Defining and delivering resilient ecological networks: an example for nature conservation in England

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1365-2664.13196

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1 **Defining and delivering resilient ecological networks: an example**

2 **for nature conservation in England**

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Summary

36

37   1. Planning for nature conservation has increasingly emphasised the concepts of

38   resilience and spatial networks. Although the importance of networks of habitat for

39   individual species is clear, their importance for long-term ecological resilience and

40   multi-species conservation strategies is less well established.

41   2. Referencing spatial network theory, we describe the conceptual basis for defining and

42   assessing a network of wildlife areas that supports the resilience of species to multiple

43   forms of perturbations and pressures. We explore actions that could enhance network

44   resilience at a range of scales, based on ecological principles, with reference to four

45   well-established strategies for intervention in a spatial network (Better, Bigger, More

46   and Joined) from the influential *Making Space for Nature* report by Lawton *et al.*

47   (2010).

48   3. Building existing theory into useable and scalable approaches applicable to large

49   numbers of species is challenging but tractable. We illustrate the policy context,

50   describe the elements of a long-term adaptive management plan and provide example

51   actions, metrics and targets for early implementation using England as a case study,

52   where there is an opportunity to include large-scale ecological planning in a newly

53   launched 25-year environment plan.

54   4. *Policy Implications*: The scientific principles to place resilience and network theory at

55   the heart of large-scale and long-term environmental planning are established and

56   ready to implement in practice. Delivering a resilient network to support nature

57   recovery is achievable, and can be integrated with ongoing conservation actions.

58   England's 25 Year Environment Plan provides the ideal testbed.

59   **Keywords**: Corridor, Climate change, Biodiversity conservation, Habitat management,

60   Protected Area, Metapopulation, Nature Recovery Network, Resilience

3

Introduction

62 It is well understood that species exhibit inter-connected dynamics over large areas ($>>10^3$

63 km^2). Metapopulation theory has been influential in applied ecology and conservation for

64 decades (Cadotte *et al.* 2017). Recent extensions of this concept to meta-communities and

65 networks of interlinked ecosystems (Logue *et al.* 2011; Pellissier *et al.* 2017) give rise to the

66 notion of spatial ecological networks, which describe the large-scale distribution and

67 dynamics of species and communities.

68 These dynamics are especially significant when considering longer-term resilience under

69 changing environmental pressures. There is now a substantial literature on ecological

70 resilience (Cumming & Peterson, 2017; Morecroft *et al.*, 2012; Oliver *et al.*, 2015). Here, we

71 define a resilient ecological network as one in which species can persist even in the face of

72 natural perturbations and human activities (including climate change). The twin concepts of

73 networks and resilience are becoming increasingly influential in conservation planning

74 (Albert *et al.* 2017; Bixler *et al.* 2016; Samways & Pryke, 2016), recognising both the current

75 pressures on biodiversity and future climate change. Designing, evidencing, and

76 implementing large-scale conservation plans to achieve resilient networks is increasingly

77 feasible, although conceptual and practical challenges remain.

78 We consider these challenges in the context of England, representing a region strongly

79 influenced by human activities. Lawton *et al.* (2010) concluded that England's wildlife sites

80 needed to be "Better", "Bigger", "More" and "Joined" (henceforth "BBMJ") to constitute a

81 resilient network. The Lawton report has been highly influential (Rose *et al.* 2016) but there

82 has been little progress towards realising it, partly reflecting a lack of clarity about what a

83 resilient ecological network would look like. The publication in January 2018 of a 25-year

84 environment plan (henceforth 25YEP) for England (DEFRA 2018) provides a focus to

85 synthesise scientific progress and an opportunity to put the Lawton vision into practice.

4

86   The 25YEP includes a goal to create a resilient Nature Recovery Network based on the

87   Lawton principles. Specific commitments include: creating 500,000 hectares of new wildlife

88   habitat; putting 75% of existing protected sites into 'favourable condition'; and developing

89   metrics to assess progress towards these goals (DEFRA 2018). However, it is unclear

90   whether delivering these commitments would be sufficient to achieve Lawton's vision of

91   enhanced biodiversity and functional ecosystems in the face of climate change and other

92   pressures.

93   In this paper, we explore the scientific basis for planning ecological networks that are

94   resilient, building on spatial network theory. We elaborate on the features of resilient

95   multispecies networks and the interventions required to support them. We then consider how

96   metrics of resilience might be developed with reference to the 25YEP. The practical

97   complexities involved in delivering and evidencing the 25YEP's goal will be challenging, but

98   we highlight immediate actions that would contribute to the goal with a low risk of

99   unintended consequences.

100   **The rationale for BBMJ**

101   Ecological networks are subject to numerous pressures, whose impact can be distinguished in

102   three ways: (i) specificity: whether a single site is affected, through to all sites in the network;

103   (ii) intensity: the magnitude of impact (e.g. the severity of its effect on habitat quality or

104   average population size); and (iii) covariation: whether multiple sites are impacted

105   simultaneously (i.e. the extent to which impacts are spatially correlated).

106   Demographic, genetic and environmental stochasticity are all potentially more damaging for

107   smaller populations, so increasing population sizes by increasing habitat quality ('Better')

108   and expanding existing habitat patches ('Bigger') should dampen fluctuations in population

109   size, and enhance resilience to local stochasticity and perturbations. For perturbations that are

110   less specific, more intense and/or spatially correlated, the roles of habitat creation ('More')

111   and enhancing connectivity ('Joined') are more important, by promoting metapopulation

112   dynamics or geographic range shifts. Thus, the relative importance of the BBMJ strategies

113   depends on the spatiotemporal scale of pressures that the system experiences, but the ordering

114   reflects their significance for population viability at the landscape scale (Lawton, *et al*., 2010;

115   Hodgson *et al*. 2011).

116   'Bigger' sites are likely to contain larger populations on average, which are better buffered

117   against variable conditions. The impacts of 'Better' are much the same as 'Bigger', since

118   quality can be conceptualised in terms of an increase in population carrying capacity. 'More'

119   sites improve the capacity of the network to withstand perturbations, e.g. through

120   (re)colonization and rescue effects, thus increasing the chance that some populations survive

121   a global perturbation. Finally, 'Joined' sites facilitate movement through the network, which

122   is valuable in the face of global change. In practice, BBMJ strategies should be implemented

123   jointly according to both need and opportunity.

124   **Ecological Theory to Support Resilient Ecological Networks**

125   Network resilience is hard to demonstrate since it only becomes apparent when monitored

126   over long periods. Nonetheless, theory and empirical evidence provide insights into how it

127   could be measured and enhanced.

128   Classic metapopulation theory has guided much thinking in terms of managing habitat

129   networks to improve species' persistence (Cadotte *et al.* 2017). Metapopulation structure is

130   related to all four BBMJ strategies, and the metapopulation approach has been able to predict

131   species' persistence and expansion across landscapes (Nowicki *et al.* 2007; Hooftman *et al.*

132   2016). Metapopulation capacity measures the ability of a single-species network to support a

133   viable metapopulation (Hanski & Ovaskainen 2000), and is enhanced when many large

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134   patches are clumped in space. However, clumping can result in large gaps between

135   metapopulations, creating barriers to range expansion, so there is a trade-off (Hodgson *et al.*

136   2012).

137   Spatial network theory leads to comparable conclusions; persistence and resilience are

138   governed by both the distribution of nodes (habitat patches or populations) and the links

139   among them. Both overall connectedness and the existence of connected sub-systems

140   (modules) are important (Fortuna *et al.* 2006; Gilarranz *et al.* 2017). Approaches for

141   describing network structure include least-cost path analysis, least-cost corridors, graph

142   theory and circuit theory (Laita *et al.* 2011).

143   Thus, there is a strong theoretical and empirical basis for the planning of ecological networks.

144   Different modelling frameworks reach similar conclusions despite different assumptions.

145   Spatially-realistic simulations are becoming increasingly possible (Bocedi *et al.* 2014; Gilbert

146   *et al.* 2017), and the dynamics of multiple species across real landscapes can now be

147   projected in space and time. However, such simulations are data-hungry, and faster progress

148   might be made using simpler metrics from metapopulation, graph and circuit theories. There

149   is a need to research the strengths of these approaches, so as to develop easily-obtained,

150   robust, metrics for network resilience.

151   **Resilient Ecological Networks in Practice**

152   We suggest a five-stage adaptive management framework (Westgate *et al.*, 2013) for

153   designing and delivering a resilient network (Figure 1). Each assessment of resilience (step 1)

154   would be informed by actions implemented in previous iterations (step 4) and evidence of

155   their effectiveness (step 5), as well as new knowledge, new opportunities for action and

156   changing environmental pressures. The following sections describe these steps in detail.

157

7

158   *Figure 1: Adaptive Management Cycle for implementing a resilient ecological network. The*

159   *Vision specifies the desirable network that is resilient to future pressures. Theory-based*

160   *proxies for resilience are becoming available, based on scientific tools and techniques that*

161   *are continually developing (black arrows). Features of the existing network would be*

162   *evaluated regularly to determine the likelihood that the vision will be achieved (1). Plausible*

163   *conservation actions focussed on sites or species would be identified (2) and evaluated for*

164   *their potential to improve network resilience (3). Actual conservation actions are directed at*

165   *sites or species (4), and their effectiveness monitored (5).*

166
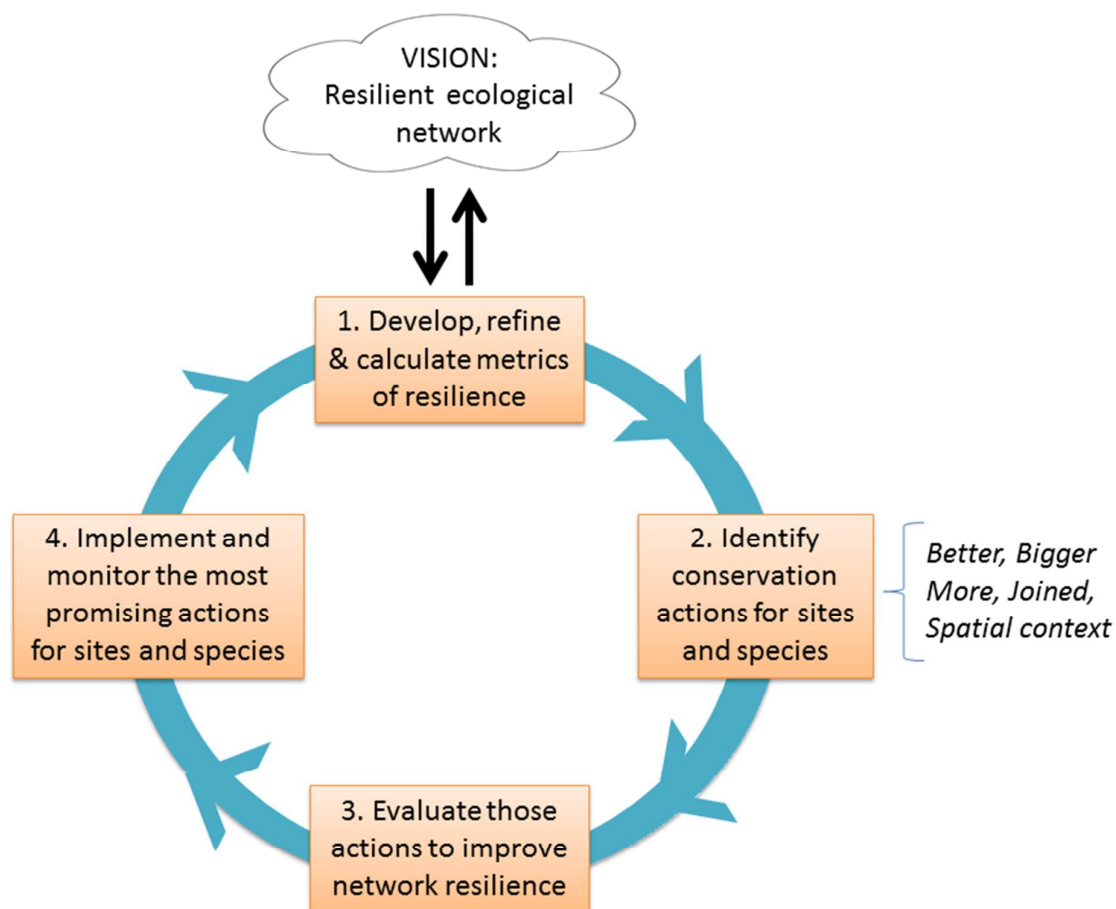
167   ***1) Assess resilience using measurable network features***

168   Network metrics can be developed using the theory described above. For example, species-

169   specific habitat models can be used to identify the distribution of suitable patches (e.g.

8

170   Lawson *et al.* 2012), and metrics such as metapopulation capacity can then be estimated.

171   Network resilience can be framed in terms of its probability density at some point in the

172   future (e.g. the probability that 80% of species will exceed some threshold value in 100

173   years) for alternative scenarios. Models might be built using data for as many species as

174   possible, and extended to others by modelling 'virtual species' (Santini *et al.* 2016).

175   ***2) Plausible actions to improve resilience***

176   In practice, plausible actions are limited to lower levels of organisation than the network

177   itself: sites are areas wherein conservation is practiced, and the level at which actions are

178   easiest to define (Lawton, *et al.*, 2010; Hodgson *et al.* 2011); conservation outcomes are

179   generally measured in terms of species' status.

180   Plausible actions comprise improved management (Better), expanding existing sites (Bigger),

181   and the establishment of new sites (More). These efforts can be arranged spatially (including

182   stepping-stones and corridors), and the matrix between patches 'softened' so as to increase

183   species' dispersal over multiple generations (Joined) (Figure 2). Conservation actions will

184   likely continue to target particular threatened species or communities for which the prospects

185   are poor without intervention, although successful interventions do not guarantee the

186   resilience of the network as a whole.

187

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9

189   *Figure 2: An idealised ecological network. Plausible actions to increase network resilience*

190   *include improving the condition (A) or size (B) of existing sites, creating new sites (C),*

191   *creating features that facilitate dispersal (D) and softening the matrix (E).*

192
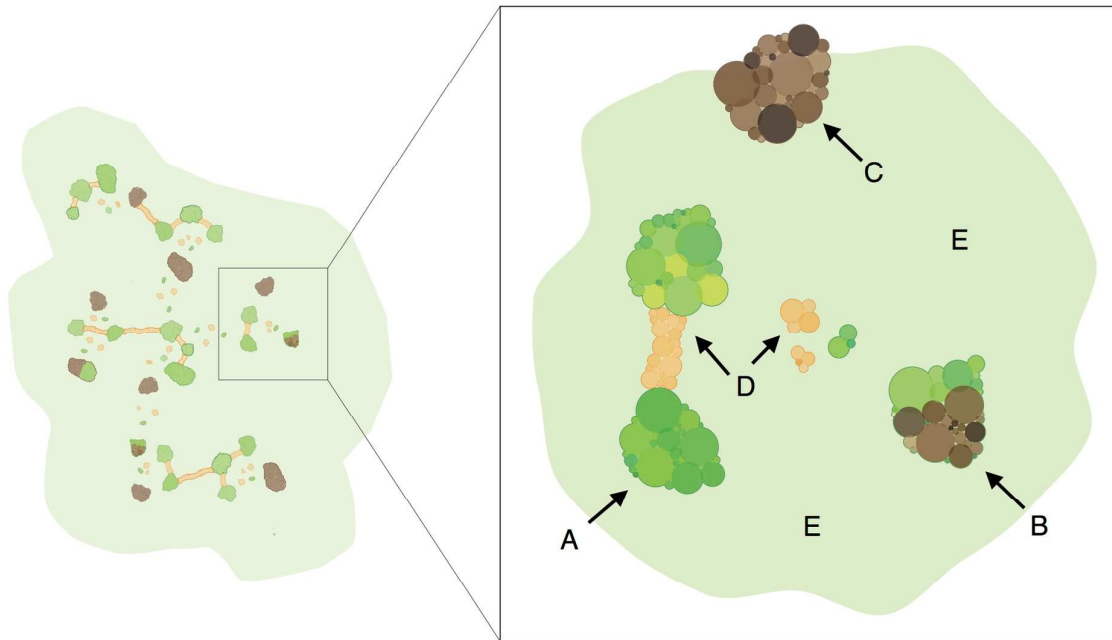
193   Many countries still have substantial areas of natural or semi-natural habitats where modest

194   actions could improve their contribution to species conservation (Sutherland *et al.* 2018).

195   However, in highly fragmented landscapes where network resilience needs to be re-built, it

196   will be necessary to create new habitat (Shwartz *et al.* 2017).

197   **3) Evaluate proposed actions in terms of potential gains in network resilience**

198   The potential effects of the plausible actions on network resilience could be evaluated in

199   terms of habitat suitability and connectivity for multiple species (Albert *et al.* 2017; Watts *et*

200   *al.* 2010). One could then use scenario-based modelling (Kukkala & Moilanen 2013) to

201   identify those locations at which action (e.g. habitat creation or improvement) may deliver

202   the biggest gain. Resilient networks also need to facilitate shifts in species' distributions.

10

203   Metrics based on circuit theory provide a convenient way to simulate the expected flow of

204   species under alternate network configurations (Hodgson *et al.* 2016).

205   ***4) Implement and Monitor***

206   The best actions identified in (3) would be enacted and their effectiveness monitored, both at

207   local sites and across the overall network. The timescales for success (increased network

208   resilience) may be long (decades) but modelling tools and continued monitoring (Box 2) will

209   feed into future iterations of the cycle (Figure 1).

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211   Our iterative approach towards enhancing network resilience will require major time and

212   resource commitments, which contrasts with the need to carry out remedial actions urgently.

213   As an interim, the principles of BBMJ and spatial network theory suggest a suite of actions,

214   which we outline for England in Box 1 that can have immediate benefits with negligible risks

215   of adverse effects (Hodgson *et al*., 2011).

216   The targets in Box 1 relate somewhat to the 25YEP commitments (DEFRA 2018), but we

217   suggest additional actions are needed to enhance the resilience of England's ecological

218   networks. The commitment to restore 75% of protected sites is similar to target (i) in Box 1,

219   and recognises the need for concerted efforts in habitat management. While the 25YEP calls

220   for a review of the functions of the National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

221   for wildlife delivery, we suggest quantitative targets are required to expand the area of high

222   quality habitat within them (target ii). Furthermore, we suggest a more ambitious target of

223   doubling of the area of land under long-term protection (target iii). The 25YEP's commitment

224   to creating 500,000 ha of wildlife habitat would contribute towards network resilience, but

225   the spatial configuration of this habitat is critical in determining the impact on resilience

226   (target iv). Finally, there is a need for targeted habitat creation with a focus on enhancing the

227   connectivity of the countryside (target v). Over time, these targets should develop in response

228   to the accumulation of evidence and knowledge about progress towards achieving the vision

229   of network resilience.

230   **Prospects**

231   The BBMJ approach sets a path towards targeted, scientifically underpinned interventions.

232   The ecological principles underpinning resilient ecological networks are now well

233   established. The time is right for implementation, although many challenges will emerge in

234   application to the real-world.

235   Research is required to allow quantification of network resilience, both in terms of measuring

236   network features and mapping them onto area-based and species-based proxies. Achieving

237   resilience to different pressures, for multiple species, will likely suggest conflicting actions.

238   For example, increased connectivity is beneficial for movement between patches, but can

239   reduce resilience to local perturbations (Gilarranz *et al.* 2017) and promote the spread of

240   invasive species.

241   The UK government's commitment to creating a resilient network for nature under the

242   25YEP provides an opportunity to show global leadership in taking a science-led approach to

243   network planning. A network that delivers for species and habitats would provide important

244   ecosystem services and opportunities for people to enjoy them. For example, protecting large

245   areas of peatland would support wildlife, secure carbon storage, improve water quality and

246   enhance opportunities for recreation. Bringing the design of a resilient network for nature to

247   fruition would be a step-change in wildlife conservation, providing the means to integrate,

248   and reconcile, the competing demands for space in an increasingly crowded, and

249   environmentally compromised, world.

13

250 **Acknowledgements**

253

254 *Box 1. Potential targets for delivering Better, Bigger, More and Joined wildlife sites in*

255 *England. Achieving these targets would likely enhance network resilience, until a more*

256 *formal evaluation is done.*

257 **(i)** **Improve the condition of protected areas.** Approximately 8% of England is

258 protected for nature conservation, underpinned by Sites of Special Scientific Interest[1], for

259 which the government has a target that 50% should be in "favourable condition"[2] by 2020

260 (currently 38%). We suggest an elevated target of 80% by ~2040 and that condition should be

261 redefined in terms of multispecies ecosystem properties, rather than for specific designated

262 features. **(=*Better*)**

263 **(ii)** **Improve the condition of landscapes that are not currently protected for nature**

264 **conservation but have broader roles** (e.g. recreation and preserving natural beauty).

265 National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty cover ~24% of England. Expanding

266 the area of high quality semi-natural habitat to cover 40% of these landscapes (an increase of

267 33%) to enable these large areas to be foci for the development of resilient ecological

268 networks. **(=*Better & Bigger*)**

269 **(iii)** **Increase the area of habitats under long-term protection for nature.** The

270 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has a target of 17% of terrestrial and freshwater

271 habitats to be conserved by 2020. An appropriate target for England would be to at least

272 double the area being protected (currently 8%) by designation and other effective long-term

273 measures by ~2040. **(= *Bigger & More*)**

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[1] Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), National Nature Reserves, Special Protected Areas, Special Areas of Conservation, and Ramsar sites. Although the levels of protection vary across categories, with the highest afforded to the international designations, all categories are also designated as SSSIs, and it is this designation that provides the reporting framework for all protected areas.

[2] 'Favourable condition' indicates that the designated feature(s) within a site are being adequately conserved, appropriately managed, and are meeting site-specific monitoring targets, which are subject to regular review.

274 **(iv)** **Establish large habitat areas by creation and/or restoration.** This entails

275 extending current high-quality sites and linking them with new habitat. Taking account of

276 past losses, creating 500,000 ha of well-positioned semi-natural habitat would make a

277 significant contribution to establishing a resilient network, and take the total area of this

278 habitat in England to ~2.25 million ha - just over 17% land area (cf. CBD target). Focussing

279 this activity in large areas would maximise wildlife benefits, enable the incorporation of

280 innovative management (e.g. rewilding) and be more cost effective. A suitable target for

281 England would be to establish 25 new landscape-scale habitat creation areas (each totalling

282 >10k ha) by ~2040. **(= *Bigger & More*)**

283 **(v)** **Improve the quality and extent of habitat connectivity.** Linear landscape features

284 such as along roads, footpaths, hedgerows, rivers and coasts, simultaneously provide habitat

285 and connect sites. Their quality and permeability should be improved through management

286 and restoration, and this habitat should be mapped and its condition assessed. Such features

287 are often heavily used by the public and so improvement in quality and extent would also

288 benefit people's quality of life. **(=*Better & Joined*).**

289
290

291 | *Box 2: Recommendations for implementing scientifically-underpinned actions for resilient*
292 | *networks*
293 | 1. Devise theory-based metrics to assess the resilience of ecological networks based on the
294 | modelled viability of multiple species under plausible environmental change scenarios.
295 | Evaluate these metrics regularly at multiple scales.
296 | 2. Derive and evaluate proxy measures for the components of network resilience. Examples
297 | could include: area of high-quality habitat ('Better'), median patch size ('Bigger'), total area
298 | of suitable habitat for multiple species ('More') or network conductance ('Joined').
299 | 3. Monitor the impacts of interventions on ecological parameters. For example, habitat
300 | patches close to intervention sites should experience lower extinction rates, higher
301 | colonization rates, and smaller fluctuations in population size than sites in control regions.

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