

Question for short debate 12.01.23: Outcomes from COP15

Wildlife and Countryside Link briefing

Executive summary

- The Global Biodiversity Framework agreed in December 2022 sets a 2030 mission to take action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. It includes 23 action targets to deliver that mission in an equitable manner, including reducing harmful subsidies, providing finance, and cutting food waste.
- Target 3 - to protect and manage 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 - is one of the most significant actions agreed.
- Considerable uncertainty remains about the interpretation of the “30x30” target. The UK Government can help ensure this global target is met by delivering on its own 30x30 promise at home.
- Members of the House of Lords can hold the Government to its 30x30 promise over coming months by:
 - Advocating for expansion of the SSSI network of sites protected for nature.
 - Increasing the ambition of Environment Act targets, including a new target to improve the management of SSSIs.
 - Amending the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill to help protected landscapes contribute more to 30x30.
 - Rejecting the Retained EU Law Bill to ward off a significant threat to SAC and SPA sites protected for nature.

Lord Randall of Uxbridge has secured a short debate in the House of Lords on 12 January, on the following question:

“To ask His Majesty’s Government what assessment they have made of the outcome of the United Nations Biodiversity Conference: COP15, held in Montreal between 7 and 19 December; and to what extent the United Kingdom is fulfilling all of its international obligations to protect biodiversity.”

Broadly speaking, the outcome of COP15 has been recognised as a step forward for nature’s recovery. Nature and conservation eNGOs, including [RSPB](#) and [Born Free](#), have welcomed the agreement of a new [global biodiversity framework](#) with 23 targets for 2030 and 4 long term goals for 2050.

Of those targets and goals, target 3 is highly notable. It commits countries to *“ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures”*. As the CEO of the Wildlife Trusts, Craig Bennett, has [written](#) the global agreement of “30x30” means that *‘finally, we have a north-star target for biodiversity that can provide that same level of focus as the temperature targets do for climate.’*

By upholding the 30x30 target, the UK Government can help make COP15 promises a reality.

What can UK parliamentarians do to help deliver the 30x30 COP15 target?

The UK Government deserves credit for having helped secure 30x30, having campaigned for agreement from 2020, including a [pledge](#) made in that year to deliver 30x30 at home. The UK's leadership role in the development and adoption of this key COP15 target makes it crucially important that this domestic promise is delivered, to provide a blueprint for delivery and demonstrate to all COP15 partners that the global target can be met.

Unfortunately, two years on, 30x30 progress within the UK has been limited. Recent Wildlife & Countryside Link [analysis](#) found that just 3.22% of England's land and 8% of the sea was effectively protected in 2022. This represents an increase of just 0.22% of the land and 4% of the sea compared with 2021.

Members of the House of Lords can help improve UK progress to deliver 30x30 and fulfil COP15 promises by:

Pressing for the expansion of the SSSI network

The network of sites designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) is currently only a representative network, offering protections to samples of particular priority habitat types, rather than all priority habitats in that category. Expanding the SSSI network would provide a pipeline of new sites to protect for nature, helping to meet 30x30 and providing new safeguards for remaining fragments of priority habitats.

A recent Open Democracy [investigation](#) found that in July 2021 Natural England told Defra there was "*clear justification for increasing SSSI coverage*" to meet the 30x30 target, recommending the creation of 100,000 hectares of new SSSIs by 2030. Defra have to date not accepted this recommendation, new SSSI creation stands at around 3,000 hectares per year.

Increase the ambition of Environment Act targets

The 30x30 commitment agreed at COP15 requires sites not just to be protected – they also need to be effectively managed for nature's restoration. Many of our SSSI's do not currently meet this criterion, with just 38% of SSSIs in England having favourable status.

The targets published under the Environment Act 2021 provide an opportunity to address this. Nature eNGOs have [made the case](#) for a target under the Act to restore at least 75% of SSSIs to favourable condition by 2042, with interim five-year targets to track progress. This target would provide statutory underpinning for the monitoring and resourcing required to bring SSSI management up to scratch for nature.

The Environment Act 2021 targets, [published](#) in December 2022 two months after the [legal deadline](#), are currently before both Houses of Parliament as Statutory Instruments. Calls for a condition of designated nature sites target have gone unheeded, a major missed 30x30 opportunity. Link and other nature eNGOs ask peers to highlight this omission and to press for condition of designated nature sites target to be introduced urgently, along with other [essential upgrades](#) to the ambition of the targets package.

Amend the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill to enable the restoration of nature in protected landscapes

Protected landscapes (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) are intended to form the building blocks of 30x30 in the UK. However, an outdated legislative framework prevents them realising their full potential for nature's recovery, holding back their contribution to 30x30.

The Glover Review of Protected Landscapes highlighted these issues and put forward a package of recommendations to address them, a number of which were accepted by the Government in their [response](#) to the review earlier this year. A legislative vehicle is now needed to take forward these agreed recommendations.

Given the key role that protected landscapes play in furthering the Government's levelling up missions (especially health, wellbeing and pride of place), and the Bill's focus on environmental matters and the planning system (National Parks are planning authorities), the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill provides an appropriate and timely vehicle for Glover implementation. At Commons report stage in December 2022 a series of amendments were tabled by Sir Gary Streeter MP to implement Glover and help protected landscapes deliver more for nature's recovery and do more to contribute to 30x30. Despite cross-party and significant [civil society](#) support, the Government [rejected](#) these amendments.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill is now before the House of Lords, with second reading scheduled for 17.01.23. Further amendments to implement the Glover Review are due to be tabled at Lords committee stage, support for these amendments from peers could secure the long overdue protected landscapes reforms needed to move 30x30 forward. The Bill should also be amended to do more to increase people's [access to high quality natural space](#), another COP15 target (Target 12: *'significantly increase the area and quality and connectivity of, access to, and benefits from green and blue spaces in urban and densely populated areas.'*)

Reject the Retained EU Law Bill

The Retained EU Law (Revocation & Reform) Bill is intended to *'save, repeal, replace, restate or assimilate'* the retained EU law (known as REUL) applying in the UK. It completed [Commons Committee stage](#) in November and is expected to progress to the Lords in the next few months.

The Bill presents a direct threat to the protections that safeguard key nature sites from harm. Amongst over 1,000 environmental laws affected by the Bill are the Habitats Regulations, which underpin Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designations, further building blocks for 30x30. As a result of the Bill, the Habitats Regulations will now either be dropped from UK law, or (much more likely) be hastily rewritten by the 2023 deadline, or by an extended deadline in 2026, with a view to lessening the 'burden' of regulation.

Any weakening of the Habitats Regulations through this process of upheaval and deregulation will jeopardise SACs and SPAs, risking their ongoing effective management for nature and thereby undermining efforts to reach 30x30. Instead of being weakened, the strong level of protection offered to SACs and SPAs by the Habitats Regulations should be extended to SSSIs and other nature designations.

Environmentally minded peers should reject the Retained EU Law Bill in its entirety at Lords stages, to prevent a [self-inflicted blow](#) to nature's recovery in the UK.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 67 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world.

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