



2. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

AONBs are designated for the fine quality of their landscape – their outstanding natural beauty. It has long been recognised that natural beauty does not simply refer to the visual appearance of the countryside, but includes flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features, manmade, historic and cultural associations and our sensory perceptions of it. The combination of these factors in each area gives a unique sense of place, and helps underpin our quality of life.

The Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has a suite of special qualities that together make it unique and outstanding, underpinning its designation as a nationally important protected landscape. These are the special qualities we need to conserve and enhance for the future and they should be considered in all decisions affecting the AONB. This Statement of Significance is based on the 1993 Assessment of the Dorset AONB produced by the Countryside Commission. The special qualities of the Dorset AONB are:

Contrast and diversity – a microcosm of England’s finest landscapes...

The AONB is much more than one fine landscape – **it is a collection of fine landscapes**, each with its own characteristics and sense of place, including different landforms, soils and wildlife habitats. Contrasting and complex geology gives rise to the chalk downland, limestone country, greensand ridges and clay vales that occur in the Dorset AONB; they are often closely juxtaposed to create **striking sequences of beautiful countryside that are unique in Britain**. The transitions between the component landscapes of the mosaic are often particularly attractive, with strong contrasts in some areas and a gentle transition of character in others.

The ridge tops of west Dorset and the chalk escarpments add an extra dimension to the Dorset AONB landscape by providing stark contrasts of landform that serve to increase and emphasise its diversity. These areas of higher ground also allow the observer **uninterrupted panoramic views** to appreciate the complex pattern and textures of the surrounding landscapes.

Nowhere is the contrast and diversity of this rich assemblage of landscapes more graphically illustrated than in the Isle of Purbeck. Here, many of the characteristic landscapes of the Dorset AONB are represented on a miniature scale to create scenery of spectacular beauty and contrasts, which mirrors that of the whole AONB.

Within this overall context, there are **numerous individual landmarks**, such as hilltop earthworks, monuments and tree clumps that help to contribute an individuality and sense of place at a local scale.

In addition to its outstanding scenic qualities, the AONB retains a sense of **tranquillity and remoteness** that is an integral part of these landscapes. It retains **dark night skies** and an **undeveloped rural character**. The AONB’s Landscape Character Assessment, ‘Conserving Character’, adds further understanding of the contrast and diversity of the AONB landscapes and their management requirements.





Wildlife of national and international significance...

The contrast and diversity of the AONB as a whole is reflected in its wildlife. The range of habitats and associated species is unusually rich, including 80% of all British mammal species, 90% of bird species and 80% of butterfly species. The AONB's southern location and relatively warm climate make it hospitable to many species unable to survive further north and also home to species new to Britain, naturally expanding their ranges with the changing climate. The AONB includes many areas of **international significance**, including Poole Harbour and the Fleet which are key sites for breeding and overwintering birds, lowland heath areas in the east, calcareous grasslands in the Cerne and Sydling Valleys, ancient woodlands at Bracketts Coppice and the West Dorset alder woods, and important cliff and maritime habitats along significant sections of the coast.

Further coastal and marine areas are proposed for protection at European level. Many further areas are important at the national level and are supported by a large number of locally significant sites.

The quality of the wider AONB landscape offers high potential to rebuild extensive mosaics of wildlife habitat and to improve the linkages between them.

A living textbook and historical record of rural England...

The Dorset AONB boasts an unrivalled expression of the interaction of geology, human influence and natural processes in the landscape.

In particular, the Dorset AONB has an **exceptional undeveloped coastline**, renowned for its spectacular scenery, geological and ecological interest and unique coastal features including Chesil Beach and the Fleet Lagoon, Lulworth Cove and fossil forest, Durdle Door and Old Harry Rocks. The unique sequential nature of the rock formations along Dorset and East Devon's Jurassic Coast tells the story of 185 million years of earth history. The significance and value of this to our understanding of evolution is reflected in the designation of the coast as a World Heritage Site. The dynamic nature of the coast means that it is constantly changing and new geological discoveries are constantly being made, emphasising the importance of natural coastal processes.

With relatively little large scale development, the Dorset AONB retains a strong sense of continuity with the past, supporting a **rich historic and built heritage**. This is expressed throughout the landscape, as generations have successively shaped the area. It can be seen in field and settlement patterns and their associated hedges, banks and stone walls, the wealth of listed historic buildings and the multitude of archaeological sites and features. The South Dorset Ridgeway is a fine example of this, with a concentration of prehistoric barrows and henges to rival that at Stonehenge and Avebury giving a focus to this ancient landscape.

Industrial activity has also left its mark. Examples of our industrial heritage include traditional stone quarrying in Purbeck, and the thousand year old rope industry around Bridport which have shaped the landscape, local architecture and town design.

A rich legacy of cultural associations...

Over the centuries, Dorset's landscapes have inspired poets, authors, scientists and artists, many of whom have left a **rich legacy of cultural associations**. The best known of these is Thomas Hardy whose wonderfully evocative descriptions bring an extra dimension and depth of understanding to our appreciation of the Dorset landscape.

Other literary figures inspired by Dorset's landscapes include William Barnes, Jane Austen, John Fowles and Kenneth Allsop. Turner, Constable and Paul Nash are just a few of the many artists associated with Dorset, while Gustav Holst captured the character of the Dorset heathlands in his work 'Egdon Heath'. Such cultural associations past, present and future, offer a source of inspiration to us all and may help develop new ways of understanding and managing the AONB.

