

What is 'natural beauty'?

AONBs are designated for the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

The term 'natural beauty' first gained currency in a legislative context in the 1907 Act which gave legal status to the National Trust ('for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty'). It has been the basis for the designation of both AONBs and National Parks since the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, but has never been exhaustively defined in legislation²⁴.

Over the years, qualification and amendment to the legislation has made it clear that natural beauty includes considerations such as wildlife, geological features and cultural heritage but is not restricted by them²⁵. Government guidance relating to AONBs provides a useful non-technical definition: "'Natural Beauty' is not just the look of the landscape, but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries"²⁶. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 clarified that land used for agriculture, woodlands, parkland or with physiographical features partly the product of human intervention in the landscape, is not prevented from being treated as an area of 'natural beauty'.

In the 1949 Act 'natural beauty' replaced other phrases such as 'landscape beauty' and 'characteristic landscape beauty'²⁷. These provide a clue to the importance of landscape character and beauty as an aesthetic experience bringing people a sense of pleasure, wellbeing and connectedness with nature. Character is interpreted in different ways with the Landscape Institute

focusing on the pattern of landscape elements²⁸, landscape archaeologists seeing the human process of a landscape 'coming into being' and ecologists also considering the quality of the natural processes and ecological systems which underpin patterns of vegetation. Natural beauty encompasses all of these views.

Our perceptions of the landscape and the value we place on its qualities rely on our senses and emotions, and are shaped by many factors including taste, background, culture and understanding. These values may change over time even if the intrinsic character of the landscape does not.

For AONBs it is not enough just to possess natural beauty; their natural beauty should have the potential to be 'outstanding' both in terms of the quality of the components of character (including their biodiversity) and the human aesthetic experience of the landscape.

For the purposes of this Plan, natural beauty is defined by the Statement of Significance.

24. Guidance for assessing landscapes for designation as National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England, Natural England 2011.

25. A draft statement on natural beauty, The University of Sheffield, January 2006.

26. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A guide for AONB Partnership members, Countryside Commission, CA24, November 2001, p.6.

27. Holdaway, E. (2007). Origins and Intentions of the 1949 Act Natural Beauty. Report to Countryside Council for Wales.

28. Landscape Institute and IEEM (2013). Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

John Dower, one of the main architects of the 1949 Act recognised the overlap between natural and man-made elements in the landscape.

'Most natural features have some man-made or man-controlled tincture, and man-made features derive an integral part of their beauty and interest from their natural surroundings.'

Report on National Parks, 1945

High Weald AONB Statement of Significance

The High Weald is one of the best preserved Medieval landscapes in North West Europe.

Despite its large size (1,500km sq.) and proximity to London, its landscape has remained relatively unchanged since the 14th century, surviving major historical events and social and technological changes. Its outstanding beauty stems from its essentially rural and human scale character, with a high proportion of natural surfaces and the story of its past visible throughout.

The extensive survival of woodland and traditional mixed farming supports an exceptionally well-connected green and blue infrastructure with a high proportion of semi-natural habitat in a structurally diverse, permeable and complex mosaic supporting a rich diversity of wildlife.

The natural beauty of the High Weald comprises

- **Five defining components of character** that have made the High Weald a recognisably distinct and homogenous area for at least the last 700 years.
 - 1. Geology, landform and water systems** – a deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone with numerous gill streams.
 - 2. Settlement** – dispersed historic settlement including high densities of isolated farmsteads and late Medieval villages founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries.
 - 3. Routeways** – a dense network of historic routeways (now roads, tracks and paths).
 - 4. Woodland** – abundance of ancient woodland, highly interconnected and in smallholdings.
 - 5. Field and Heath** – small, irregular and productive fields, bounded by hedgerows and woods, and typically used for livestock grazing; with distinctive zones of lowland heaths, and inned river valleys.
- **Land-based economy and related rural life** bound up with, and underpinning, the observable character of the landscape with roots extending deep into history. An increasingly

broad-based economy but with a significant land-based sector and related community life focused on mixed farming (particularly family farms and smallholdings), woodland management and rural crafts.

- **Other qualities** and features that are connected to the interaction between the landscape and people and which enrich character components. Such qualities and features enhance health and wellbeing, and foster enjoyment and appreciation of the beauty of nature. These include locally distinctive features which enrich the character components such as historic parks and gardens, orchards, hop gardens, veteran trees, along with their rich and varied biodiversity, and a wide range of appealing and locally distinctive historic buildings including oast houses, farm buildings, Wealden Hall houses and their associated features such as clay-tile catslide roofs. People value the wonderful views and scenic beauty of the High Weald with its relative tranquillity. They appreciate the area's ancientness and sense of history, its intrinsically dark landscape with the opportunity to see our own galaxy – the Milky Way – and the ability to get close to nature through the myriad public rights of way.