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Green Corridors in London

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LONDON ECOLOGY UNIT

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GREEN CORRIDORS IN LONDON

INTRODUCTION

This note is to explain and accompany maps prepared by the London Ecology Unit to indicate *Green Corridors* in Greater London. Corridors are a popular concept in planning for the conservation of nature, because it is widely believed that they may act as conduits to lead animals and plants into suburban and urban areas, which can then survive there as viable populations. These maps have been prepared for the series of handbooks on individual London Boroughs published by the Unit and also as a contribution to the preparation of Unitary Development Plans by London Boroughs; increasingly such corridors are being given protection in UDPs. Some have defined corridors as broad indicative bands, including much good wildlife habitat but also other land uses. Our approach here is rather to define more closely the extent of the corridor.

This note deals briefly with the conduit function of corridors and then goes on to describe the method used to define them in London and the use of the maps in local planning.

CORRIDORS AS CONDUITS

A review of the literature on corridors by the Unit shows that there is a very substantial body of research suggesting corridors do function as conduits, though very little of it comes near to proving the case. Decisions on the allocation of land and resources cannot wait the completion of critical studies, so planning must proceed on the basis of the present limited knowledge.

Corridors should be preserved and enhanced, where possible, as they probably do permit certain species to thrive where they otherwise would not. It is, however, difficult to specify just which species may benefit from corridors of just which nature, beyond the obvious conclusion that a corridor will be a better conduit the wider, the more continuous and the better are its component habitats.

THE CRITERIA

Preparation of corridor maps imposes a black-and-white view on the actual shades of grey of the face of London. This means that many decisions had to be made on which parcels of land qualified as corridors and which did not. Below, these criteria, and their rationale, are described.

Continuity

Corridors are required to lead from the countryside into the suburban and urban fabric. The Unit has never advocated that corridors need be absolutely continuous, but has not before spelt out just what kind of a gap can be tolerated in a corridor. The only long, truly continuous corridors in London are those for fully aquatic species in running water. Even these, however, may run underground for various distances before re-emerging. Short gaps, of no more than 200 metres, are permitted in our corridors, but they are considered to connect the running water habitat alone, and not any surrounding terrestrial habitat. The canals are a special case, where the continuity of the towpath ensures a better

continuity of terrestrial habitat than that by many other water courses.

Terrestrial habitats are inherently more discontinuous than running water. Here the size of gap allowed is more stringent. A common situation is a road or rail-side habitat strip cut by the tarmac of a road; here the corridor is allowed to continue, provided that the cut ends of the corridor facing each other over the gap are more than a few metres wide.

The habitat of rail routes is often braided by sidings and branch lines. Here the situation is more complex, as the immediate vicinity of most active rail lines is kept quite free of plants, but the areas between, and the less active sidings and yards, may hold good habitat. Here too the separated parcels of habitat must face each other across the active lines.

A very common linear habitat found in suburbia is the combined back gardens of houses between parallel roads. These "backlands" can provide excellent wildlife habitat, broken internally only by garden fences, which act as no barrier to most species. However most backlands are completely surrounded by houses and the hard surfaces of driveways, etc, so that they are separated from adjoining backland strips by two such developed strips as well as a road. Such backlands are considered to be too far apart to make corridor links. Exceptionally a backland strip lacks houses on one or more side: where such an exposed side is separated by no more than a road from a corridor, a link is allowed.

Quality and composition of the habitat

Some specialised animals and plants find suitable habitat even in the most heavily developed urban areas, but we are defining corridors for a wider range of species which require a more natural setting. The minimum requirement for our corridors is that the habitat has a natural surface: water or vegetation. The principle is that any vegetation is likely to act as a better route for movement of animals and plants than are hard surfaces like roads, car parks and built development.

The quality of the habitat is not a simple issue, as a grassland species might find a barrier in a fine ancient wood and *vice versa*; there is no such thing as an optimal habitat for all possible commuters along a corridor. We have allowed all terrestrial habitats, even close mown grass, in corridors, but have not allowed long stretches of running water with no accompanying terrestrial habitat to act as links between terrestrial habitats.

Shape

Our corridors are designed to promote the movement of animals and plants. For this purpose they do not have to conform to the dictionary definition, which includes the concept of passage or strip: something long and *thin*. Our corridors include all qualifying habitat regardless of its shape. See below for the practicalities of mixing corridors with other designations in planning.

Geometry

The consequence of our criteria is that corridors in London make a complex network of habitat of greatly differing sizes and shapes and leading in every different direction. Only the habitat beside the major roads, rails and some tributaries of the Thames are at all straight, radiating out from

the centre of the metropolis. There is no reason to require corridors to conform to any particular geometry: habitat composition and near continuity are sufficient for their purpose. A complex network of habitat increases the number of possible pathways for animals and plants to follow.

Neither do corridors need to link "sites"; a corridor which remains thin as it comes to an end in the heart of London nevertheless can hold animals and plants along its own length in places that would not have them without the corridor.

Change

As abandoned land reverts to nature, landscaping is carried out, and open land is developed, pieces are continually being added to or removed from corridors. Our corridors generally are based on comprehensive aerial photography of London dating from 1981, but are updated where we have the knowledge. Changes of which we are not aware, and problems with judgement of the photographs, will result in errors. The latter errors should very largely concern situations where the outcome is not crucial to the existence of a corridor, nevertheless we ask map users to report all errors they find to the Unit.

DESIGNATING CORRIDORS

Our definition of corridors includes much land which deserves protection as a site of importance for nature conservation of its own right, regardless of any connection it may have with the countryside; the accompanying figure, for example, shows how the sites of importance (black), all of which are parts of corridors, relate to the rest of the corridors (grey) in the London Borough of Hounslow. Elsewhere in London not all sites of importance have corridor links.

Hyde Park, for example, has no corridor connection through to the wider countryside according to our criteria. The corridors that radiate out from such totally isolated fragments of the countryside may nevertheless enrich their surrounds; the Park may not be as fine a source as the wider countryside, but it likely serves its surrounds better than would a remote and tenuous connection to the Green Belt. Thus, these corridors also deserve protection.

In planning to protect and enhance nature conservation amenity in London, we advise that sites of importance are selected first and then that corridors are selected to link them where possible, and to lead into the urban fabric. These corridors in Unitary Development Plans would then be areas of land of lesser value for nature conservation, as the sites would take all that of greater value. It should be clear, then, that our corridors include both land that should be protected for its own sake and corridors in the narrower sense appropriate in a development plan.

Appended to this report is our advice on a policy and justification to protect corridors in a Unitary Development Plan (an excerpt from the joint publication of the Countryside Commission, English Nature, London Wildlife Trust and the Unit - *Green Capital, planning for London's greenspace*).

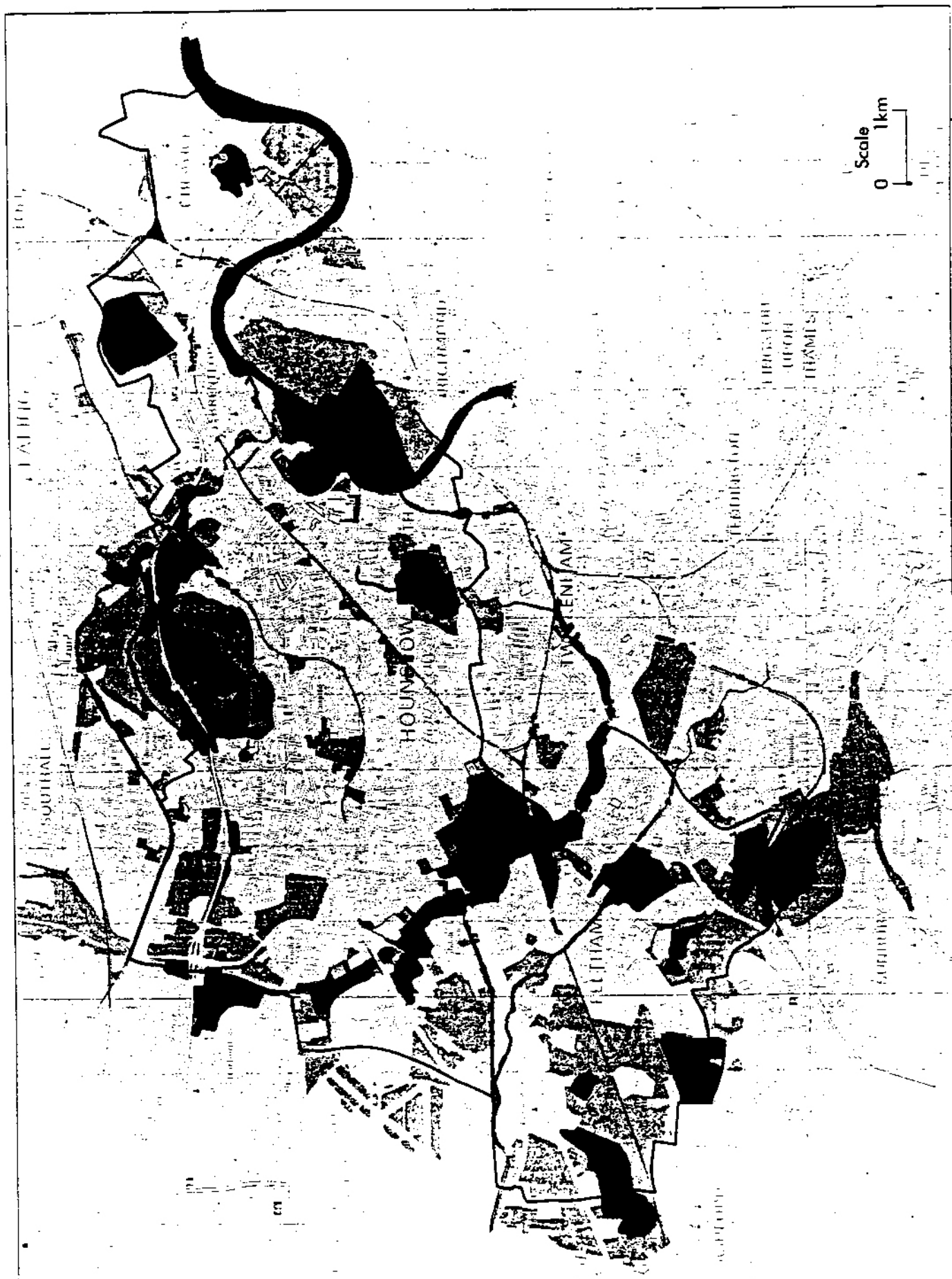


Figure 5
Green corridors within the Borough of Hounslow

Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey 1986 1:50,000 map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office
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Green corridors

Green corridors in London may provide:

- routes for riders and pedestrians;
- a landscape element of considerable value, often providing an impression of great extent when viewed side on;
- a pleasant view for commuters through the developed parts of London;
- a facility along which animals and plants may move.

Councils will probably wish to take all of these elements into account when identifying corridors in their borough, and the wording of our recommended policy takes this into account.

If one looks strictly at the last element — facilitation of movement of animals and plants — it is clear that the identification of corridors should follow the identification of sites to be protected as 'sites of nature conservation importance' and 'sites of local nature conservation importance' (policies L22 and L23 below). Corridors are then chosen to link these sites and to lead into the developed fabric of London, and will consist of habitat of lower quality than that of the protected sites. Corridors will better serve this function the wider they are, the better connected, and the greater the range and quality of their habitat, although every candidate, however thin or poor, should be seen in its context and protected, if without it there would be no corridor.

Few corridors in London are absolutely continuous; most have gaps and some would be better termed 'stepping stones'. Thus corridors will be relatively continuous areas of open space leading through the built environment. They may link sites to each other and to the green belt or to metropolitan open land. They will often consist of railway embankments and cuttings, roadside verges, canals, parks, playing fields and rivers. They may allow animals and plants to penetrate further into the built-up area than would otherwise be the case, and provide an extension to the habitats of the sites that they join.

L21. The council will identify green corridors and will expect proposals to enhance their value for nature conservation, amenity, landscape or access.

Justification

L21.1 The council recognises the importance of maintaining a network of greenspace to:

- assist animals and plants to thrive in the developed parts of the borough;
- conserve and enhance valuable landscape and amenity features;
- relieve the journey of commuters by providing a green view from their route through the built environment;
- serve as recreational access routes for pedestrians and cyclists.

L21.2 Green corridors are relatively continuous areas of greenspace leading through the built environment, and they may link to each other and to the green belt or to metropolitan open land. They may serve one or more of the functions above.

L21.3 The Secretary of State's strategic guidance for London refers to the value of such land in providing opportunities for public access and as wildlife corridors. The guidance also refers to the English Nature document *Planning for wildlife in metropolitan areas*, and to the handbooks of the London Ecology Unit, all of which recognise the value of green corridors.

Legislation and guidance

Barker, G, and Graf, A, 'Principles for nature conservation in towns and cities'. In *Urban Wildlife Now* No.3, English Nature, 1989.

Department of the Environment, *Strategic Planning Guidance for London*, paras 62 and 66, 1989.

English Nature, *Planning for wildlife in metropolitan areas*, p.9, 1987.

London Ecology Unit Ecology Handbooks 1-14.

London Planning Advisory Committee, *Strategic Planning Advice for London*, paras 8.27-8.29, 1988.

9. Nature conservation

Sites of nature conservation importance

The borough's wildlife resources are an important amenity that must be considered carefully whenever development and land use changes are proposed. Policies must aim to protect sites that are of nature conservation value within the borough.

When identifying sites for protection under the policies, councils should have regard, not only to the value of their biological and geological components, but also to their value as a source of inspiration and enjoyment in the context of recreational, educational