

Biodiversity and Ecosystems

Evidence for the Environmental Audit Committee by Wildlife and Countryside Link
September 2020

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 57 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature.

Introduction

1. The 2021 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) meeting in China represents a moment of opportunity. The global community has the chance to agree that, by 2030, humanity will halt and start to reverse the loss of biodiversity and put nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of all people and the planet. Such an agreement could drive action to prevent human caused extinctions and recover the abundance and diversity of life, so that all people and nature can thrive.
2. The UK can play a leading role in forging this global commitment, in this year of UNFCCC COP 26 UK presidency. By taking robust action to recover biodiversity domestically, the UK can lead by example. With the State of Nature (2019) report showing continuing declines in UK wildlife abundance¹ a domestic biodiversity success story would demonstrate to the world that it is possible to reverse biodiversity decline - even in densely populated nations like the UK, where nature has been diminishing for decades.
3. UK leadership on biodiversity would also make a transformative contribution to efforts to secure a green recovery from Covid-19. Biodiversity is nature's immune system and evidence is mounting that human assaults on biodiversity, including illegal wildlife trade, industrial farming and deforestation, can all turn our planet into a petri dish for new diseases². By protecting biodiversity, we can protect ourselves by ensuring that zoonotic pandemics like Covid-19 are not repeated. Biodiverse ecosystems, including their capacity to effectively store carbon, have an important role to play in preventing the gathering crisis also arising from human interference in the natural world – the climate breakdown that threatens to disrupt global economics on a far greater scale than Covid-19³. Enhancing biodiversity is a necessary measure to securing long term economic stability.
4. In our response, we set out a three-part plan to set a global lead in enhancing biodiversity – setting ambitious targets, creating the conditions in which those targets can be met, and then delivering on them through a Nature Recovery Network. This blueprint would give a priority focus for the Government's biodiversity work, provide a plan for the UK to lead on at the 2021 Convention on Biological Diversity meeting, make a climate contribution ahead of COP26, and deliver lasting economic benefits.

¹ <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2874344/>

³ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2020>

Biodiversity enhancement plan (part A): Setting ambitious targets

5. The expiry of legally binding targets inherited from the EU provides an opportunity for the UK to up the scale of its environmental ambition. The replacement target infrastructure being taken forward by the Environment Bill marks a start towards this in England and an amendment, if accepted, would extend it to Northern Ireland. Defra's targets policy paper⁴ contains promising material on biodiversity, including plans for outcomes targets to improve the quality of marine and terrestrial habitat in protected sites and to improve the overall status of species populations on land and in freshwaters.
6. Whilst this is a start, more work is needed to ensure that the new targets reflect how far we need to go to restore biodiversity. More than two-fifths of UK species have experienced significant declines since the 1970s⁵. The scale of decline needs a level of ambition to match.
7. A headline goal to bend the curve of biodiversity loss into biodiversity recovery is needed to set this level of ambition, and to provide an overarching focus for target setting. Globally Link has proposed "Recovery of species populations by 2050", as this goal, underpinned by milestones for 2030, 2040 and 2050, and supported by three sets of targets: species abundance, species extinction risk, and habitat quality and extent. As organisations that have been tracking the state of the natural world for many years through ground-breaking State of Nature and Living Planet⁶ reports, Link members believe this measure will be the most accurate way of determining the state of our biodiversity over time. This ambition, if committed to domestically ahead of CBD 2021 via an amendment to the Environment Bill that requires government to set a target to reverse the decline in the state of nature, could then be adopted at the Convention to apply globally.
8. Defra's Targets Policy Paper indicates that the scope of biodiversity targets in England would cover most of the underpinning elements of the headline goal - species abundance, species extinction risk, and habitat quality and extent. For habitats outside of protected areas, however, Defra proposes an action focused target, based on appropriate management, (such as agri-environment schemes) arguing that the indicator to directly monitor the quantity, quality and connectivity of habitats is still not fully developed. Link agrees that further work on this indicator is needed, but notes that there has been significant progress, including the increasing availability of remote monitoring technology to support compilation of the data and the development of innovative metrics for connectivity. We therefore urge that this work is prioritised and accelerated to provide a more robust indicator for habitats.
9. It is essential to have an effective legal framework for establishing these targets. The Environment Bill will create this new framework - however, there are several significant weaknesses in the current drafting that would render any set of targets unreliable. To address

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environment-bill-2020/august-2020-environment-bill-environmental-targets>

⁵ <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

⁶ https://wwf.panda.org/knowledge_hub/all_publications/living_planet_report_2018/

these weaknesses, the Environment Bill should be amended to: (1) create a clear link between targets and Environmental Improvement Plans; (2) make the interim targets legally-binding; (3) clarify the significant improvement test to ensure that future iterations of the targets framework remain comprehensive and strong; (4) ensure the targets that are set are ambitious and comprehensive enough, through requiring that an appropriate number and type of long-term targets are set in each priority area, with the explicit purpose of the targets needing to maintain a healthy environment as a whole system; and through requiring the Secretary of State to have to obtain and take into account independent, expert advice and carry out a full public consultation when determining what targets to set, and when reviewing targets (making public the reasons for any divergence from advice).

10. A commitment to effectively protect at least 30% of our land, seas, and water for nature by 2030 would help realise the scale of ambition embodied in these targets.
11. Ambitious biodiversity targets need to be closely tied to a duty to implement measures that tackle the key drivers of biodiversity loss (see part B) and provide the tools that will deliver species recovery (see part C).

Biodiversity enhancement plan (part B): Creating the conditions for success

Reduce the pressures on wildlife and plants

12. Action to reverse biodiversity decline must first recognise and address the factors that have caused the decline. The significant reductions experienced by two fifths of UK species since 1970 have been driven by many factors, including:
 - Intensive agriculture. 97% of wildflower meadows have been lost since the 1930s, due to agricultural intensification and changes in land use. 70% of floodplains are now under intensive agriculture⁷ creating issues of flooding, poor water quality and siltation.
 - Climate change. Since the 1980s, average UK temperatures have increased by nearly 1°C. This is driving widespread changes in the abundance, distribution and ecology of the UK's wildlife⁸.
 - Development. Building on greenfield has resulted in a net reduction in all types of grassland (both farm use and recreational areas) of 1.9 million acres since 1990, an area greater than the size of Suffolk and Sussex combined⁹.
 - Overexploitation. Mounting consumption of limited natural resources has left those resources depleted. Water is a case in point; exploitation has reached such a point that the Public Accounts Committee reported this summer that England faces 'serious risk of running out of water within 20 years'¹⁰.

⁷ https://valuing-nature.net/sites/default/files/documents/Synthesis_reports/VNP09-NatCapSynthesisReport-Floodplains-A4-16pp-144dpi.pdf

⁸ <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.ceh.ac.uk/press/almost-2-million-acres-gb-grassland-lost-woodland-and-urban-areas-expand>

¹⁰ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/news-parliament-2017/water-supply-and-demand-management-report-published-19-21/>

- Pollution. Plastic waste, air pollution and chemicals are choking our habitats, from Killer Whales facing extinction in UK waters due to PCB chemical pollution¹¹, to the 5,000 items of marine plastic pollution found per mile of beach in the UK¹².
 - Invasive Species. An estimated 25 new listed species have established as invasive in the UK in the last 20 years, causing environmental damage estimated by last year's EAC inquiry as costing £1.8 billion a year¹³. A recent study found that the average abundance of native plants, animals and insects has fallen in most major ecosystems by least 20% since 1990 due to invasive species. For example, Ash is a keystone species that is home to 164 species of ash-obligate or highly associated species. 56 of these species are threatened with extinction so it is likely that the spread of diseases such as ash dieback will lead to further biodiversity loss¹⁴. The inadvertent introduction of new pests and diseases through the procurement of trees from uncertain origins has had a devastating impact on the natural environment and added a massive financial burden to land managers.
 - Habitat loss. For example, ancient woodlands are one of our richest and most complex terrestrial sites, yet loss of this unique habitat means that ancient woodland now covers only 2.4% of the UK. Many of these sites have been planted for productive forestry but restoration to native woodland could help to increase their value for biodiversity. Hedgerows, which provide important habitat and connectivity for wildlife, have been removed at a much faster rate than they have been planted since the Second World War, and many remaining hedgerows are so badly managed that their value to wildlife is much reduced.
13. Action must be taken to reduce these pressures, linked to the proactive work to create space for biodiversity. Good regulation is key and can act as the safeguard to prevent the over exploitation of precious natural resources. The need for good regulation on development and agriculture is especially urgent and is explored in more detail in part C. Regulation can be a catalyst for shifts in behaviour, from changes in dietary consumption to a reduction in virgin plastic material usage, that make a positive impact on biodiversity. Regulation should be combined with innovative policy, such as a nature-based solutions to climate change, a Nature Volunteer Force to track invasive species, greater use of bio secure assurance scheme such as UK & Ireland Sourced and Grown (UKISG), new recycling infrastructure to tackle pollution and changing farming practices on floodplains (from intensive agriculture to rich pasture), to meaningfully tackle the human activities that harm the variety and abundance of UK species.

Curate the data needed to understand biodiversity

14. To enhance our ecosystems, we first need to understand them, their state and function. This can only be achieved with adequate data and the supporting infrastructure to meet our environmental information needs; including standards-compliant data that provides the required information about sites, species and habitats; their status, condition, and connectivity.

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jan/14/uks-last-resident-killer-whales-doomed-to-extinction>

¹² <https://www.sas.org.uk/our-work/plastic-pollution/plastic-pollution-facts-figures/>

¹³ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/invasive-species-17-19/>

¹⁴ Hultberg, T. et al, 2020. Ash dieback risks an extinction cascade. *Biological Conservation*, 244, p. 108516.

Data also needs to cover the integrity and resilience of terrestrial, aquatic and marine ecosystems; the existing value, potential and inter-relationships of the services they provide and the scale and scope of positive and negative impacts.

15. Currently, the collection of environmental data in the UK is carried out by a wide spectrum of environmental bodies and many individual volunteers. With regard to biodiversity data a range of organisations including local environmental records centres, national recording schemes and the wider National Biodiversity Network play a vital role in checking, collating and disseminating data of known quality. Local authorities, statutory agencies, environmental NGOs, researchers, developers, their agents and others need to access and use data but at each step in the required data pathways there are gaps, obstacles, and inadequate tools. Environmental and economic gain could be realised by upscaling the collection, management, sharing and effective application of biodiversity data and other environmental evidence.
16. Without an effort to enhance the collection, curation and effective use of environmental data, with the aim of informing, prioritising and targeting efforts and monitoring and evaluating outcomes - at local to national scale – efforts to enhance biodiversity will continue to fall short. Environmental NGOs, local environmental records centres, local authorities and statutory agencies must be given the resources they need to knit current arrangements into a comprehensive, standards-compliant, accessible¹⁵ national data framework, to ensure interoperability and meet local to national needs in seamless fashion. These new resources should include training to give more people the skills needed to properly collect, manage, and interpret environmental data. We need a new generation of highly skilled and accredited field officers, ecologists, data managers and environmental data scientists.
17. A cohesive and accessible environmental information framework, with the required supporting infrastructure and funding mechanisms will offer unparalleled opportunities for nature's recovery across ecosystems and the implementation of Environment Bill initiatives and strategic planning. This was recognised, with regard to species, by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in a speech in July, when he spoke of the Government's interest in an 'accurate, centralised body of data on species populations'¹⁶ to allow for more effective planning. Recent work on newt populations, by the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, illustrates the potential for certain species groups. Using high quality data¹⁷, the Trust has developed a species distribution model that describes the relationship between locations where newts are known to occur, locations where newts are known or presumed to be absent, and a suite of environmental variables that influence species distribution. The modelled relationship allows for a prediction of where newts are likely to occur, allowing for informed strategic planning.

¹⁵ <https://www.nature.com/articles/sdata201618>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/george-eustice-speech-on-environmental-recovery-20-july-2020>

¹⁷ <https://cdn.naturalresources.wales/media/687859/eng-evidence-report-259-review-of-the-current-conservation-status-ccs-of-the-great-crested-newt-in-wales.pdf>

Resource the biodiversity frontline

18. As demonstrated above, environmental NGO's have a crucial role to play in collecting the environmental data needed to make informed biodiversity decisions. They are also key delivery partners in biodiversity enhancement groundwork. They have specialist skills and knowledge, practical on-the-ground conservation capability (including substantial land holdings) and can draw upon a volunteer and citizen scientist workforce; all assets that could be usefully deployed in the push to enhance biodiversity.
19. Resourcing is needed to unlock those assets. During lockdown, eNGOs faced collective gross losses in excess of £35 million per calendar month. For the environment sector, this is a hugely significant sum of money resulting from loss of retail revenues, visitors' fees, charitable giving and a fall in membership income. Ongoing losses from reduced membership income alone are expected to exceed £100million this year and next year (these figures are from Link research¹⁸). This financial impact has already hit vital nature work, from Marine Protected Area monitoring being suspended to planned habitat creation projects being cancelled.
20. Link has proposed a Government stimulus package of c.£315million¹⁹ to help eNGOs recover. This package, comprising a compendium of "shovel ready" projects, would support thousands of existing eNGO jobs, create and restore 200,000 hectares of priority habitat and sequester millions of tonnes of carbon. This support would help eNGOs recover from 2020 and enable them to bolster the push to enhance biodiversity over the years ahead.

Biodiversity enhancement plan (part C): Delivering a Nature Recovery Network

21. After setting targets to underpin the goal of species recovery by 2050, and creating conditions in which these targets can be met, the critical step will be providing space for terrestrial and marine species to recover in. A coherent Nature Recovery Network (NRN) will provide this space.
22. The Wildlife Trusts have developed a definition of the NRN that encapsulates what it would deliver for biodiversity: 'A Nature Recovery Network is a joined-up system of places important for wild plants and animals, on land and at sea. It allows plants, animals, seeds, nutrients and water to move from place to place and enables the natural world to adapt to change. It provides plants and animals with places to live, feed and breed'²⁰.
23. The Wildlife Trusts definition ends with the warning that the NRN "can only do this effectively if, like our road network, it is treated as a joined-up whole". This is an essential point. The NRN is an existing Government measure (contained in the 25 Year Environment Plan), as are several of its building blocks. However, work is required to strengthen and knit together these measures, to form a coherent network for nature to recover in. We set out below how this could be achieved.

¹⁸ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/huge-nature-cost-of-coronavirus.asp>

¹⁹ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Nature_projects_compendium_summary.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/nature-recovery-network>

The Nature Recovery Network

24. The NRN should provide the key organising spatial framework for nature's recovery, enabling the successful delivery of environmental commitments, including the recovery of species by 2050 goal and its associated targets.
25. The NRN is contained in the 25 Year Plan for the Environment, but there are currently no duties or actionable plans in place to create it. This must be rectified, with a Government delivery plan setting out future intentions for investment and action, specifying who is responsible for delivering it and including specific targets, milestones, timescales, delivery mechanisms, and budgets. The delivery plan should closely tie the delivery of the NRN to the achievement of the recovery of species by 2050 goal, and associated targets.
26. The core of the NRN should be formed from linking up existing sites of high value to nature. SSSIs, Local Wildlife Sites, Important Plant Areas, Important Fungi Areas and Important Invertebrate Areas, Marine Protected Areas, and Special Areas of Conservation represent a 'conservation ark' for species otherwise lost from areas – by linking them up this arc can grow. Such enhancement of currently protected sites would implement the recommendations of the 2010 Lawton Review of wildlife sites²¹ and move us away from simply protecting nature, to actively enabling it to recover. The linking up of existing sites would also further the recommendations of the 2019 Glover Review of landscapes²².
27. This recovery will be further advanced by creating new sites of high value to nature and linking to existing protected sites. When creating these new sites, it will be important to plan the right habitats for the right places, taking account of a variety of factors including the ecological needs of species and integration with the wider landscape.
28. When planning the NRN, it will also be important consider where the greatest benefits will be delivered for people. By 2030, 90% of the UK population will live in urban areas²³ and where possible, in addition to restoring nature, the NRN should maximise benefits to people by delivering large areas of nature near to where people live, and integrating nature into the fabric of our towns and cities. The statutory guidance for the NRN, expected next year, should be an opportunity to further this aim of linking people and nature.
29. For nature to recover, the NRN needs to extend across every part of England, including rural, coastal and marine areas, cities and towns. For this to happen, the systems and processes necessary to implement it must operate everywhere, not in only a few target areas. The below measures, to apply across England, should be the building blocks of the NRN to ensure a truly joined up system of places.

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/making-space-for-nature-a-review-of-englands-wildlife-sites-published-today>

²² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf

²³ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/what-is-the-future-of-our-urban-built-heritage>

30. The NRN should be cognisant of existing environmental and climate plans and take the opportunity where possible to help deliver these plans and realise their benefits. For example, catchment management plans - focussed on working with natural processes in combination with restoring the natural function of catchments - can reduce flooding whilst also realising the potential of rivers to function as thriving wildlife corridors.

Coordinating the NRN at a local level: Local Nature Recovery Strategies

31. As envisioned in the Environment Bill, Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) allow for the strategic planning of activity to restore, buffer and link sites at a local level to enhance biodiversity. As such they have the potential to be the local floorplans to the national blueprint that is the NRN. However, as currently drafted in the Bill, LNRSs are isolated documents. There is no requirement on local authorities (the authors of LNRSs) to link the Strategies into the NRN and other environmental plans, and no duty upon authorities to apply LNRSs to relevant areas of local activity (such as planning).
32. To tie LNRSs to the NRN, the Environment Bill should be amended to require all LNRSs to include a statement of how the Strategy is expected to contribute to the delivery of the NRN, and of the species recovery goal and associated targets. This would ensure that each Local Nature Recovery Strategy helps deliver the NRN and contributes towards national biodiversity and wider environmental objectives, serving as a mechanism to translate national targets to local delivery.
33. Similarly, the Environment Bill should be amended to require each LNRS to coordinate local biodiversity net gains arising from planning, environmental land management schemes and other local priorities for nature. This coordination and delivery should make ecological sense, ensuring that all biodiversity gains aggregate up to form a coherent local nature recovery network, which can then in turn link with other local networks to form part of the national whole. These amendments would ensure that the content of Local Nature Recovery Strategies would render them fit to fulfil their intended purpose – as the comprehensive local building blocks of a national Nature Recovery Network.

Coordinating the NRN at a local level: Zonal planning

34. The Government's Planning White Paper,²⁴ as currently drafted, represents a threat to the development of the Nature Recovery Network. The NRN is not mentioned in the White Paper, potentially relegating it to an ambition stated only on the pages on the 25 Year Plan for the Environment, with no embodiment in the new zonal planning system. Furthermore, environmental protections applying to nature-rich sites will be reduced, if those sites are on land designated into either the White Paper's proposed 'growth' and 'renewal' zones. Nature-rich sites in these zones (including greenfield sites and woodland) will be at risk from development, instead of being protected and incorporated into the NRN.

²⁴https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907647/MH-CLG-Planning-Consultation.pdf

35. The planning system should contribute to enhanced biodiversity, rather than detracting from it. The White Paper should commit the planning system to helping achieve the NRN and integrate the system with emerging local nature recovery strategies. One possible way of doing this would be through the creation of two dedicated zones for biodiversity- a Highly-Protected Zone and a Nature Recovery Zone.
36. A Highly Protected Zone would cover currently protected sites, applying a legal presumption against development to further safeguard them. This would reinforce the protection already afforded by site designations, incorporating other SSI's, Local Nature Reserves, ancient woodlands, peatlands and other priority habitats into highly protected zones.
37. A Nature Recovery Zone would, within its boundaries, apply planning permission in principle for environmental investments and discourage new hard infrastructure. Many projects to create important habitats like ponds and wetlands currently require planning permission, but this could be granted in principle for areas in a Nature Recovery Zone to speed up investments in ecosystems. These recovery zones would become engine houses for nature's recovery, helping to support nature and provide nature-based solutions to climate change and flooding.
38. Local Nature Recovery Strategies could designate Highly Protected and Nature Recovery zones, designations that would then be incorporated into local plans, giving LNRSs direct application in the planning system and enabling meaningful local coordination of the Nature Recovery Network. These LNRS designations, carried through into local plans, would also allocate new land to the NRN, helping it to grow.

Growing the NRN: Biodiversity Net Gain

39. Done well, Biodiversity Net Gain, has the potential to accrete more land to the Nature Recovery Network by requiring residential development to create more habitat than it destroys – both within new development and through the creation of new spaces for nature. If coordinated by Local Nature Recovery Strategies, as described above, these gains will help grow the NRN into a truly joined up system of places for wildlife and plants.
40. This is a very welcome principle, which is currently weakened by provisions in the Environment Bill exempting Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects permitted by Development Consent Orders from Biodiversity Net Gain. The Planning White Paper risks weakening Biodiversity Net Gain further by extending the use of Development Consent Orders to cover large-scale housebuilding, as well as infrastructure. This exemption could lift whole new towns, and the infrastructure projects associated with them, out of the Biodiversity Net Gain system.
41. This would represent a major missed opportunity to deliver biodiversity gain at scale, and to add new high biodiversity value sites to the NRN with each new residential development. Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects and large-scale housebuilding can be some of the most damaging developments for nature but if appropriately located and planned, they offer significant opportunities for biodiversity gain. The exemption for Development Consent Orders

should be removed from the Environment Bill, to ensure that the potential role of Biodiversity Net Gain in creating a comprehensive and growing Nature Recovery Network is fully realised.

Growing the NRN: Environmental Land Management

42. Environmental Land Management, as proposed in the Agricultural Bill, will reward farmers and land managers for creating more space for wildlife, along with the cleaner air and water wildlife needs to thrive. As such it represents an opportunity to further the aims of the Nature Recovery Network through growth of biodiversity on cultivated land. Robust and comprehensive Local Nature Recovery Strategies will be needed to align the local outputs of Environmental Land Management with the national NRN, and the recover species by 2050 goal.
43. This major change to our system of subsidising land management is intended to be phased in over seven years. In order to deliver biodiversity benefits swiftly, up-front advice and support needs to be provided to farmers now, to aid enable speedy adoption of Environmental Land Management practices. The Government should also provide clarification on the scope of Environmental Land Management through the later stages of the Bill process. It is important that Environmental Land Management applies beyond agriculture, and that community land managers are given the notice and support they need to apply it successfully. Significant environmental projects, such as the Northern Forest²⁵, are dependent on community land managers for delivery, and Environmental Land Management should provide the support community land managers need to realise current ambitions.

Growing the NRN: The Nature for Climate Fund

44. The Nature for Climate Fund (NfCF) is a £640m primarily aimed at supporting woodland creation and peatland restoration projects in England. It therefore has potential to help support the recovery of biodiversity in England. To realise this, it is important that projects supported by the fund are not narrowly focused on delivering carbon sequestration. For example, when it comes to woodland expansion, there is a risk that activity is focused on planting fast-growing conifers to deliver carbon sequestration quickly. However, native trees can deliver multiple public goods, including carbon sequestration, air quality and flood mitigation, and are a better option for biodiversity and the growth of the Nature Recovery Network.

Growing the NRN: Urban greening

45. A recent National Trust report²⁶ has demonstrated the potential to extend the Nature Recovery Network into towns and cities through urban greening. The report sets out how £5.5 billion of investment could upgrade existing parks with new facilities, plant new green streets, pocket parks and walls, and create large parks and forests on the fringes of urban areas to connect countryside and city. This work, in addition to providing significant environmental and

²⁵ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-plant-trees/the-northern-forest/>

²⁶ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/press-release/new-research-shows-55bn-fund-needed-to-level-up-access-to-urban-green-space-as-part-of-uks-green-recovery>

economic benefits, would give close access to nature to over 20 million people, making the Nature Recovery Network a part of everyone's lives.

Growing the NRN: Highly Protected Marine Areas

46. Blue spaces are as invaluable for biodiversity as green ones. Whilst the Government is leading on international efforts to protect 30% of the ocean by 2030, at home less than 10% of UK seas are covered by a full set of management measures²⁷ to limit activities that damage biodiversity.
47. Richard Benyon's independent Review into Highly Protected Marine Areas in England and Northern Ireland²⁸ proposes that this management gap be addressed by the creation of Highly Protected Marine Areas. These areas would offer more protection than the current Marine Protected Areas, prohibiting extractive, destructive and depositional activities and allowing only non-damaging levels of other activities within their boundaries. These new highly protected areas would give marine ecosystems space to recover, form marine components of the Nature Recovery Network, and support closely linked coastal habitats

The benefits of enhancing biodiversity

48. Biodiversity is complex, with progress in one area being liable to be offset by inadvertently damaging policies in another. It is essential that the Government implements a clear and comprehensive plan to enhance biodiversity, that draws together welcome but isolated current biodiversity measures into a coherent strategy based around clear priorities. The three-part plan set out above – setting ambitious targets, creating the conditions in which those targets can met, and finally achieving them through a Nature Recovery Network – would provide these priorities, and the means of delivering them.
49. Such a plan, if swiftly embarked upon, would allow the UK to lead by example at the 2021 Convention on Biological Diversity and make an important climate contribution to COP26.
50. Enhanced biodiversity will also lead to economic benefits for all UK citizens. The labour needed to create and maintain the Nature Recovery Network will be considerable, with the urban greening element of the NRN (as proposed by the National Trust) alone being forecast to create 40,000 jobs in initial construction and over 6,000 created permanently for ongoing maintenance²⁹. The National Nature Service³⁰, proposed as a means of coordinating such NRN work, would also equip people with highly transferable skills, opening doors to lasting employment in growing green sectors of the economy³¹. The increase in green space created by the NRN would provide a further boost to the economy through improved public health,

²⁷ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/ocean-recovery.asp>

²⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/890484/hpma-review-final-report.pdf

²⁹ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/press-release/new-research-shows-55bn-fund-needed-to-level-up-access-to-urban-green-space-as-part-of-uks-green-recovery>

³⁰ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/NNS%20August%20letter%20-%202020.08.20.pdf>

³¹ <https://www.businessgreen.com/news/4014231/linkedin-demand-green-jobs-tripled-uk-2019>

with Public Health England estimating that £2.1 billion a year could be saved from health costs if everyone had good access to greenspace³².

51. In addition to the economic and public health benefits, enhanced biodiversity will help provide the economy with what it most needs - long-term stability. The successful recovery of species by 2050 will play its part in preventing the further environmental crises we know to represent the greatest threat to the global economy, from pandemics to climate change.
52. Recovering the economy through nature's recovery is a policy option popular with the public. RSPB research has shown that 3 out of 4 people in England (76%) support the suggestion that nature should contribute to the UK's economic recovery from Covid-19³³.
53. The recovery of biodiversity is achievable and will deliver lasting benefits for nature and people. The next six months represent an unparalleled window of opportunity, with action in the UK potentially sparking off progress on a global scale. It is time to seize the biodiversity moment, to secure an abundant future.

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Butterfly Conservation

League Against Cruel Sports

Floodplain Meadows Partnership

Peoples Trust for Endangered Species

British Mountaineering Council

Institute for Fisheries Management

Four Paws

Wildlife Gardening Forum

³²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

³³ <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/rspb-england/posts/new-research-reveals-huge-public-support-for-putting-nature-at-the-heart-of-coronavirus-recovery-plans>

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Whale and Dolphin Conservation

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

The Rivers Trust

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