Announcement of Opportunity: NERC – Natural Capital Synthesis Reports

*Applications must be received by info@valuing-nature.net by **midday 9 January 2017.***

NERC eligible researchers are invited to apply for funding under a new Valuing Nature initiative for **Natural Capital Synthesis Reports.** The purpose of this call is to fund researchers to produce short synthesis reports which a) define the current state of knowledge to address specific policy or practice needs in the language and format that is accessible to users; and b) define key gaps in knowledge that should be addressed by further research.

Background

There is increasing recognition that global economic growth and development are depleting the planet's natural resources, and doing so at an accelerating rate. Pressures including population growth and changing patterns of consumption, are degrading the very ecosystems that sustain human well-being. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA)[1] in 2005 highlighted the need to better recognise the values and benefits people derive from ecosystems by bringing together existing knowledge and in 2011, the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) published a comprehensive assessment of the services provided by UK ecosystems[2]. This work developed a conceptual framework for linking underpinning natural capital stocks, flows of ecosystem services and benefits to human well-being, and conducted a more comprehensive assessment of the benefits people receive and the values placed on them than had been attempted previously.

UK environmental policy is increasingly being framed in terms of the links between environmental resources and benefits to humans (e.g. the Defra-led 25 Year Environment Plan, the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and its link to the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act, and the inclusion of the Natural Capital Asset Index in the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework. However, in this rapidly developing area there is limited understanding of how to apply existing knowledge to address the questions of policy and practice users.

Conceptual Framework for Natural Capital Evidence

This opportunity is framed in terms of the conceptual framework published by the Natural Capital Committee (2014)[3] and the concept of evidence chains.

Figure 1 below illustrates the links from a range of natural assets (understood through the lens of land-use categories) that provide ecosystem services, goods and benefits to humans which can be valued.
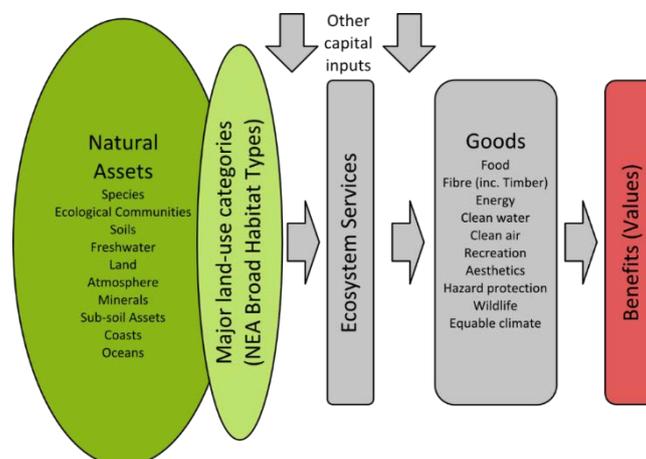

Figure 1. Natural capital and benefits to people - a framework (Natural Capital Committee, 2014)

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[1] Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. 2005. *Ecosystems and human well-being: Synthesis.* Washington D.C., Island Press.
[2] UK National Ecosystem Assessment. 2011. Synthesis of the key findings. DEFRA.
[3] Natural Capital Committee 2014. The state of natural capital: restoring our natural assets

The Nature Capital Committee used this framework to develop a risk register[3] for natural capital assets, structured around understanding of the extent, condition or spatial configuration of each, and to consider a set of metrics that could be used for reporting in terms of Natural Capital.

In many cases the link from the natural asset to the benefits derived by humans is poorly understood. There is a need for evidence at each step in the pathway from the role of characteristics of the natural asset, through understanding the relationships with flows of ecosystem services, benefits to humans, and the valuation of these benefits. This may require datasets, models and approaches from many different sources to be translated and combined. Construction of such evidence chains can allow appropriate metrics to be chosen to track progress, can identify evidence gaps and can enable the effectiveness of different interventions to be assessed.

Scope of this call

The opportunity is for applicants to propose short synthesis reports that will be completed this financial year. These will review existing evidence from the research base and/or experience of its application. They will a) define the current state of knowledge to address specific policy or practice needs in the language and format that is accessible to users; and b) define key gaps in knowledge that should be addressed by further research. Applicants should specify the form their outputs will take, these could be similar to documents such as Natural England's Evidence briefing, POSTnotes, Defra evidence statements or they could take another form.

Proposals should address one or both of the following:

- **Natural Capital Metrics** – which are the most appropriate metrics for tracking progress and supporting decision-making at national and local levels.

- **Evidence of the effectiveness of ecosystem interventions in the Natural Capital context** – which interventions targeting natural resources are most effective at producing demonstrable improvements in the benefits experienced at local and national levels.

Proposals can address any topic(s) in terms of the environmental resource(s) (asset(s)) and the specific benefit (or multiple benefits) considered. The proposal should make clear how the topic(s) and benefit(s) selected are of direct relevance to a specified policy / practice audience, and how this audience has been or will be engaged to ensure the output meets the audience needs. Applicants should explain where their proposed synthesis report sits in terms of evidence chains that link and describe the relationships between environmental resources to benefits.

This is an interdisciplinary exercise, which combines natural, social and economic science. The call is NERC funded, so proposals should include demonstrable links to natural environment research, but can bridge any other discipline interests of the Valuing Nature Programme funders (ESRC, AHRC, BBSRC and Defra).

Available resource & eligibility

Up to £40K is available, which is expected to support four to six synthesis reports. Activities must be complete by 31 March 2018.

The Valuing Nature Programme Coordination Team will provide a template and support for final formatting of the Synthesis Reports, and will promote the outputs via Valuing Nature communication channels.

Awards can only be made to institutions eligible for funding from the Natural Environment Research Council - see http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/funding/eligibilityforrcs/.

Other requirements

All successful applicants also will be expected to attend a Kick Off meeting in London on 26 January in late January 2018. Awardees will be invited to the Valuing Nature Programme Annual Conference in autumn 2018, though this will be outside the project period and so is not a requirement.

Assessment Procedure

Applications will be assessed against the following criteria:

- Quality of proposal (clear objectives, effective proposed approach, fit to call)
- Relevance of topic (topic selected fits within scope of call, clear reference to its position within Natural Capital framework and evidence chains)
- Evidence of user need (specific need identified, demonstration of user engagement either previous to this project or as part of this project, demonstration that this project is complementary to existing evidence in this area)
- Expertise of applicant team (experience of lead / team (i) at this type of activity (ii) in this topic area)
- Feasibility (realistic timescales and scope of project)
- Value for money

Applications will be assessed by the Valuing Nature Programme Coordination Team (with input from the Chair of the Valuing Nature Programme Advisory Group if any conflict of interest is identified), and recommendations will be made to NERC for approval.

Timetable for awards

- **Midday Tuesday 9 January 2018**: Deadline for submissions on application form to info@valuing-nature.net

- 12 January 2018: Applicants notified of result of application

- 26 January 2018: Kick Off meeting in London

- By 31 March 2018: All reports complete and contracts end.

Contact

Please contact the Valuing Nature Programme Coordination Team with any enquires, by emailing info@valuing-nature.net.