



30 by 30: Land for Nature's Recovery

Introduction

We welcome the UK Government's commitment to manage 30% of land for nature. This is a significant opportunity to protect the last remnants of natural and semi-natural habitat in England, and restore degraded ecosystems that are most important for wildlife, people or our response to climate change.

Getting this right is critical for the survival and recovery of many species that have been in decline for decades. Showing that it can be done in a way that supports a nature-positive economy would be a powerful contribution to global diplomacy, as the UN considers adopting targets to protect 30% of the land and sea by 2030 at the Convention on Biological Diversity next year.

To date, however, the Government has seriously underestimated the effort required to deliver 30% effectively. The Government has suggested that 26% of land in England is already protected for nature. However, the majority of this area is not specifically designated for nature's protection. Even where there are environmental designations in place, this includes many poorly-managed sites that are not in a good condition for nature and have not been monitored for years. A meaningful 30% commitment cannot simply be fulfilled by designating a new National Park.

The true area that is currently protected and well-managed for nature in England is much lower. Just 8% of land is statutorily designated specifically for nature's protection, of which less than 40% is in favourable condition. In other words, **only 3% of land could reliably be said to be specifically protected for nature**, rather than the 26% suggested by Government.

Nevertheless, with targeted reform of existing designations and a programme of identifying and protecting new sites, the 30% target in England is achievable by 2030. Success will require:

- **Completing the network of nature's finest sites:** an ambitious expansion and evolution of existing environmental designations, completing the network of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and the national site network to safeguard and restore the last fragments of precious habitats, many of which have all but disappeared such as wildflower meadows, ancient woodlands, biodiversity-rich brownfields, and wetlands;
- **Adaptation of existing landscape designations:** such as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty to ensure that they play a more meaningful role in nature's recovery; and
- **Other designations for nature's recovery:** A combination of other effective land management measures that can provide lasting protection from harm (such as pollution and development) and support for nature's recovery, including a spectrum of more interventionist management choices (underpinned by mechanisms such as agri-environment programmes) and less intensively managed options (such as rewilding).

In this briefing, we set out the conditions the Government should meet to count land as protected under its 30% target. If these are met—in combination with more sustainable management across the whole country—this could provide the foundation for recovery of habitats and species and a nature-positive economy for everyone.

Conditions

In order to contribute towards a 30% target, areas must meet two conditions:

1. **Protected for nature in the long-term:** the entirety of the 30% should be afforded long-term protection for nature and long-term protection against damage such as pollution, over-exploitation, invasive non-native species, habitat destruction and development.
2. **Well managed and in good or recovering condition:** land that counts towards the 30% should be well-managed for nature, and must all be regularly monitored at appropriate intervals as part of a programme of active management and investment. This monitoring should show clear evidence both of good management for nature and that the land is either in good condition for nature, or is showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery. The kind of management in place should be adaptable to changing ecological circumstances and may vary from highly species-specific and interventionist approaches such as long-term agri-environment systems to much more hands-off approaches like rewilding.

We recommend two further commitments:

1. **Strict protection for nature's last enclaves:** as a guideline, early proposals for the 2030 Action Targets for the Convention on Biological Diversity included at least 10% of the land designated for strict protection. In England, many important remnants of natural habitats such as ancient woodlands, important Invertebrate Areas and important Plant Areas remain undesignated. The Government should undertake a comprehensive exercise to identify the most important areas, with significant wildlife populations or remaining fragments of unspoilt habitat. These areas should be given the highest levels of legal protection (SSSI, SAC, SPA, Ramsar) as the finest nature sites. Scientific evidence suggests that to establish resilient ecological networks, 16% of land *or more* should be designated for strict protection and be in good condition.¹ This wildlife-rich core of sites would be the backbone of a Nature Recovery Network.
2. **A connected network across England:** the connectivity of areas of habitat has been identified as a key criterion in nature's recovery. River corridors, linear features and green infrastructure will play a crucial role. While these areas may not always themselves contribute towards the 30%, Government must set targets and introduce policies that will increase the connectivity of areas of habitat.

What should count in the 30%?

There are a range of different types of land designations in England that could contribute to meeting 30% for nature. With reform and better management, existing designations might meet our conditions of long-term protection and effective management for nature's recovery. In addition, novel designations could also contribute.

(1) Strictly Protected Areas

SSSIs should be considered the minimum level of protection needed to constitute "strict protection." In order to contribute to 30% all sites must be monitored and in favourable condition or showing

¹ <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1365-2664.13196>

demonstrable signs of ecological recovery. **The core of the 30% should be afforded the highest protection as SSSIs, SACs, SPAs or Ramsar sites.**

A comprehensive review should take place to complete the network of natural and semi-natural habitats and important havens for wildlife for this kind of strict protection. To count, these areas must be either in favourable condition or showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery. These designations already provide some protection from harms such as development, although this is not total and should be strengthened.² This must be confirmed by accurate and up to date monitoring data.

At present just 8% of land is protected as SSSI and a large percentage of these sites are not in a good condition for nature—only 38.4% of SSSIs are in favourable condition and monitoring is currently inadequate. For example in 2019 only 54% of SSSIs had been monitored in the last six years. This poor record on monitoring is a result of severe cuts at Natural England. The Agency's budget fell by 72% between 2009 and 2019.

Natural England must complete and implement its reviews of SSSIs and implement the recommendations of the 2nd and 3rd UK SPA Reviews in order to increase the areas covered by these designations. The SSSI selection process should be inclusive and comprehensive, rather than the current approach which aims only to designate a representative sample of sites. Instead, all sites that meet the thresholds should be designated as SSSIs. However, identifying and completing designation of these areas is currently a lengthy process; this process must be improved and sped up, with more flexible management options to help adapt to changing conditions like climate change.

(2) Strengthened Landscape Designations (within which more areas will contribute to 30x30)

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks ("Protected Landscapes") currently contribute the majority of the 26% of land in England that the Government claims is protected for nature. Although these Protected Landscapes have the potential to contribute significantly to the 30% and to the wider Nature Recovery Network (NRN), **only those sections of Protected Landscapes (rather than their entirety) that meet the criteria of long-term protection, positive management for nature, and good condition should count towards 30%.**

National Parks and AONBs are not designated specifically for nature conservation. The statutory purposes of National Parks cover natural beauty (including wildlife), cultural heritage and recreational opportunities. AONBs have only one statutory purpose relating to natural beauty. Neither amounts to an effective purpose to require the restoration of nature across the protected landscape. Many of these Protected Landscapes do include high concentrations of sites designated for nature within them, but evidence suggests that, in many cases, SSSIs within National Parks and AONBs are in poorer condition than SSSIs in the countryside outside of these areas.^{3,4}

In future, these areas could make a crucial and genuine contribution to biodiversity's recovery, but only if they are given significantly greater resources and a clear requirement to play a greater role in nature's recovery. For example, the Glover Review recommendation to strengthen statutory

² Ideally, the level of protection in SSSIs would be increased to match the national site network, where significant impacts are only allowed where imperative reasons of overriding public interest apply.

³ <https://www.britishwildlife.com/article/volume-30-number-2-page-87-95>

⁴ <https://www.cnp.org.uk/news/raising-the-bar>

Management Plans with clear priorities and actions for nature's recovery is a necessary first step to ensure that parts of those areas could qualify for the 30%. This should be used as a guide to target resources and funding to deliver environmental outcomes in National Parks and AONBs, integrating with their wider statutory purposes.

(3) Other areas protected and managed for nature

These areas are likely to vary enormously, from areas owned and managed by public bodies and NGOs to privately owned land. Some will be farmed, some will be city parks, some will be specifically held for nature. To contribute to nature's recovery, these areas will need to have a similar mosaic of management measures to suit different circumstances and changing conditions.

Local Wildlife Sites could contribute towards 30% where they can be shown to meet the criteria above; more information is needed on the condition of most of the sites. A report from The Wildlife Trusts shows that there is information about the condition of 15% of the 44,000 sites,⁵ partly because many Local Wildlife Sites are in private hands and are rarely monitored.

Local Wildlife Sites form a significant natural resource of good quality or restorable habitats and a focus on these could enable rapid progress to be made against the 30% target. This could be addressed with substantial investment in Local Wildlife Site Partnerships. A significant proportion of Local Wildlife Sites could be included in the 30% if they were monitored and shown to be in good condition for nature or showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery, in line with the recommendations set out in Defra's *Local Sites: Guidance on their Identification, Selection and Management*.⁶ A stronger mechanism for their protection is needed, such as the novel designation outlined below.

Other areas that could contribute, where they meet the conditions above, include: land under conservation covenants, National Nature Reserves (NNR), irreplaceable habitats, land under long-term environmental stewardship schemes, and land owned by conservation NGOs, as long as it is designated or required to be protected, managed and monitored for nature.

Novel designations may also contribute to 30% if they meet the criteria for long-term protection and enhancement of nature. For example, a new designation such as a "Wildbelt" could identify and protect areas that present the most significant opportunities for nature's recovery, building on the current designations which focus on protecting existing features.⁷ There is also potential to provide long-term protection and target better management through the planning system. If the Government proceeds with planning reform, new areas could be identified for strict protection and nature's recovery.⁸ Local Nature Recovery Strategies, proposed in the Environment Bill, will identify areas where there are the most significant opportunities for managing land better to enhance the natural environment and should be reflected in new planning frameworks.

⁵ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/local-wildlife-sites>

⁶ <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402204735/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/rural/documents/protected/local/sites.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Wildbelt%20briefing%20September%202020.pdf>

⁸ The current proposals for protected areas do not offer any additional protection beyond existing designations. We propose stronger, strictly protected zones, as well as areas identified for nature's recovery: <https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Link%20briefing-the%20Planning%20White%20Paper%20and%20Nature-Nov2020.pdf>

The 30% as part of a wider Nature Recovery Network

While the 30% target may be for the UK as a whole, England should aim to achieve at least 30% of land protected and well-managed for nature. This 30% target should not be seen as a ceiling but as a minimum achievement required to contribute towards nature's recovery. Scientific evidence demonstrates that protecting at least 30% of land can have a significant impact on extinction risk and on climate change.⁹

Of course, nature cannot be confined to 30% of the country and other areas must be hospitable to nature even if they are not formally included in the 30%. Wildlife must be able to travel between protected areas along blue and green corridors through towns, cities, the countryside and the farmed environment. LNRs must ensure that there are ambitious plans to restore nature everywhere, underpinned by effective regulation. With effective management for nature and sufficient funding, long-term Tier 2 and 3 ELMs contracts could contribute to achieving nature's recovery both in protected areas and beyond, in building the wider NRN. These other areas may not meet the conditions to contribute to 30% but will still play an important role in nature's recovery.

Conclusion

Protecting and effectively managing 30% of land for nature would help to restore habitats and wildlife populations, and has significant co-benefits for climate and people. To be included in the 30x30 target, land should be subject to long-term protection, regularly monitored and well-managed for nature. This target should be maintained and extended beyond 2030 to promote nature's recovery. The extent of existing protected areas in England that currently meet those criteria is small—probably limited to the c.3% of land that is in a SSSI in favourable condition.

To boost the extent of SSSI making the grade, the Government should invest in a comprehensive monitoring and management programme, providing Natural England with the resources necessary to service the network. It should also undertake a programme of new designation to significantly increase the area of land protected under the SSSI and national site network standards. The starting point for delivery of the 30x30 target, should be to complete this network of the most wildlife-rich sites afforded the highest levels of protection.

Further land could be brought into compliance by strengthening other existing designations. With a clear requirement to play a greater role in nature's recovery, further protection and positive management measures to enhance the natural environment, and the resources to deliver good environmental outcomes, sections of Protected Landscapes such as National Parks and AONBs could make a genuine contribution to biodiversity's recovery and form part of the 30%.

Finally, there may be potential for new designations to add further to these existing protections. In particular, novel designations may help to protect and manage areas with the greatest potential for restoring and enhancing the natural environment, alongside designations that protect existing biodiversity. To contribute to a truly effective Nature Recovery Network, these areas must combine a mosaic of management styles from the most interventionist to more hands-off approaches.

By completing the strictly protected network of England's last remaining natural habitats, modernising existing designations to focus on nature, and identifying a range new areas most important for nature's recovery, delivery of the 30 by 30 commitment can help to reverse the long-term decline of wildlife in England and set the UK on the path to a nature-positive economy.

⁹ <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/4/eaaw2869>

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