
Mark Pont, Assessment Programme Lead

Ken Roy
Head of Profession for Statistics
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
(by email)

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Dear Ken

COMPLIANCE CHECK OF THE MONITOR OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT (MENE) STATISTICS

Thank you for your letter outlining Natural England's plans for its new People and Nature Survey, the replacement for the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) Survey. You intend to publish the first statistics from the new survey as experimental statistics, with a view to putting them forward for assessment shortly after publication.

We have undertaken a compliance check to look at the transition to the new survey. Given the proposed changes, we have focused on the quality of the MENE data and statistics. However, through our conversations with the MENE team we also learned about the value and trustworthiness of the statistics.

We summarise our main findings below, and highlight some things you might like to consider as part of developing the new statistics.

New method

While the new survey has similar objectives to MENE, the move to an online panel method for data collection is a major departure. As far as we know, they will be the first official statistics based on data collected through an online panel. This presents an opportunity to innovate but also some potential challenges to the quality and trustworthiness of the statistics. We agree that the People and Nature Survey statistics should be fully assessed against the Code of Practice for Statistics, to ensure meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value.

Quality

The team demonstrated a good awareness of the limitations of the MENE survey, and told us how it has enhanced the quality of the data in the last few years. We heard that the team has invested a lot of resource in working through the 10-year MENE dataset to ensure it is clean, consistent and comparable; that it has strengthened its quality assurance (QA) processes; and that it has enhanced resilience in the team by spreading expertise across a wider range of staff and learning from past experiences.

We welcome that QA, and reference to the Code of Practice for Statistics, were built into the contract for the People and Nature Survey, and are pleased that the team is considering building a more collaborate approach to QA for the new survey. We encourage the team to apply the lessons learned from cleaning and maintaining the MENE dataset to develop a good understanding of, and document, the quality of the People and Nature Survey data.

Value

MENE is the leading source of information on people's engagement with the natural environment, and is used widely inside and outside government. Users in Defra told us that MENE, and the new People and Nature Survey, are key data sources for evaluating policies in the 25-Year Environment Plan. The team has established successful partnerships with several universities, which has led to detailed analyses and insight into the association between people's contact with nature and health and wellbeing. We heard how engagement with external users and stakeholders has helped colleagues in Natural England and Defra recognise the value of the MENE data and statistics, and we welcome that it has led to a better long-term partnership between Natural England and Defra. It will be important to communicate clearly the value of the new People and Nature Survey and we encourage the team to continue its wide engagement to promote and develop the new statistics.

MENE review

Last year, Natural England commissioned an external review of MENE to better understand the value of the MENE data and statistics to users and to scope out options for piloting different approaches for the People & Nature Survey. The outcome of the review fed into the requirements for the new survey, but the team also made immediate changes to how it reported the MENE results following stakeholder feedback. For example, the team released a GIS local authority dashboard, allowing users to access and integrate local-level data, and developed an interactive, visual story map summarising and reflecting on 10 years of MENE data. We welcome that the team took the opportunity to develop these additional outputs to enhance the value of the MENE statistics. We would welcome similar levels of innovation in the People and Nature Survey outputs.

The draft report of the MENE review has been ready since May 2019 but is still awaiting external peer review. To enhance transparency around the development of the new survey, and to inform users of the lessons learned from MENE, we encourage the team to publish the report as soon as possible.

Our Agriculture, Energy, Environment Domain Lead, Job de Rooij, will continue to engage with the statistics team throughout the transition to the new survey.

I am copying this letter to Rose O'Neill and Simon Doxford, the responsible analysts at Natural England.

Yours sincerely



Mark Pont
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