

"NNR", "SSSI", "SAC", "Red List" – what do they all mean?

Richmond Park is London's largest SSSI, an NNR and a European SAC. It also contains a significant number of Red Data Book species: 34 beetles found in the recent survey of veteran trees in the Park are on the Red List. What do these terms mean, and what do they mean for the Park and its visitors?

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the country's very best wildlife and geological sites. They support plants and animals that find it more difficult to survive in the wider countryside where they are often under pressure from development, pollution, climate change and unsustainable land management. SSSIs need active management to maintain their conservation interest, and it is illegal to carry out certain potentially damaging operations on a SSSI without consent from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, or reasonable excuse.

National Nature Reserves (NNRs) were established to protect nationally important areas of wildlife habitat and geological formations in Britain, and as places for scientific research. This does not mean they are "no-go areas", but it does mean that scarce and threatened habitats such as the acid grassland of the Park are carefully managed and that visitors must not damage the wildlife. All NNRs are also SSSIs and contain vulnerable habitats and species, such as the Park's beetles.

These beetles appear in the British Red Data Book, which lists categories ranging from "Endangered" (RBD1), which includes some of the Park's beetles, to "Endemic" (RBD5).

Many endangered species are also listed by the World Conservation Union (IUCN)

on its annual Red List, which is recognised as the most reliable evaluation of species in need of conservation attention.

In the Red List, species are classified as "Extinct" or "Extinct in the Wild", "Critically Endangered", "Endangered" or "Near Threatened". In September 2007 there were 41,415 species on the Red List with 16,306 threatened with extinction; human activity and climate change were the biggest threats to biodiversity. The Red List is intended to guide the conservation activities of governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and scientific institutions.

Areas that are internationally important for their biodiversity are designated Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). SACs have been given special protection under the European Union's Habitats Directive in order to provide increased protection to a variety of wild animals, plants and habitats, as part of global efforts to conserve the world's biodiversity.

The effect of all these impressive designations on visitors is that they must not do anything that would damage the Park's wildlife: for example, not light fires, move or remove wood or fungi or plants, or leave litter. Cyclists should keep to cycle paths and walkers should keep dogs under control. Despite the restrictions, it should be a matter for local pride that we have such an important and beautiful natural habitat here on our doorstep. The Friends are now using the NNR designation on their letterhead and including it in promotional material (and on the newsletter back cover).

Marilyn Mason, with thanks to Dr Nigel Reeve, Community Ecologist for the Royal Parks

See also the website of Natural England www.english-nature.org.uk.