

Conservation Principles

1. Introduction

The National Trust was born of a desire to protect the elements of our environment that people value. Since its foundation in 1895 we have been caring for places of historic interest or natural beauty. Today these places include ancient stone circles, a cotton mill, gardens, villages, castles, country houses, works of art and libraries, historic landscapes, stretches of coastline, woods, farms, and important habitats for wildlife. Our fundamental purpose – to promote the long-term care of places of historic interest and natural beauty for the benefit of the nation – is set out in the National Trust Act of 1907.

The National Trust shall be established for the purpose of promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest and as regards lands for the preservation (so far as is practicable) of their natural aspect, features and animal and plant life.

Section 4.1 National Trust Act, 1907

It is our responsibility to promote the protection of a wide variety of places of historic interest and natural beauty in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, through acquisition, management and advocacy, and, in some cases, through restrictive conservation covenants. The power to hold land inalienably sets the National Trust and the National Trust for Scotland apart from all other heritage organisations and requires us to manage the land, structures and collections in our care for the benefit of people today and generations to come.

The significance of our properties lies in their extraordinary breadth and diversity, reflecting the range of cultural and natural heritage throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland; through our ownership we can understand and conserve the unique nature of each place within its setting and in relation to its wider context. The significance of many properties is officially recognised by local, national and international designations.

In our stewardship role, we carry a heavy burden of responsibility to past, present and future generations. This was recognised in *The Benson Report on the National Trust* which stated that:

‘An institution like the National Trust must keep faith with its past and at the same time look to the future’.^[1]

Our approach to these responsibilities has evolved in response to social, economic and environmental change, to opportunities and threats. Increasingly we are aware of the impact of climate change on our conservation interests, and the direct connection between the quality of the environment and conservation. The careful stewardship and frugal use of natural resources underpin all our work. We recognise we need to work beyond our ownership boundaries and in close partnership with others. We look after places through the process of conservation, which we now define as:

‘...the careful management of change. It is about revealing and sharing the significance of places and ensuring that their special qualities are protected, enhanced, enjoyed and understood by present and future generations’.^[2]

^[1] The National Trust, *The Benson Report on the National Trust: Report by the Council’s Advisory Committee on the Trust’s constitution, organisation and responsibilities* (The National Trust, London, 1968), p.16.

^[2] This definition was made by the Conservation Directorate in September 2003.

This definition applies to the conservation of natural and cultural elements of our environment, to the fabric of our properties and their contents, and the way their beauty and sense of history are enjoyed by our visitors.

In response to irreversible or inevitable change, such as coastal erosion or disasters resulting from human activity, we can transfer to the future as much as possible of the affected property's significance by recording what will be lost and preserving the record. Other forms of change provide opportunities, for example improving the condition, presentation and interpretation of properties, and we can initiate and be creative in implementing them. In some cases changes, such as inappropriate development, will have an unacceptable effect on the significance of properties and we will mitigate, prevent or oppose these. It follows that the potential impact of change must be assessed before it can be defined as acceptable or not, but change that is in accordance with the Conservation Principles will usually be considered acceptable.

2. Addressing the need

The Conservation Principles set out in this paper have always guided our work, but their formal adoption will equip us to discharge our responsibilities in a professional and inspiring way. They will serve as a touchstone for the development of policy and will guide our staff in reaching an exemplary standard of conservation, management and stewardship. They will inform our external policy work, partnerships and advocacy.

The Conservation Principles are presented in a concise and accessible form, providing a 'golden thread' to run through our strategic, business and management plans, policy documents, guidelines, manuals and advisory notes, thus ensuring all disciplines pull together in pursuit of common goals. There is no significance in the order in which they are presented.

3. The Conservation Principles

- **Principle 1: Significance**
We will ensure that all decisions are informed by an appropriate level of understanding of the significance and 'spirit of place' of each of our properties, and why we and others value them.
- **Principle 2: Integration**
We will take an integrated approach to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, reconciling the full spectrum of interests involved.
- **Principle 3: Change**
We will anticipate and work with change that affects our conservation interests, embracing, accommodating or adapting where appropriate, and mitigating, preventing or opposing where there is a potential adverse impact.
- **Principle 4: Access and engagement**
We will conserve natural and cultural heritage to enable sustainable access and engagement for the benefit of society, gaining the support of the widest range of people by promoting understanding, enjoyment and participation in our work.
- **Principle 5: Skills and partnership**
We will develop our skills and experience in partnership with others to promote and improve the conservation of natural and cultural heritage now and for the future.
- **Principle 6: Accountability**
We will be transparent and accountable by recording our decisions and sharing knowledge to enable the best conservation decisions to be taken both today and by future generations.

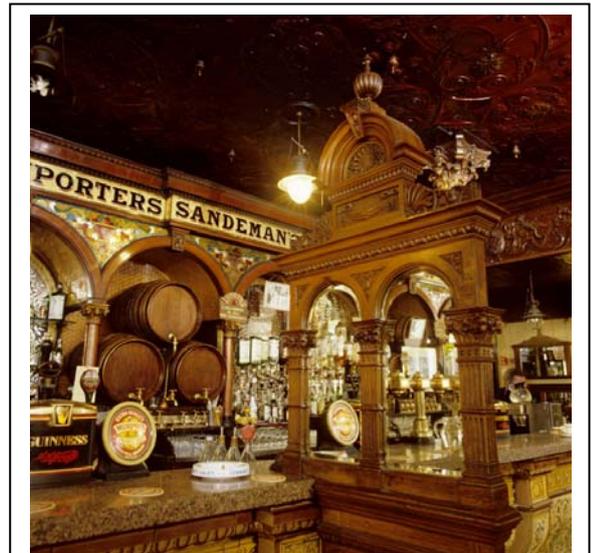
Principle 1: Significance

We will ensure that all decisions are informed by an appropriate level of understanding of the significance and 'spirit of place' of each of our properties, and why we and others value them.

Our properties are places of great complexity, significant for many reasons, cultural and natural, tangible and intangible. All these aspects make up the property's 'spirit of place'. They contribute to local distinctiveness and many are protected by national and international designations. Capturing this essence in Statements of Significance, by defining the reason for acquisition and what it is that we wish to preserve, is core to our Property Management Plans, Conservation Management Plans and Acquisitions and Disposals Policies. This is fundamental to ensuring that all decisions we take maintain and enhance our properties, preventing damage and thus ensuring their significance is maintained.

Statements of Significance and management plans should reflect the breadth and diversity of our properties. As values change and new research adds to knowledge or challenges preconceptions, significance must always be reassessed.

Our understanding of the significance of properties and their contents, including their social, intellectual, environmental and economic contexts, is developed through the many processes of research and survey that our specialist advisers and others undertake. Understanding significance also requires wider consultation and engagement with supporters and interest groups, to determine what they value. Well-informed consultation results in management decisions that ensure significance is passed to and enjoyed by future generations.



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Spirit of place

The ordinary elevated to extraordinary: the High Victorian décor of the Crown Bar, Belfast, makes it one of the last of its kind. It has survived developers and bombers to become a national treasure.



© NTPL/Paul Harris

Integration in action

Since managing Hafod y Llan Farm, Snowdonia, on a low intensity mixed system, its bio-diversity has improved and it has achieved full organic status. Hafod y Llan shows how business and productivity can integrate successfully with good environmental practices and diverse habitats.

Principle 2: Integration

We will take an integrated approach to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, reconciling the full spectrum of interests involved.

Each of the elements of a property are interdependent: much of the significance of archaeological finds lies in their burial context; landscape, gardens and buildings provide the habitat for living gene banks of animals and national collections of plants, often providing sanctuary to endangered species, as well as housing collections of cultural artefacts. This richness and diversity requires management decisions that take account of a wide but connected range of interests. These will include the views of specialists, as well as of those who live and work on our properties, and who visit, or value their beauty and historic interest in other ways. Engagement with the interests of those beyond our boundaries is also strategically important in influencing the long-term preservation of our properties which do not, and cannot, exist in isolation.

Conservation is a creative process of negotiation to agree clear, shared goals and objectives, that provides imaginative solutions to perceived conflicts of interest, such as finding new uses for redundant historic buildings without adversely affecting their significance. Our ability to find these solutions derives from our extensive knowledge and skills, based on research, survey, and a great depth and breadth of experience in managing our properties.

Conservation requires working with other interests, such as social and economic needs: this will achieve new ways of working and better results than working in isolation. Taking this holistic approach requires good operational and project management, to ensure that maximum significance is passed on to future generations.

Principle 3: Change

We will anticipate and work with change that affects our conservation interests, embracing, accommodating or adapting where appropriate, and mitigating, preventing or opposing where there is a potential adverse impact.

We need to understand processes of change, whether natural, physical, social or cultural, in order to manage their impacts effectively. We recognise that some of these processes are benign and in accord with conservation philosophy. Where desirable and possible we will work with, rather than against, them.

Some changes such as cliff erosion or sea level rise are inevitable and it is neither practical nor realistic to resist them. We will accept that some built structures, habitats or species will be lost. Where loss is unavoidable, its severity can be mitigated, for example through recording, recreation or relocation where feasible and desirable. Indeed, positive benefits of unavoidable change may well accrue and add new significance, such as new wildlife habitats in landscape created by estuary flooding.

We will also identify avoidable processes of change that are damaging to our conservation interests and have an unacceptable effect on the significance of a property. We will campaign and manage our properties to defend them against adverse changes, such as inappropriate development and economic policies that affect the viability of current management practices or reduce resources for conservation. Success will be measured by the extent to which our diversity of interests and assets is perpetuated.

Conservation activities themselves can initiate desirable change, such as improvements to the physical state and interpretation of our properties. Conservation management enables us to anticipate, and therefore to minimise or prevent damage and deterioration, and to be proactive and creative in improving the state of our properties through preventive maintenance, the principle of 'little and often' repair. Change brought about by capital improvement projects will depend on our understanding of significance and what we are trying to preserve.



© NT. Taken by Peter Bee

Dealing with change

Rising sea levels and more frequent storms are taking an increasing toll on the harbour walls of Mullion Cove, Cornwall. Working with consultants and the community, the Trust has developed a long-term strategy to manage the cove's gradual return to its original form.



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Whilst decisions around change will be informed by evidence, the absence of a full research record need not delay the adoption of interim protective or preventive measures. However, the precautionary principle means that where we possess less knowledge, the least risky option will be chosen in order to achieve the maximum transfer of significance. Full research and the development of a longer-term conservation strategy should proceed alongside such actions, particularly where significant change or loss is anticipated.

Principle 4: Access and engagement

We will conserve natural and cultural heritage to enable sustainable access for the benefit of society, gaining the support of the widest range of people by promoting understanding, enjoyment and participation in our work.

We aspire to enable the widest range of access opportunities and experiences for present and future generations at our properties through our stewardship and conservation work, providing pleasure, inspiration, excitement, understanding and involvement in our heritage. We will achieve this by promoting access and learning at our properties, whether physical or virtual, in line with our 'Vision for Learning'. In doing so we will also develop our own knowledge and experience through dialogue with those using our properties.

Conservation achieves its objectives by involving people, providing many opportunities for mutual benefit. Enhancing places, buildings and their contents in our care through conservation contributes significantly to a sense of individual and social well-being; access to them 'refreshes the spirit', enables discovery, deepens understanding and appreciation of place and provides space for active and passive pursuits. Conservation enables our supporters' enjoyment of these benefits, and enhances it by involving them in our work both passively through observation and actively through participation. We will take every opportunity to engage existing and new supporters and involve them in our conservation activities, thereby encouraging life-long enthusiasm and interest in heritage and the natural environment.

Negotiating the reconciliation of real and apparent conflicts in providing sustainable access requires the setting of clear conservation and access standards. Standards support and provide the framework for the property manager in making decisions that meet the twin aims of access and conservation and enables them to be complementary, achieving greater value than if each objective is addressed on its own. Conservation advisers will work with other functions to assist operational managers in devising new ways of providing access to conservation activities.

Our long-standing commitment to providing and extending access is fundamental to the purpose of conservation. We have a proven track record of imaginative ways of protecting properties from the wear and tear caused by physical access. Our ways of providing this benefit will be regularly reviewed to ensure our properties remain relevant and inspiring.



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Opportunity for access

The construction of the Footprint building in the Lake District presented an opportunity for 'participant friendly' involvement. Groups and individuals played an important part in the straw bale wall construction, making blocks for the clay/cob wall and the rammed earth tyres. Semi-skilled volunteers also worked on shingle fixing, and external and internal wall painting.

Principle 5: Skills and partnership

We will develop our skills and experience in partnership with others to promote and improve the conservation of natural and cultural heritage now and for the future.



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Working in partnership

The Trust's Careership Scheme is supported by the National Gardens Scheme and runs in partnership with Reaseheath College, Cheshire. It provides practical and class-based training to the next generation of gardeners and wardens.

We will develop the skills and experience required to promote and improve the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, working in partnership with others. The conservation of our heritage requires a balance of traditional and innovative methods and craft and conservation skills to be developed and maintained, combining the best of past practice with the potential of current and future technology. Research, recording, analytical and management skills are all prerequisites of the successful brokering of conservation solutions, while opportunities for using learning, interpretation and promotion occur at all stages of our conservation activities.

We will develop the conservation skills of our staff and volunteers by learning from the experience of others and by sharing and promoting best practice, informing and influencing wider conservation and environmental decisions. This will not only enable us to meet our needs but will also serve the needs of the wider community, and ensure that these skills are transferred to future generations

We will undertake training in partnership with others, acting both as trainers and trainees, and welcome training opportunities and students provided by others, encouraging school placements, apprenticeships and practical learning as well as supporting academic training..

All these skills need to develop and adapt in response to changing perceptions of what is considered to be heritage and how it can best be managed. We will provide creative conservation solutions to all challenges and share them widely by demonstrating their use through practice in our properties.

Principle 6: Accountability

We will be transparent and accountable by recording our decisions and sharing knowledge to enable the best conservation decisions to be taken both today and by future generations.

Our legacy to the future is formed by the record of our activities as much as by the places we preserve and pass on through our work. Only by recording and making accessible the decisions and actions both of ourselves and our predecessors can we be truly accountable to present and future generations.

On occasion, major changes have been made and works undertaken to our properties without proper documentation, and the underlying decisions and rationale for them have been lost or obscured. Consequently, our understanding of our properties and our ability to make well-founded management decisions and to interpret them where this has happened is diminished.

It is essential, therefore, that our contemporaries and our successors are given every opportunity to understand what we have done and why through responsible record-keeping. This may include building or property logs, advisory reports, survey, monitoring and treatment records, and management plans.

Our reputation and business efficiency are enhanced by the rigorous management of our records. Significant investment is required to achieve this according to national and international conservation, recording and archiving standards. We will augment our internal resources by building on our partnerships with others, such as the National Archive, county record offices, national museums, universities and special collections, to provide access to our records and thereby virtual access to our properties. Future generations may question our judgement and decisions by the conventions of their time, but, through understanding the reasons behind them, are in a better position to undo, reverse or retreat any consequential damage.



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Evidence of accountability

The Trust's Biological Survey Team has built up a knowledge bank of 30 years of continuous scientific observation of habitats and species. Past baseline monitoring now enables us to monitor change over time; this element is likely to become increasingly important as changes occur to land and habitats, prompting the movement of many species.

The Conservation Principles were produced by the Central Conservation Directorate. Katy Lithgow, Head Conservator, led the project with her colleagues: David Adshead, Head Curator; Rory Cullen, Head of Buildings; and David Thackray, Head of Archaeology.