

*This paper forms part of the proceedings from the BOU conference **Ecosystem services: do we need birds?**
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Partnerships and strategic challenges

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Thirty years ago the ecosystem approach was almost dead, but the last 10 years has seen a resurgence in the interest of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in the ecosystem approach and the value that can be placed on ecosystem services. This in part derives from placing a greater value on the benefits that humans derive from ecosystem services and of the need to understand the trade-offs between the different services in making decisions about how we best use our land and seas. Understandably, this has led to some tensions with established approaches towards conservation, some of which are explored in this conference.

In support of the ecosystem approach, the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) has provided a comprehensive assessment of the state of our understanding of ecosystem services. Following the publication of the UK NEA and the Natural Environment White paper, a range of initiatives, highlighted in this meeting, are now progressing across the UK to make the ecosystem approach mainstream. There has also been a substantial increase in research funding at the ecosystem scale by the Living With Environmental Change partners to further develop the evidence base and plug gaps in our understanding.

Looking forward, it is clear that our environment is changing in an unprecedented fashion as a result of world population growth and the consumption of natural resources. We face an unprecedented number of challenges as we simultaneously try to conserve biodiversity, mitigate climate change and improve human well-being whilst ensuring food, water and energy security. Addressing these challenges requires working in partnership and taking a systems perspective at which the ecosystem approach must lie at the heart.

This conference has highlighted a wide range of topics relating to birds from an ecosystem perspective ranging from valuation and the cultural services they provide to the specifics of the role that birds play in ecosystem functioning. This talk will end with a reflection on some of those issues, knowledge gaps and future directions.