

National Character Areas (NCA) Tool Review

Ecosystem Services Tools

TABLES Project 2012: Mini reviews	
Guidance	<i>Using your experience and expertise, consider the following tasks in relation to the tool. It may not be possible to complete all tasks for each tool due to a lack of available information, the task not applying to the tool, etc. Please note where this is the case by writing in the reason in the space provided. Please use a maximum of 6 pages of A4 (excluding diagrams and appendices). Your responses are required in the white spaces.</i>
Task 1: Basic information	
Name of the tool	National Character areas (NCAs)
Type of tool (list all that apply) <i>Learning and skills (pedagogic); participatory; regulatory; collaborative; mapping; valuation; modelling; decision; futures; financial; ecosystem services</i>	
Group members <i>(minimum size 3 members, must include a BCU rep)</i>	1. Alister Scott
	2.
	3.
	4.
	5.

Please provide a brief synopsis of the tool

This may include: background context, development (and ownership if appropriate), current use and applications etc.

Please also note any desired outcomes of the tool so that you can make reference back to these in Task 7: SWOT analysis

This is a decision support tool to help the partners of Natural England think about combining landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity and landscape change within an ecosystem services framework. This tool builds directly from the Landscape Character Areas and Joint Character Areas work that informed landscape policy approaches at the turn of the century.

“NCAs provide information on the natural and cultural features that shape landscapes. They also help to identify opportunities to enhance the distinctive qualities of landscapes, including biodiversity, geodiversity as well as other essential ecosystem services. This will help to equip local communities with the tools they need to understand and shape their surroundings” (Natural England 2012 <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/publications/nca/default.aspx>).

Using a template it allows evidence to be built up across 159 identified NCAs. For the first time information is being pulled together across environmental disciplines and each profile seeks to condense thousands of pages of data (including ecosystem service data and analysis to identify key environmental opportunities. It is designed to be a strategic high level document for policy making at a landscape scale by a range of key players.

The process is bespoke and undertaken by Natural England staff using available evidence and then making assessments with justifications. This is then quality assured with consultation is undertaken internally across functional teams (land management, access, land use) and also including views from key partners representative of different sectors of society (e.g Local Authorities, FC, NFU, CLA, EA, English Heritage, Wildlife Trusts, AONB’s), before production in public reports.

The following key headings are used :

Description: This is a landscape led description of an area. It identifies links to other NCAs and the distinct qualities that shape this area. It draws heavily on the suite of LCAs produced.

Opportunities : These are statements of environmental opportunity which are derived from an analysis of key facts, landscape change and description together with other relevant documents/strategies

Key Facts and data : Focusses on existing suite of designations (landscape and biodiversity)

Landscape Change: Global summary of landscape changes using Countryside Quality Counts data

Analysis: Shows the projected impact of Statement of Environmental Opportunity on Ecosystem Service Provision. It is noteworthy that attention is given to cultural services here in their distinctive forms



This approach is designed to get Natural England’s partners to think about ecosystem services within their own planning and management approaches. It also involves NE staff within a learning process. It is a voluntary guidance tool with no statutory footing however and is seen as a tool to help and inform. To date it has been used the Forestry Commission to provide information on local landscapes to support their ‘Woodland Potential Calculator’. Pennine Prospects are using the Southern Pennines NCA published in March 2012, to support the development of a woodland creation and management strategy for the South Pennines; a Heritage Lottery funded Watershed Landscape Project; a Local Nature Partnership application on behalf of a wider South Pennines Partnership.

Task 2: Use of the tool			
Position / Use <i>If you can, please indicate which stage(s) of the decision / policy making process your tool is / could be used in (these stages were identified in the specification document)</i>	Stage	Currently used	Could be used
	Ideas	Yes	Yes
	Survey	yes	Yes
	Assess	Yes	Yes
	Policy / decision	No	Potential
	Implement	Yes	Yes
	Evaluate	Not yet	Potential
Please add any further comments here: The tool is very new and evolving and hence had not had any substantive evaluation. Reports produced thus far have had some good reviews but it is not yet clear how they are being used by partners.			
Task 3: Existing literature about the tool			
Are you aware of any KEY policy and / or academic literature evaluating your tool? <i>(e.g. reports, journal articles, books)</i>	Author & Date	Title Vol pages	Web link (if available)
	Please add any further comments here: Natural England National Character Profile Areas http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/category/587130 Given its relative newness there are no academic or policy evaluations as yet. This review is therefore based on informal discussions and my own work on landscape management and policy.		
Task 4: Your experience of working on the tool			
Have you done any research/consultancy work on this tool in terms of its development, testing and/or evaluation? <i>If so, please provide an outline.</i>	I have been heavily involved in the development of landscape assessment and evaluation that shaped the landscape character approaches in England, Wales and Scotland. I gave used this experience to conduct a simple evaluation of the tool thus far. Natural England senior management have championed the development of National Character areas throughout the work programmes of the organisation. It therefore becomes a tool for helping manage staff and their own work programmes. Mark Philiips appointed to his present position in October 2011 has helped re-design the initial template and NCA process to produce a relatively simple and well signposted set of outputs for partners that explicitly incorporates ecosystem services within it. Evaluation is ongoing but there remains the key issue of data gaps and obsolescence in light of landscape changes.		
Guidance	For Tasks 5-7, please also try to consider the future development and application of this tool in the TABLES project in your answers.		
Task 5: Incorporating the ecosystem approach (EA) and ecosystem services (ES)			
Please refer to the summary text about ES for concept clarification at the end of this template (appendix)			
Using examples (from practice, research or consultancy), explain how EA	At present the ES is explicitly incorporated into the tool within the analysis phase. In each statement of environmental opportunity prepared in the NCA template the projected impact on ecosystem services is assessed. A symbol based approach is used with		

<p>and/or ES are currently incorporated in/by the tool</p> <p><i>If neither approach is currently incorporated, please move to the next question</i></p>	<p>assessments drawing on data (where available) but equally on the experience of the inputter (Natural England specialist). Given that one overall decision is made on the impact on ecosystem services, the decision is not traceable to data in its present form.</p> <p>There is widespread recognition of the issue of data quality and the problems of making global assessments across what are diverse areas of landscape. However, it does give a clear indication at the NCA scale of the cumulative impact of certain actions on the ecosystem services. It is however only looking at the net effect only.</p>
<p>How <u>could</u> the ecosystem approach and/or ecosystem services be (further) incorporated within the existing tool?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There could be a more inclusive process allowing other organisations to work collaboratively on filling out templates to help with triangulation particularly given the significant data gaps. 2. There is an opportunity to incorporate local knowledge and expertise more explicitly at the outset which is lost in many of the desk based assessments that are made. Consultation is made late in the process. 3. There is an opportunity to incorporate statements of economic and social (community opportunity) within a more integrated set of impacts on ecosystem service outputs using what if (scenarios). 4. The current unpacking of Strategic Environmental Opportunity has important information that could be subjected to separate ecosystem service assessments which then collectively shape an overall assessment. 5. Many of the assessments are made based on desk based assessments; field based recordings would enhance and help ground truth the process. 6. Need to make explicit the nature of deficiency and level of uncertainty in assessments within the NCA profiles. . 7. Need to look beyond statements of environmental opportunity and look at what if issues to allow a greater input into planning policy issues and address landscape change 8. The process of filling out templates represents a powerful learning opportunity about ecosystem services within NE. This could be captured to improve skills understanding and provide support to staff and partners in NE. 9. There is an opportunity to update the templates to ensure that these do not represent a domes day snapshot. 10. Cross referencing the ES assessments to data and decision making justifications 11. Electronic access and interactions set within a public portal encouraging the use of an open space format. . 12. Ability to drill down across scale to have more complex assessments. This would

follow the LCA approach.

Task 6: Situating the tool within priority questions/criteria arising from the scoping interviews

Explain how the tool can be situated within the priority questions/criteria that arose in the scoping interviews

Complete as many boxes as required

Priority question/criteria	Does your tool address/implement this question/criteria? Or does it have the potential if it was better integrated with an EA/ES approach? <i>Please explain how.</i>
Language and communication	
1. Contribution to aiding the development of shared vocabulary within which principles of EA and ES can be shared with multiple stakeholders across built and/or natural environment	Strong The whole idea of NCAs is that it gets people to think about these issues in a relatively simple and straightforward way.
2. Capacity of the tool to develop shared understandings of the many identities and values of places from the perspectives of multiple visitors, residents and businesses	Partly. The NCA profiles help people understand what makes these areas tick. Unsure how accessible and usable the documents will be for all these different audiences.
3. Capacity of the tool to improve or enable engagement across different publics so avoiding the usual suspect problem	Partly. Simplified nature of these is affording them success in many quarters as many community groups are making sense of them and realising the value of certain features and processes in their locality, so something about the format of them is resonating with people. The unique geography and spatial framing limits some uptake.
Learning from experience/pedagogy	
4. Capacity of the tool to help reveal and value 'hidden' assets that are not recognised by communities or publics that use them	Good. This is a good tool that will help people understand what is distinctive about a particular character area and the key assets that help to support the ecosystem services.
5. Extent to which tool is building on other tools or EA/ES progress	Partially. The tool builds on LCA but also helps link across landscape, biodiversity and geodiversity, and as such could be beneficial given that landscape and nature /culture conservation remains a significant divide within policy and practice in England.
6. Extent to which tool is locally derived or grounded or can be adjusted to closely reflect 'local' context. Is the tool suitable for an open source	Partially. The tool can be grounded. Specialist staff are used to support key areas and assets in NCAs to ensure that the correct assessments are made as far as is possible. However the NCA scale varies from

approach?	small to large.
7. Extent to which the tool is open to interpretation and application in a variety of forms (that reflect 'cultural' differences)	Strong. The tool is flexible to help people understand ecosystem thinking within particular landscape settings. It therefore seeks to inform and therefore will be open to different interpretations. There is also an issue over the extent to which the data inputted and assessments made might vary across staff although there is a system of QA in place.
Developing and selecting tools	
8. Is the tool dependent on a specific funding source? How onerous is the application procedure? What are the chances of success?	Yes The tool is funded through NE core budgets. New Defra ministers and also changes in NE senior management might lead to changes in support? However the full buy in from NE Board and the embedding of all staff in this suggests it will become even more important for guiding the work of the organisation.
9. Does skills development (essential or optional?) and support exist for the tool or is there a body to ensure the optimal and correct use of it?	Yes. The NCA process does require training and support. NE staff are required to use these templates within their work programmes so it is embedded in the organisation. There is support and training given by NE through the NCA National Team (and using experienced authors to share knowledge) dedicated person (Mark Phillips- ES). There is a lot of 'learning by doing' with Mark as facilitator and guide.
10. Extent to which current statutory hooks can be exploited by the tool or will benefit the quality or application of the tool (e.g. NNPF's duty to cooperate, SUDS, ecol. networks)	Strong but with spatial biases towards existing designations: Synergy between national park plans and the NCAs and AONBS in particular.
Informing resultant policies effectively	
11. Extent to which the tool informs or improves policies/decisions. What does the tool cover? (full range of positive and negative economic, social and environment impacts / tradeoffs?)	Partially. The tool does look at ecosystem services based on the projected impact of environmental opportunities. It does not cover what ifs or particular development proposals.
12. How does the tool link into the planning system (applications and processes). At what cost / extra burden?	No. At present it is too crude as an overall measure which limits its value in planning decisions. The description could be used within a more generic landscape assessment.
Delivering management objectives	
13. Suitability or capacity of the tool to assist with managing visitor needs and pressures	Partial. The overall impact on recreation is assessed with regard to environmental opportunities but it

within protected areas / the considered area? How?	misses the impact from economic and social opportunities. There is a marked bias towards landscape designations.
Local ownership/new governance	
14. To what extent can the tool assist in developing statutory plans (local and management plans) and improve ownership and use by publics?	Limited. Issues of generality and lack of traceability of decision to evidence. However, they can provide a useful context.
15. To what extent does/could the tool contribute to a new form of community governance in management of the environment?	Partially. As a tool it can provide a resource for communities. Recognised need for Natural England to make work visible in the local arena
Improved tools: understanding flows, interconnections and spatial issues	
16. Capacity to improve spatial understandings of the flows and interactions of various ecosystem services between sectors and at different scales	Weak: written as separate documents not linking the thinking across scales and boundaries due to different authors. The big picture solutions and interventions are excluded from analysis at scales larger than NCA ie The processes are interrelations which operate between separate NCAs within the same river basin. Wider opportunities from thinking at this scale includes cropping and flood improvement schemes.
17. Capacity of the tool to reconcile assessments of options and benefits across different scales (and sectors)	Weak because it is expert led to such a degree rather than being able to be deconstructed and rebuilt in different forms in the way which data led models can.
18. Extent to which the tools is capable or can be manipulated to work across sectoral and administrative boundaries	This is a weak attribute of the tool.
19. Extent to which the tool can handle data shortages and gaps (or is effectiveness considerably compromised?)	Strong: data is an issue but in the context of the NCAs the outputs have been produced to support policy/decisions. Currently there are no statements that highlight the lack of evidence and data.
20. To what extent has/could the tool put landscape/nature conservation and designated species/sites on the radar (positively or resulting in resentment?)	The tool has a bias towards designated sites as that is where the best evidence is. There are concerns that wider countryside sites are more susceptible to data shortages. This is potentially a big issue as some priority habitats where local/regional data is lacking is not currently taken into account in these documents although links to local records office are included.

Please add any further comments here:

The tool leads to outputs in the public domains. There is a risk that in order to be a public document some of the tensions and conflicts across the cultural services are neglected and

remain hidden.

Task 7: A SWOT analysis of the tool

Referring back to the relevant policy and academic literature (listed in Task 3), plus your own expertise (listed in Task 4) and the way in which the tool is situated within the priority questions/criteria (listed in Task 6), please complete a summary SWOT analysis ensuring that each point is well justified

Where possible, this analysis should reflect the tool's past and current application, as well as its effectiveness in policy and

Strengths *(of the tool in delivering intended outcomes)*

- Bold focussing and simplifying key outcomes and processes.
- Praise for cutting through academia and giving leadership.
- Pragmatism.
- Willingness to simplify.
- Staff learning tool.
- A set of statements of environmental opportunity which set out possibilities for future enhancement of the area.

Weaknesses *(factors that detract from the tool's ability to deliver intended outcomes)*

- Natural England designed and developed the tool in isolation.
- No spatial interactive map/tool with the outputs?
- Some data is old/out of date. Needs to be a way of ensuring data is refreshed and kept up to date.
- Using JCAs as a geography that is not understood or used in any substantive way by other organisations; crucially all partners use different spatial geographies.
- Catchments based partnership working/approach is becoming more common and offers an opportunity for this approach to be superimposed within catchment based approach pilots.

Opportunities *(consider opportunities for application of the ecosystem approach and services)*

See Task 5

Major opportunity to have local expertise that informs the data through an open source platform.

<p><i>decision making processes</i></p>	<p>Threats (<i>factors which negatively affect the tool and its outcomes</i>)</p> <p><i>Classify these by their “seriousness” and “probability of occurrence” in the table below, and pay particular attention to the threats associated with potential use of ecosystem approach/ecosystem services.</i></p> <table border="1" data-bbox="351 358 1404 817"> <thead> <tr> <th>Threat</th> <th>Seriousness (high, medium, low)</th> <th>Probability of occurrence (high, medium, low)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>The abandonment of NCAs as they fail to catch on with partners as planning tools</td> <td>Medium</td> <td>Medium</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Merger with EA and FC creates new body which discontinues NCAs</td> <td>Medium</td> <td>Low</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Loss of key staff delivering NCA</td> <td>High</td> <td>Low</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Funding of NE cut</td> <td>High</td> <td>Low</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Defra change priorities</td> <td>Medium</td> <td>Low</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Please add further comments here:</p>	Threat	Seriousness (high, medium, low)	Probability of occurrence (high, medium, low)	The abandonment of NCAs as they fail to catch on with partners as planning tools	Medium	Medium	Merger with EA and FC creates new body which discontinues NCAs	Medium	Low	Loss of key staff delivering NCA	High	Low	Funding of NE cut	High	Low	Defra change priorities	Medium	Low
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<p>Guidance</p>	<p><i>Please now use the remainder of the document (box below) to make any general comments, observations or analyses of the tool</i></p>																		
<p>Further comments</p>	<p>This is a tool under development. Its exposure to public and academic scrutiny is limited and hence evaluations are also subject to these weaknesses.</p> <p>Expectations from partners about what they expect to be in the document and the reality of what NE templates and guidance states should be in the document are very different.</p> <p>Academic comment: Given the limited resources in this area it seems important that as many people as possible agree a spatial geography within which decision tools can be embedded. We have too many different spatial frameworks that serve to confuse.</p>																		

Appendix

Supporting document 3: Analysis supporting Statements of Environmental Opportunity

The following analysis shows the projected impact of the Statements of Environmental Opportunity on Ecosystem Service Provision:

Statement of Environmental Opportunity	Ecosystem Service																		
	Food provision	Timber provision	Water availability	Genetic diversity	Biomass energy	Regulating climate	Regulating water quality	Regulating soil quality	Regulating water flow	Regulating soil erosion	Pollination	Pest regulation	Regulating coastal erosion	Recreational opportunity	Inspiration/Sense of place	Biodiversity	Geodiversity	Tranquillity	Sense of history
Safeguard, manage and enhance the large areas of open, expansive moorland, and the Internationally Important habitats and species they support, as well as protecting soils and water resources	↗ **	↔ **	↑ **	•	•	↑ **	↑ **	↑ ***	↗ **	↑ ***	↗ *	↗ *	n/a	↗ *	↑ *	↑ ***	↔ *	↔ *	↑ ***
Manage and enhance the pastoral character of the moorland fringes, lower hills and valleys, with their mosaics of pastures and meadows, and their strong field patterns defined by drystone walls, to improve ecological networks and strengthen landscape character.	↗ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	•	↗ *	↗ **	↔ *	↗ *	↗ *	↗ **	↗ *	n/a	↗ *	↑ *	↑ ***	↔ *	↔ *	↗ *
Protect the comprehensive range of historic landscape features for their cultural value and the contribution they make to local distinctiveness and sense of identity.	↔ *	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	↔ **	n/a	↗ *	↑ *	↔ **	↔ **	↗ *	↑ ***
Improve opportunities for the enjoyment and understanding of the landscape, and to experience the sense of escapism and inspiration, whilst also conserving the qualities of the landscape and its valuable historic and wildlife features.	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	↘ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	n/a	↑ ***	↑ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *	↔ *

Note: Arrows shown in the table above indicate anticipated impact on service delivery ↑=increase ↗=Slight Increase ↔=No change ↘=Slight Decrease ↓=Decrease. Asterisks denote confidence in projection (*low **medium***high) •=symbol denotes where insufficient information on the likely impact is available. Dark plum =National Importance; Mid plum =Regional Importance; Light plum =Local Importance

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