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From species to systems: ecosystem services resulting from bird conservation

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Last year's Natural Environment White Paper and new England Biodiversity Strategy may, with hindsight, be viewed as the point at which nature conservation in England underwent a step change. These documents signalled a shift in environmental policy towards greater emphasis on what the environment does for us as human beings, and protecting it as a means of safeguarding our own future. This growing awareness of ecosystem services, the benefits provided to people from functioning ecosystems, has been reflected in the academic literature for many years now, but the publication of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005 caught the interest of the wider policy community. Undertaking a similar assessment for the UK – the National Ecosystem Assessment – has provided the evidence base upon which this new policy framework has developed.

Although a greater understanding and acknowledgment of the value of biodiversity and the environment as a whole is generally welcomed, there are those in the nature conservation lobby who are uneasy about any shift to ecosystem services. Arguably those working, volunteering or just interested in the natural world tend to recognize its inherent value and do not feel the need to justify why we should conserve and protect – it is the right thing to do. There is a fear that a focus on ecosystem services will divert resources, undermine traditional biodiversity-led work and lead to the neglect of those species and ecosystems which do not appear to have the greatest value to society. Is this anxiety justified and what do we need to do to avoid such conflicts?

In this presentation we will discuss the potential impact of the ecosystem services agenda and adoption of the ecosystem approach on nature conservation in England. We will consider the extent to which traditional approaches to bird conservation might meet the needs of society and deliver a range of ecosystem services and conversely how adopting the ecosystem approach might affect bird conservation and change priorities. We will look at how species conservation and safeguarding ecosystem services might be achieved in concert, focusing in particular on upland habitats and lowland farmed landscapes. We will illustrate this through examples from Natural England's work both through species conservation projects and through our recent ecosystem approach pilots.