sustainable development.'

### **Regional image**

Despite almost 30% of the Northwest being national park or an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the region's image is based on its urban centres. 'We are still sometimes viewed as a largely post-industrial region,' said Hensman, 'and we have a long way to go to persuade not just those outside the region, but those inside it, as to how lucky we are to have such a diverse and plentiful natural environment. But by valuing our natural environment more, we can help change perceptions.' Ensuring that the region's businesses and decision-makers value the natural environment will lead to greater inward investment. 'Businesses will choose to relocate or expand here, and key workers will choose the better quality of life our environment offers as a reason for living and working in the Northwest.'

## **What our speakers said... John Leaver, Chair, The SITA Trust**

'We've invested £55 million so far,' said John Leaver as he introduced the SITA Trust. The Trust is responsible for the Landfill Communities Fund and runs two programmes: Enriching Communities and Enriching Nature. The latter focuses on biodiversity and it is through this project that the Trust supports the Natural Economy Northwest. 'We created a dialogue with each regional biodiversity forum,' said Leaver, 'and through them developed project assessment panels. We split the funding across the regions and invested £8 million into 150 projects.'

£900,000 of funding was directed to 100 projects in the Northwest. 'The key to the project's success has been the partnerships we've made,' said Leaver, 'and the panel in the Northwest – led by Natural Economy Northwest's Will Williams – has been one of the best we've worked with.' Enriching Nature was vastly oversubscribed. 'It was very challenging,' admitted Leaver, 'but the panels showed themselves to be courageous and imaginative – and able to make judgements on competing priorities. We relied on them to make the decisions for us.'

Although Enriching Nature supports biodiversity, the SITA Trust also prioritises projects that deliver social and economic benefits. 'Our investment has had a broad impact,' said Leaver, 'creating direct and indirect employment opportunities, raising public awareness, increasing tourism and creating volunteer opportunities. We're delighted to be supporting Natural Economy Northwest and to be involved in the development of the region.'

### **What our next steps are... the 100 Days Campaign**

Kicking off on 25 June, the 100 Days Campaign is an email, online and media relations campaign that raises the profile of the contribution that the natural environment makes to our economy, culture and society. It's a marketing campaign aimed at the region's businesses, decision-makers and policymakers – all those individuals and organisations who invest in the Northwest.

Each day for 100 days, the campaign reveals a new fact about the Northwest's natural environment. Each day, people across the region learn how the environment delivers economic benefits, how it boosts health, and how it contributes to regional business.

The campaign is not about Natural Economy Northwest. It focuses on the wider natural economy and the natural environment. It's being supported by environment sector organisations from across the region, many of whom have supplied facts, stories and statistics for use in the campaign. The 100 Days Campaign will, then, profile those organisations and ensure that funding and governmental bodies, developers, regional business and policymakers begin to value not only the natural environment but the work of the organisations committed to maintaining and nurturing it.

The campaign is up and running. Visit [www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk](http://www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk) for more details or email [joanna@creativeconcern.com](mailto:joanna@creativeconcern.com) sign up for the weekly campaign emails.

### **What our next steps are... the Natural Economy Network**

Launched on 14 June, the Natural Economy Network is a collaborative forum for environmental economy news, information, reports and more. A monthly email newsletter supplies updates on organisations working across the Northwest, and it also gives members access to the growing set of downloadable tools being developed by Natural Economy Northwest. Tools range from presentations on Green Infrastructure and natural tourism, resources from the 100 Days Campaign and a set of ongoing reports.

Visit our website for more details, or email [joanna@creativeconcern.com](mailto:joanna@creativeconcern.com) to register for the emails.