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Nature's in trouble across Europe: Why the EU must stop backtracking

Senior Policy Analyst Paul de Zylva examines the state of nature in Europe and exposes how the European Commission and Member States are backing away from the urgent action needed to save our wildlife.

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Nature is in deep trouble across the EU. Yet, instead of doubling down on protection, the European Commission, EU Member States, and too many politicians are retreating from the very actions needed to halt the decline of our wildlife. In a bid to supposedly "boost growth," they are actively weakening the environmental protections essential for our health, food security, and clean water.

Nature is declining across the EU

The situation is dire. [Just as in the UK](#), ecosystems across Europe are crumbling. **A quarter of all wild animals in the EU face extinction.** 65% of habitats of ecological importance are in unfavourable condition, and the vital ecosystem services we rely on are deteriorating.

The European Environment Agency (EEA) leaves no room for doubt:

*“The state of Europe’s environment is not good, especially its nature which continues to face **degradation, overexploitation and biodiversity loss**. The impacts of accelerating climate change are also an urgent challenge.”* Their most comprehensive 'state of environment' report warns that the outlook is concerning, **posing major risks to Europe's economic prosperity**, security, and quality of life.

[EEA Executive Director, Leena Ylä-Mononen](#), says:

“We cannot afford to lower our climate, environment and sustainability ambitions. Our state of environment report, co-created with 38 countries, clearly sets out the science-based knowledge and demonstrates why we need to act. In the European Union, we have the policies, the tools and the knowledge, and decades of experience in working together towards our sustainability goals. What we do today will shape our future.”

New strategy to halt biodiversity loss

The EU's track record is a story of missed deadlines and unfulfilled pledges. [The EU's Biodiversity Strategy aimed to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2020](#). The strategy was adopted in 2011 after the previous 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss by 2020 had been breached. The headline aim of the strategy was to "...halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services by 2020, to restore ecosystems in so far as is feasible, and to step up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss."

[Like the UK](#), it's a story of failing to deliver pledges and deadlines. The EU's failure was signalled as early as 2015 when a review of progress toward the EU's 2020 deadline reported:

"...biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU have continued... This is consistent with global trends and has serious implications for the capacity of biodiversity to meet human needs in the future."

The review concluded *"...that the 2020 biodiversity targets can only be reached if implementation and enforcement efforts become considerably bolder and more ambitious. At the current rate of implementation, biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystem services will continue throughout the EU and globally."*

Despite calls from a majority of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to urgently prioritise these targets, **the 2020 deadline was missed**. Now, the EU has launched a new strategy aiming to put biodiversity "on track to recovery by 2030." While the ambition to 'lead by example' sounds familiar, the history of failure suggests we need more than just new headlines - **we need radical action**.

No time for false solutions and false starts

Given the past failures, there is zero room for delay or "**false solutions**" like **biodiversity offsetting**. These schemes are often enthusiastically promoted by industry but tend to conceal a continuation of business-as-usual destruction. They lack the genuine change in government and business behaviour required to reverse the crisis.

A good start? **Properly enforce the nature laws** that the UK is currently trying to repeal.

Nature laws must be properly enforced

Some Member States seem determined to harm nature. Poland, for instance, has **attempted to fell Europe's most ancient forests**, echoing the destructive clear-felling of ancient peat forests in Czechia's Šumava National Park.

While the EU has rightly intervened to remind these states of their duties, vigilance is not enough. The EU must also examine its own policies that drive nature's decline outside its borders. EU support for harmful production, such as oil palm and biofuels, has been implicated in driving deforestation globally.

[The EU Birds and Habitats Directives](#) remain the bedrock of protection for Europe's most important species and habitats. A 2015-16 review confirmed these laws are "fit for purpose," but they are failing because they are not being properly observed or implemented. The new Biodiversity Strategy must fix this implementation gap.

The new EU Biodiversity Strategy must **improve implementation of nature laws** and renew the EU's lead role in reversing nature's decline.

The EU is heading backwards

However just when the EU should be stepping up, it's stepping back.

- **Funding slashed:** Financial support for environmental action has been cut.
- **Deregulation:** Existing protections are being weakened in the name of "economic growth."
- **Corporate influence:** The belief that business must be free from rules to profit is overriding public interest.

Friends of the Earth Europe (FOEE) warns:

"...the economy has become the catch-all justification for weakening democratic safeguards and rolling back environmental and social protections. Since 2024, the Antwerp Declaration [which calls for a European Industrial Deal to complement the EU Green Deal and safeguard quality jobs in Europe] has operated as a shadow roadmap for EU policy, used to legitimise a deregulatory agenda driven by corporate demands rather than public interest."

Action – or more delay and destruction?

The UK and EU must step up and start delivering on the long-standing agreed aims under the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#). Human activity is degrading land, habitats and species, and worsening the conditions needed to support both wildlife and human life, making more pandemics likely.

After decades of failure to fulfil pledges, the test is now how seriously both the UK and the EU are responding to the overwhelming evidence of nature's poor condition, not least from the assessments by the [IPBES](#) and the United Nations. We need to recognise that so many of the drivers of decline are rooted in government policy, including the failure to properly protect nature and the financing of destructive activities and infrastructure.

- **For the UK:** Rapid action to protect, conserve, and restore habitats at pace and scale.
- **For the EU:** Full implementation of a bold new biodiversity strategy.
- **For Both:** Playing a leading, unashamedly pro-nature role in delivering the **Global Biodiversity Framework** to end nature's decline by 2030.

In the face of overwhelming evidence of nature's decline, the prospect of the UK and EU presiding over another 'lost decade' of delay and destruction is simply not an option.