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How well are the UK and the EU protecting nature?

Nature is in crisis. The UK and EU must not preside over another lost decade of delay and destruction.

Contents

1. [The state of nature in the UK](#)
2. [The state of nature across the EU](#)
3. [Action – or more delay and destruction?](#)

The United Kingdom prides itself on being a green and pleasant land. It also wants to be a global leader in protecting nature and taking action on climate change. This is good, because the UK's 14 Overseas Territories abound with biodiversity and need care and attention. They're also on the front line of excess heat, severe storms and other destructive effects associated with a changing climate.

The European Union also wants to step up action to halt and reverse global biodiversity loss. This matters because of the EU's global influence as a trading power and political voice.

As the world wakes up to nature in crisis and governments prepare to renegotiate global agreements on reversing its decline, how well are the UK and EU doing?

The state of nature in the UK

For a small island nation, the UK is blessed with a fantastic variety of wild species, habitats and tidal ranges, geology and soil types.

Britain is home to most of the world's chalk streams, to over 260 bee species (including 10% of all bumblebee species), internationally important bat species, 4,000 beetles, 2,500 butterfly and moth species, 1,500 lichens, 1,500 native higher plants and over 200 species of breeding bird. The UK's peatlands, as well as being home to many species, are also our largest carbon store and help protect people, property and businesses from potential flooding.

Although we have so much natural wealth to treasure, many independent studies, as well as official government data and reports, reveal nature is in decline. One of the starkest findings is that the UK is now among the world's most nature-depleted nations.

In 2018, recognising this dire situation, the UK government launched its 25 Year Environment Plan with the bold aim of "improving the environment within a generation and leaving it in a better state than we found it."

Bold words indeed, but of little use until the government takes proper action. Given the decades of failure by successive governments in meeting previous promises to protect and restore nature, we need action now.

Indicators going the wrong way

UK governments use a [set of about 50 indicators to track the state of biodiversity](#) – the habitats and the plant, insect and animal species they are home to – across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, 12 of these indicators worsened over 2009 to 2019, and 8 worsened over 2014 to 2019. Indicators flashing red for heading in the wrong direction include the condition of important habitats, the abundance and distribution of wild species, the size of fish in the North Sea, the status of pollinating insects, and birds numbers on farmland and in woodlands.

Half of the indicators show some sign of improving over the long term (10 years to 2019), including sustainable fisheries and the extent of marine protected areas. But with only 18 indicators improving in the short term (5 years to 2019) the indicators overall suggest that any progress is stalling.

- **Butterflies and birds** – these continue to decline on farmland in Britain.
- **Landscapes** – the condition of valued landscapes and habitats, many of which have Europe-wide importance for nature, is in decline.
- **Priority wild species** – the proportion of wild species most at risk and requiring priority action, which has deteriorated in both the short and long term.
- **Water bodies** – the proportion of lakes and wetlands in England that are healthy, confirming earlier data that just 17% of rivers in England are in good condition.

This sorry picture is not new. For years, the 4 UK governments have produced reports and data tracking the state of nature. They also receive independent reports showing too many indicators heading in the wrong direction, with advice on the actions required to turn many more of the red indicators to green, and to keep them there.

Back in 2008, a [report on the state of the natural environment from the UK government's own wildlife watchdog](#) found that "Over the last 50 years or so England's natural environment has suffered serious losses... Many of the surviving wildlife rich sites form a small isolated and fragmented resource."

Even protected areas show decline

You might think that nature reserves and national parks are full of nature. But in 2010? a [government-commissioned review of the existing network of national parks, nature reserves and other protected areas in England](#) found "compelling evidence that England's collection of wildlife sites are generally too small and too isolated, leading to declines in many of England's characteristic species."

The first ever assessment of the UK's natural ecosystems in 2011 found [30% of the UK's ecosystem services in decline, with many others in a reduced or degraded state](#).?

The natural assets we all rely on for healthy food, for protection from flooding and for amazing natural heritage that supports UK tourism and recreation, are in diminished condition and are not functioning effectively to keep supplying the benefits and public goods we have come to expect.

Then in 2013, the first ever State of Nature report showed that [3 in 5 UK species were declining, with 60% of species declining since the 1960s and 31% in strong decline](#).??

A nature-depleted United Kingdom

The [second State of Nature report in 2016](#) found the abundance of wildlife in the UK was decreasing, with 1 in 6 animals, birds, fish and plants having been lost, more than 1 in 10 of wild UK species facing extinction and the number of the most endangered creatures falling by two-thirds since 1970.

There's no shortage of evidence of the continuing parlous state of nature in the UK. The 2019 State of Nature report shows "no let-up in the loss of nature" and confirms the long-term decline of UK nature, with the average abundance of wild species declining by 10% since 1970. If that's not enough, the report shows the rate of wildlife decline steepening since 2010.

Shockingly, the report also showed the UK ranked 189 out of 240 countries and territories when measured for how intact their nature and biodiversity are – making the UK among the world's most nature-depleted countries, according to Natural History Museum (NHM) researchers.

The NHM's [Biodiversity Intactness Index \(BII\)](#) tracks the diversity of species and habitats (aka biodiversity), the percentage of the original number of species that remain and their abundance in habitats, landscapes and nations, despite human impacts.

[The Index](#) puts the UK's BII rating in the bottom 10% of 240 nations and territories, with just 53% of original nature left intact compared with the Index's low safe limit of 90% and the global average for all nations of 79%.

Each of the four UK nations is close to the bottom of the BII rankings of 240 nations and regions:

- Scotland (where 56% of nature is still intact - 28th from the bottom)
- Wales (51% - 16th from the bottom)
- Northern Ireland (50%, 12th from the bottom)
- And bringing up the rear, England (47% - 7th from the bottom)

NHM Professor Andy Purkis said: "The UK is where the industrial revolution was born, and it changed the landscape forever. We have led the world in degrading the natural environment... Britain has lost more of its natural biodiversity than almost anywhere else in western [Europe](#), the most of all the G7 nations and more than many other nations such as China. It is very striking – and worrying."

The next State of Nature report is due in 2023.

A lost decade for nature

So much time has been wasted in the face of so much evidence. Despite the need for concerted action, the UK has also missed its 2020 targets for protecting and restoring nature.

Along with other governments across the world, the UK had signed up to end and reverse nature's decline by 2020 and was an enthusiastic lead player in negotiating the global nature agreement, the 2010 Nagoya Protocol. This agreement was needed because governments had failed to hit previous targets to stop and reverse harm to nature by 2010.?

Well before the 2020 deadline, the [UK government's own assessment of its progress in meeting or, more accurately, missing the 2020 targets it helped devise did not look good](#). It would only meet 5 of the 20 targets that it helped negotiate in 2010 to reverse nature's decline by 2020. The RSPB described the failure as "a lost decade for nature".

In the most crucial areas – the agreed targets on controlling pollution, restoring vulnerable ecosystems, the status of wild species and the condition of degraded ecosystems – the UK was nowhere near where it should have been, especially given its aspiration to lead the world in action for nature and climate.

A biodiversity Brexit?

As an EU member, the UK had signed up to EU standards and laws that have been instrumental in protecting many wild species and habitats, as well as raising standards for drinking water, clean beaches, and bathing water and air quality.

Sins were positive when the government pledged that when we left the EU, it would retain and abide by the standards the UK had helped to design.

During and since the 2016 Brexit referendum, government ministers and MPs have made countless pledges to retain existing EU standards and even to exceed them in a new post-Brexit global leadership role for the UK on nature, climate and other aims.

On leaving the EU, the UK government enshrined existing EU standards and the UK's future ambitions in a new "landmark" Environment Act. It became law on 10 November 2021, with the government's press release proclaiming: "[World-leading Environment Act becomes law](#)."

The then Environment Secretary George Eustice repeated this claim:

"The Environment Act will deliver the most ambitious environmental programme of any country on earth. It will halt the decline of species by 2030, clean up our air and protect the health of our rivers, reform the way in which we deal with waste and tackle deforestation overseas. We are setting an example for the rest of the world to follow."

Old habits die hard

Whether the new act will be strong enough remains to be seen. Even with the ink still drying, senior ministers were trying to weaken or scrap two vital nature laws – the 1979 Birds Directive and the 1992 Habitats Directive. These are the legal backstops that protect the most precious wildlife species, natural habitats and landscapes across the UK and Europe.

Why would a UK government seek to remove the nature laws it helped design? And why would it want to discard key tools to ensure nature is not only protected but thrives, when ministers have also made big commitments, such as:

- Then Prime Minister Boris Johnson's pledge to protect 30% of our land and sea by 2030, as part of the global [Leader's Pledge for Nature](#). Johnson said "We cannot afford dither and delay because biodiversity loss is happening today, and it is happening at a frightening rate."
- The Environment Act 2021's legally binding commitment to reverse the decline in the abundance of wild species by the end of 2030, and to start increasing species populations into the 2040s and 2050s.

Third time lucky? UK looks to scrap vital nature laws

How does the UK government expect to meet its own commitments if at the same time it wastes everyone's time trying to gut the most important laws? It may come down to the UK having form on this. After all, since 2010 ministers have twice before tried to disable or scrap all-important nature laws.

The first attempt in 2011 was by Chancellor George Osborne. Before gaining office, he had pledged the HM Treasury would become environmentally responsible if he became Chancellor in a Conservative-led government.

Instead, without evidence, Mr Osborne claimed that nature laws were blocking progress and development and should be weakened or scrapped. His wild claims were not backed by credible evidence, and a formal government review of the nature laws concluded that Mr Osborne was not correct in his claims or aims.

The second attempt to dilute or discard nature laws was in 2016. But a formal "fitness check" review found that these laws were not blocking economic development – as the UK government had again mischievously claimed – but simply that governments were not properly implementing them.

Friends of the Earth, WWF, Birdlife and over 100 other UK conservation organisations publicised the threat to fundamental laws protecting vulnerable habitats and endangered species. Our Nature Alert campaign saw 100,000 people from the UK join with people across EU member states to give a resounding "no" to any attempts to dilute or scrap the nature laws.

Half a million people told the official consultation that they simply wanted their governments to get on with properly observing and implementing the nature laws – not trying to get round them.

So it is baffling that UK ministers are once again looking to meddle with laws they simply need to start observing. They don't seem to understand that to meet their own pledges to protect and restore nature across the UK in the timescale needed (including to meet international obligations such as on migratory species and internationally important habitats) they don't have time to scrap EU standards and dabble with new ones, which could take years to become enacted.

Instead, ministers must step up and start observing existing nature laws – and their own pledges – instead of peddling falsehoods that such laws are either a restraint on the UK or that they can be bettered.

A post-Brexit bonfire of standards

At the time of the 2016 Brexit referendum, Friends of the Earth and others warned that ministers' promises to meet or exceed EU nature and environment laws were not guaranteed.

During the referendum campaign, George Eustice MP, who later became Environment Secretary in Boris Johnson's government, said "the Birds and Habitats Directives will go" if the UK left the EU and he went on to describe the nature laws as "[spirit crushing](#)". Boris Johnson had also previously indicated [that he was not a fan of the nature laws](#) even though their architect was his father, Stanley Johnson.

Under Prime Minister Liz Truss, the UK government seems intent on its third attempt in a decade to ditch the nature laws, along with its promises to maintain or exceed nature and other environment standards in a post-Brexit bonfire of rules and laws.

Certain interests in government may see scrapping these laws as a demonstration of UK independence. But no one who voted in the 2016 referendum was told that "taking back control" would mean our already depleted wildlife and natural environment being further eroded by the UK exercising its new-found post-EU freedom.

The UK may no longer be part of the EU, but nature doesn't know that. Habitats such as the North Sea, Irish Sea and English Channel are shared by nations, and many birds and marine species migrate across borders without showing a passport. It is also unclear how UK ministers trying to scrap the nature laws for the third time in a decade will help the government hit its new targets or comply with the UK's aim to be "world leading" in protecting and restoring nature, including by fulfilling international treaties the UK has signed, such as the Ramsar convention on wetlands.

It's not as if UK ministers have come up with any firm plan that guarantees yet more meddling with the nature laws would be better for Britain and its depleted wildlife.

The economics of nature's demise

The UK government can't claim it doesn't know the true cost of putting nature out of business. That's because the Treasury has commissioned a first-ever independent review.

In the Economics of Biodiversity, leading economist Patha Dasgupta advises ministers that:

“Continuing down our current path – where our demands on Nature far exceed its capacity to supply – presents extreme risks and uncertainty for our economies. Sustainable economic growth and development requires us to take a different path, where our engagements with Nature are not only sustainable, but also enhance our collective wealth and well-being and that of our descendants.”

Any attempt by the government to scrap our nature laws is deeply misguided, short-sighted and even reckless when there is no evidence that such laws block or thwart the UK's economic aims.

The UK's nature hot spots overseas

Over 90% of the UK's biodiversity is found in its Overseas Territories (UKOTs), which are located in some of the world's biodiversity hot spots, such as the Caribbean, Malta and Cyprus.

The UKOTs are home to many endemic species and undisturbed habitats of international significance, including 33 Red List bird species – more than the whole of continental Europe. They have a combined 32,000 species of which at least 517 are globally threatened. Even excluding the 60,000 species that have yet to be properly recorded, that compares with 194 such species in mainland UK itself.

The UKOTs also span large stretches of the south Atlantic, Indian and south Pacific oceans. So the UK effectively manages the fifth largest area of ocean in the world and potentially the most biodiverse. An important step has been the UK's creation of vast marine protection areas based around Pitcairn in the Pacific and Ascension in the Atlantic.

Biodiversity in the UKOTs faces immediate and significant threats, particularly from invasive species, under-regulated development, over-exploitation of nature resources, and climate change. A 2014 inquiry by UK MPs found the UK government was failing to adequately protect the globally significant nature in its Overseas Territories. ❌

The UKOTs and the UK's role in Europe mean both added responsibility and opportunities to lead action for nature and ecosystems at home, in Europe and globally. But will the UK rise to this challenge?

The state of nature across the EU

Nature and ecosystems are also in decline across Europe, where a quarter of wild animals face extinction, most (65%) habitats of ecological importance are in unfavourable condition and ecosystem services are deteriorating ❌.

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 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, with significant implications for the capacity of biodiversity to meet human needs in the future."

Recognising ongoing failures to take nature, biodiversity and ecosystems seriously, members of the European Parliament called on the EU Commission and member states as a matter of urgency, "to give higher priority to achieving the 2020 targets." ❌

Even so, a 2018 book still observed that "The intensification of land use and increasing urbanisation seen in Europe are causing a loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services on a dramatic scale." ❌

Now the EU's new Biodiversity Strategy aims "to put biodiversity on track to recovery by 2030, for the benefit of people and the planet". Similar to the UK's world-leading claims, the EU also says it wants to "lead by example towards an ambitious post-2020 global biodiversity framework."

Given past failures and delays, the new EU strategy will have to work harder and put into action faster. There's little or no room for delay or for deploying false solutions, such as biodiversity offsetting. These are enthusiastically promoted but tend to conceal the continuation of business-as-usual activities and lack of genuine change in government and business behaviour, which is why the state of nature is so dire across Europe and the UK alike.

A good start would be to properly enforce the nature laws that the UK wants to repeal.

Nature laws must be properly enforced

Some EU member states seem to go out of their way to harm nature. Poland, for instance, has tried to fell Europe's most ancient forests, seemingly inspired by the arguments used by the Czech Republic, which has attempted to clear-fell ancient peat forests in its Šumava National Park.

The EU has rightly stepped in to remind member states of their nature duties, but it will need to stay vigilant about such threats to Europe's nature. It also needs to examine its policies that drive nature's decline elsewhere in the world. For example, EU policies have supported harmful production such as oil palm and biofuels, which are implicated in deforestation.

The EU Birds and Habitats Directives are intended to protect the most important wild species and habitats across Europe. A 2015-16 review found that although the laws were fit for purpose, they need to be properly observed and implemented – as with attempts by Poland and the Czech Republic to destroy their protected forests.

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

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.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been linked to the decline of our natural world. 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.

In the UK that starts with UK government making up for past failures with rapid action that truly protects, and then conserves and restores, habitats and species at pace and at scale.

For the EU it means a bold new biodiversity strategy. For both the UK and the EU it requires playing a leading and unashamedly pro-nature role in renegotiations of the global pact restore nature.

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 not an option.