



MONITORING

The Biodiversity Emergency: Implications for UK policy

This Dods Monitoring briefing explores how considerations of biodiversity are playing an increasingly significant role in UK policymaking

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1. Introduction

Despite being overshadowed by the climate emergency and quest for net zero, considerations of biodiversity are playing an increasingly significant role in UK policymaking. As well as having a direct impact on climate change itself, concerns about how to halt and reverse the decline in the variety of plant and animal life have major implications for a spectrum of policy areas including agriculture and food production, energy and infrastructure, and health and disease control. The COVID-19 pandemic has injected fresh urgency into the debate on our connection with nature and the risk of outbreaks of devastating new infectious diseases due to land-use changes and human interaction with virus-prone species.

In response to the Dasgupta Review, a landmark UK report published in February that called for a more ecologically sustainable approach to economics, the government **declared** 2021 a “critical year” to reverse biodiversity loss. Its Environment Bill, which completed its passage through the House of Lords in October 2021, has been amended to include a legally-binding **target** to halt species decline by 2030, while Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, including new transport and energy ventures, are now **required** to demonstrate a “nature-positive” impact.

On the world stage, the UK has used its presidencies of the Group of Seven and UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties,

COP26, to push for stronger action to protect and enhance nature. In June, the G7 agreed to take “bold action” at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), or **COP15**. **The conference, which has been repeatedly delayed by the COVID pandemic**, has been split into two phases with virtual talks in October followed by in-person negotiations in late April 2022 in Kunming, China. The initial phase concluded with more than 100 countries agreeing the Kunming Declaration, which commits parties to developing, agreeing and implementing a framework for global biodiversity action over the coming decade when talks resume next year.

This Dods Monitoring briefing explains why the health of nature matters for policymakers and provides a timeline of key dates for biodiversity policy globally. More specifically, it examines how biodiversity considerations are having a growing influence on UK government policy, including the significance of the Dasgupta Review, and explores how these environmental concerns are playing out in four key policy areas: energy and infrastructure, agriculture and environment, health and wellbeing, and international development.

2. The health of nature and why it matters

A high level of biodiversity is generally considered to be important and desirable as it reflects a healthy and flourishing environment capable of sustaining human life. However, the UN and conservation groups have warned repeatedly that human behaviours, from industrial processes to food production, are dragging the world in the wrong direction. The [Global Biodiversity Outlook 5](#), the flagship publication of the CBD that offers a global progress report on biodiversity targets agreed in 2010 with a 2020 deadline, warned that humanity is at a crossroads. It said that “Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate, and the pressures driving this decline are intensifying.”

That stark message was echoed by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), one of the world’s largest and most experienced independent conservation organisations, in its [Living Planet Report 2020](#), which said global wildlife was “in freefall.” The report warned that “nature is being destroyed by humans at a rate never seen before,” with a 68 percent average drop in global wildlife population sizes since 1970. Global habitats are in poor health too. The report said that 75 percent of ice-free land has been significantly altered by human activity, while almost 90 percent of global wetlands have been lost since 1700. Without urgent global action, the report warns that “life on Earth will be pushed to the brink.”

The health of nature in the UK paints a similar picture. According to the State of Nature Report 2019 [published](#) by the National Biodiversity Network, 41 percent of all UK species surveyed have declined since 1970, with 15 percent threatened with extinction. The report also found that the UK failed to achieve 17 of the 20 UN Aichi Biodiversity Targets, which it had [agreed](#) to alongside 195 other countries one decade earlier. Important [measures](#) of ecosystem health, such

as fish populations in the North Sea and the status of pollinating insects, have also continued to deteriorate over the last decade. Commenting on the findings, the Natural History Museum in London [said that](#) the UK had “led the world in degrading the natural environment.”

Although concerns about biodiversity have often been overshadowed by global warming in recent years, there is a growing acceptance that both crises are two sides of the same coin. Published in 2018, the UK government’s 25 Year Environment [Plan](#) recognised that the twin threats of climate change and biodiversity loss cannot be solved in isolation from each other, nor with an approach that is only domestic in scope. It said that “systems that regulate life on earth – ecosystems, the world’s oceans, freshwater and the climate – exist in feedback loops,” adding that “damage we cause can be multiplied, creating conditions hostile to our existence.” That view was [echoed](#) more recently by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), which argued in 2020 that “climate change and biodiversity loss are twin crises that should be tackled together.”

Aggressive deforestation has caused a rapid loss of biodiversity while also degrading natural carbon sinks with a vital role in sequestering carbon. Similarly, damaging industrial fishing practices have been blamed for depleting fish stocks and damaging undersea vegetation, which [diminishes](#) the ability of the oceans to absorb carbon that would otherwise contribute to climate change in the atmosphere.

Fortunately, biodiversity loss is not irreversible. A UN [study](#) published in late 2020 found that restoring 30 percent of farmland in priority areas for natural ecosystems would prevent over 70 percent of projected extinctions, while also helping to sequester almost half of all carbon emitted since the Industrial Revolution – more

than 465bn tonnes. Since 2010, the rate of global deforestation has fallen by around one third and 44 percent of biodiverse areas are now under protection, up from 29 percent in 2000.

Supporting nature also makes economic sense, especially when nature recovery schemes are also designed to mitigate climate change or adapt to its effects. A recent study commissioned by the Campaign for Nature group estimated that protecting 30 percent of global land and oceans by 2030 would require an average investment of around \$140bn per year, less than one third of global government subsidies supporting activities that are harmful to nature. The benefits of such protection, even from a financial perspective alone, would significantly exceed the costs. While economic damage from greenhouse gas emissions could equate to \$1.7trn per year, the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity Initiative (TEEB) estimates that damages from biodiversity loss could reach \$4.5trn per year.

Against this backdrop, global leaders concluded the first phase of negotiations for COP15 in mid-October 2021 by adopting the Kunming Declaration, which commits more than 100 signatories to formalising an ambitious post-2020 global biodiversity framework when talks resume in April 2022. The Declaration, which

has been welcomed by the UK Government, also calls on parties to recognise the importance of conservation in protecting human health. As it stands, the draft framework sets 21 targets and 10 milestones to be achieved by 2030. Alongside commitments to protect at least 30 percent of global land and seas, the framework also aims to repurpose or eliminate incentives that are deemed harmful to biodiversity, reducing them by at least \$500bn per year.

As host of COP15, China has been eager to show that it is leading from the front, pledging to incorporate biodiversity protection into the development plans of all its regions and sectors. China also announced that it would invest around \$233m to establish the Kunming Fund, to support developing countries in protecting biodiversity. Addressing the conference, Chinese President Xi Jinping said natural assets were economic assets too, adding that “when we take care to protect nature, nature rewards us generously; when we exploit nature ruthlessly, it punishes us without mercy.” Stakeholders such as the WWF described the Declaration as an important show of political will. Should the framework be adopted in early 2022, it promises to set in motion unprecedented global action on biodiversity and formalise the CBD’s shared vision that society can “live in harmony with nature” by 2050.

3. Timeline

1970: First Earth Day **takes place**, marking the beginning of the modern environmental movement.

1980: First Global Sustainable Development Strategy **published** by UNEP and the WWF.

1982: UK ratified the Bern Convention.

1993: **Convention** on Biological Diversity enters force, ratified by 196 countries.

2000: **Millennium Development Goals** adopted.

2002: Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity **commit** to achieving a significant reduction of current rate of biodiversity loss by 2010.

2007: Defra **report** and **action plan** on ecosystem services published.

2010: Tenth Convention on Biological Diversity (**COP10**) revises and updates Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, including the Aichi Biodiversity Targets.

2011: Defra **publishes** Biodiversity 2020 policy paper for England.

2011: UK establishes the International Climate Fund (ICF) and first ICF strategy is published.

2013: EU **agrees** ban on widely used pesticide, neonicotinoids, to protect bees.

2015: Sustainable Development Goals agreed to.

2015: Paris Agreement signed at culmination of COP21 UN Climate Summit.

2015: The International Climate Fund changes to International Climate Finance (ICF) with 20 percent of budget allocated towards tackling deforestation.

2018: UK government **publishes** 25-Year Environment Plan.

2019: Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) publishes Global Assessment **Report** on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

2019: The first Global Sustainable Development **Report** is published by the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development.

2019: UK announces £220m International Biodiversity Fund.

2019: NHS Long Term Plan **emphasises** importance of social prescribing and commits to training more than 1,000 social prescribing link workers.

June 2020: UK government announces, "Project Speed" Infrastructure Delivery Taskforce, aiming to provide a simpler framework for environmental impacts while improving nature.

September 2020: Leading UK charities and the OECD publish reports on the loss of global and UK biodiversity, including the WWF Living Planet **Report**, RSPB's **report** on a Lost Decade for Nature in the UK, and OECD **report** on a green and resilient recovery to COVID-19.

November 2020: Nature Recovery Network Delivery Partnership **launched** in England.

February 2021: **Dasgupta Review** on the economics of biodiversity published.

March 2021: Defra **launches** second round of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund.

June 2021: UK government publishes its **response** to the Dasgupta Review, including commitment to a "nature-positive" future.

June 2021: Environmental Audit Committee publishes **report** on putting nature and net zero at the heart of the economic recovery, and **report** on biodiversity in the UK.

June 2021: G7 leaders **agree** to 2030 Nature Compact and commit to global mission to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030.

July 2021: Defra and Natural England **publish** updated Biodiversity Metric.

July 2021: Integrated Review **pledges** to ensure that all new UK bilateral aid spending does no harm to nature, and commits the UK to spending at least £3bn of its international climate finance on programmes that enhance nature by 2026.

August 2021: UK government **strengthens** duty to set a legally-binding target to halt species decline by 2030 through new amendment in the Environment Bill.

August 2021: Defra launches ECOWind, a £7m research scheme to assess how UK offshore wind sector may impact marine ecosystems.

September 2021: First **draft** of post-2020 global biodiversity framework published.

11-15 October 2021: Fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, **COP15**, held virtually.

October 2021: Kunming Declaration **adopted** at conclusion of first phase of COP15 talks.

Autumn 2021: UK ministers to host expert roundtable on how policy can enhance the link between nature, health, and wellbeing.

Winter 2021: Environment Bill expected to receive royal assent.

25 April – 8 May 2022: COP15 to resume in-person in Kunming, China.

2022: Great Britain Plant Biosecurity Strategy to be published.

2022: UK government **expected** to publish Biomass Strategy, setting out role of biomass and BECCS in reducing carbon emissions across the economy.

2025: UK government target to restore at least 35,000 hectares of peatland.

2030: Target for achieving most UN Sustainable Development Goals.

2030: UK government **targets** to reverse biodiversity loss and meet global ambition to conserve or protect at least 30 percent of world land and oceans.

2042: Conclusion of goals set out in the government's 25 Year **Environment Plan**.



4. UK biodiversity policy and the Dasgupta Review

For years the UK government has considered public policy regarding economics and biodiversity separately, with the Treasury taking care of the nation's public finances while the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra) concerned itself with the natural world. However, that binary approach was turned on its head in February 2021 with the publication of "The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review," which was commissioned by the Treasury and written by economist Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta.

The **headline messages** of the review were stark. It said our economies, livelihoods and well-being all depend on nature, but added that we have "collectively failed to engage with nature sustainably, to the extent that our demands far exceed its capacity to supply us with the goods and services we rely on." This is endangering the prosperity of current and future generations, the review warned, and blamed what it called a "deep-rooted, widespread institutional failure." The review said the solution started with the acceptance that our economies are embedded in nature, not external to it, and the need for people to change how they think, act and measure economic success. Ultimately, it warned that we need to ensure that our demands on nature do not exceed its supply, and that nature's supply should be increased. This would require radical change; the current rate of resource **consumption** in the UK is around 14.7 tonnes per year per person, double the maximum rate of sustainable consumption, which the UN puts at eight tonnes.

The review said economic success should be geared towards sustainability, and institutions such as finance and education systems should be transformed to enable these changes. It ended on an upbeat note, arguing that "Transformative change is possible." One of the most powerful outcomes of the review is that it has provided more theories and vocabulary for economists and policy makers to understand the value of

biodiversity. It has striking similarities to the Stern Review, a landmark report **published** by the Treasury in 2006 on the economics of climate change. Using economic models, it estimated that the benefits of strong and early action to tackle climate change far outweighed the economic costs of not acting, a message that continues to be echoed by scientists and experts today.

The UK government has made significant progress this year in advancing policy to help tackle the decline in biodiversity. In its response to the Dasgupta Review **published** in June, the government agreed with the report's central conclusion and committed to delivering a "nature positive" future where economic and financial decision-making is geared towards improving the state of the natural environment. As part of this drive, the Environment Bill was amended to ensure that new Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) in England, such as new transport and energy ventures, would need to **provide** a net gain in biodiversity and new habitats for wildlife. It also committed to ensuring that new UK bilateral aid spending does no harm to nature and announced further initiatives, including working with the Office for National Statistics to improve how nature is incorporated into the national accounts, and improving guidance for building environmental considerations into policy-making processes.

The government announced further amendments to the Environment Bill in August, including a legally-binding **target** to halt biodiversity loss by 2030, a new duty on government ministers to embed environmental principles into policymaking, and enhanced national targets on the quality of air, water, biodiversity and resources. The amendments were designed to support the government ambition, set out in its 25 Year Environment Plan, to **become** the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it. During the Report Stage in the House of Lords, amendments were

also passed on the Environment Bill that were resisted by the government, including on the declaration of a biodiversity emergency.

The government has announced several other initiatives to support its “nature positive” agenda, including a new **Biodiversity Metric** launched by Natural England, the government advisor on the environment, to enable planners and land managers to measure and account for nature losses and gains from development or changes in land management. In response to the Dasgupta Review it announced that it is **developing** a Nature for Climate Impact Fund to leverage private finance. Earlier this year it also ran a second £40m round of its Green Recovery Challenge Fund, a scheme to promote nature-based solutions in England that it hopes will help retrain thousands of workers in new “green jobs” in the conservation sector.

The Dasgupta Review also reinforced the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on public appreciation of nature and its connection with our physical and mental health. Recognising this, UK ministers plan to **host** an expert roundtable later in 2021 to discuss how policy can enhance this link. Internationally the UK is championing the “30x30” **target** that aims to protect at least 30 percent of global land and ocean by 2030. The pledge is supported by more than 70 countries. The UK has also supported the launch of the £220m International Biodiversity Fund and £500m Blue Planet Fund, aiming to protect nature while reducing poverty, reinforced by a **pledge** in the 2021 Integrated Review to ensure that all new UK bilateral aid spending does no harm to nature.

Some critics have said the UK government has not moved far enough or quickly enough. In a report **published** in September entitled “The UK’s footprint on global biodiversity,” the House of Commons cross-party Environmental Audit Committee identified four areas where government effort needed to be stepped up: reducing the impact of UK consumption, trade and supply chains on nature; better protecting UK overseas territories; “mainstreaming” biodiversity considerations into overseas development

assistance; and pushing for a more ambitious Global Biodiversity Framework at COP15. The Committee noted that “The government has committed to leaving a lighter footprint on the global environment,” adding “quite simply, this needs to start happening immediately.” The government has yet to respond.

The report followed another published in June, “Biodiversity in the UK: bloom or bust?,” which said the UK was one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Other groups have also expressed **concern** that a lack of binding interim targets could allow the government to defer meaningful action for future generations. Leading conservation charities including the RSPB and Wildlife Trust have **recommend** that five-yearly budgets are adopted for nature recovery, modelled on the Carbon Budgets, to ensure action is not delayed.

The growing role biodiversity is playing in policymaking has major implications for the business community. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has started to produce a new series of reports called **GEO for Business**, focusing on the environmental challenges and opportunities that demand change from businesses. The UK government’s approach to biodiversity is having an impact on a variety of sectors too. For example, to rectify the **failure** of market prices to place a reasonable value on natural assets (forests are worth more chopped down than growing), the government is starting to require developers to measure their impact on, and contribution to, biodiversity when requesting planning permission. Financial institutions are also waking up to the risks posed by changing nature and the threat of litigation. The Dasgupta Review **warns** that accessing finance may soon be conditional on a company’s dependence on natural assets, or the sustainability of its supply chain. Stakeholders argue that comparable actions are now required in the public sector.

Companies face reputational risks too, as consumers become increasingly concerned by the health of nature. There is **evidence** to suggest that consumers are scrutinising the

environmental impact of business practices and their supply chains more carefully, and changing their demand patterns accordingly. **Research** by Deloitte in 2021 found that 28 percent of UK consumers have stopped buying certain products due to ethical or environmental concerns. Businesses engaged in nature-harming ventures also face the risk of “stranded assets,”

whereby assets become less valuable, or unable to earn a return, long before the end of their expected economic life owing to a changing political climate and pressure to adopt more sustainable business practices. Exposure of the European financial sector to high-carbon assets is **estimated** to have cost the sector over €1tn in stranded assets.



5. Biodiversity in UK sectors

The following section examines how biodiversity concerns are playing out in specific sectors: energy and infrastructure; agriculture and environment; health and wellbeing; and international development.

5.1 Energy and infrastructure

In June 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson **announced** a new Infrastructure Delivery Taskforce named “Project Speed”. Recognising that the planning system could be “complex and burdensome,” which slowed infrastructural development and added costs, Project Speed sought to provide a quicker and simpler framework for assessing environmental impacts, while promising improved outcomes for nature. Developed further in the National Infrastructure Strategy **published** in November 2020, the new regime left stakeholders **wondering** if the ambition to enhance nature and deliver new infrastructure at speed could be reconciled. One year on, the government is transforming the policy landscape once more, raising nature higher up the political agenda, with potentially major implications for the energy and infrastructure sectors.

According to UNEP, energy and infrastructure have **strong links** with biodiversity and ecosystem services, owing to their impact and dependency on nature. UNEP says biodiversity concerns are **becoming** “mainstreamed,” with “growing recognition from a wide set of stakeholders, including government, industry and finance institutions, that biodiversity needs to be integrated into ... the operations of companies within these sectors.” Infrastructure and energy projects can have a detrimental impact on nature, such as through oil spills and the disruption of ecosystems. Yet there are immense opportunities for the sectors to contribute to nature recovery, and benefit from it too. Director of sustainable development at engineering

firm AECOM, Robert Spencer, **says** that new infrastructure projects “bring some of the greatest opportunities for the creation of carbon sinks and biodiversity recovery, if properly planned.”

The government agrees and a flurry of policy announcements over the past year have rendered biodiversity an important metric in the planning of new energy ventures and NSIPs – large scale developments requiring development consent, principally in the energy, transport, water or waste sectors. While the Energy White Paper, published in December 2020, only mentioned biodiversity twice, the government said in **response** to the Dasgupta Review in July 2021 that it would **embed** environmental decision-making across its infrastructure portfolio. An amendment to the Environment Bill stipulates that new NSIPs in England **must deliver** a 10 percent net gain for biodiversity. This means future infrastructure and energy projects will have to leave nature in a better condition than before development began, measured using the government’s updated Biodiversity **Metric**. A consultation on the policy design will launch later this year, including on a transition period and proposals for a similar approach for marine net gain.

There are **suggestions** too that the remit of the National Infrastructure Bank could be broadened to include a focus on improving the quality of the UK’s natural capital. Such considerations are already evident across the UK; HS2, the largest infrastructure project in Europe, **aims** to deliver a biodiversity net gain on its Crewe-Manchester leg and local councils are **implementing** “nature-positive” policies. Research suggests that the public supports this move. A **study** by engineering consulting firm WSP Global found that 72 percent of people surveyed were more likely to support new infrastructure developments in their local area if the projects were required to improve the local natural environment.

A nature-positive approach to infrastructure development is likely to have especially far-reaching implications for the energy sector. In June 2021, Natural England, the statutory advisor on nature conservation for development planning cases, **called for** new offshore wind farms to incorporate plans to enhance nature and protect the natural environment. Estimates **suggest** that to achieve the UK government's plans to produce 40GW of energy from offshore wind by 2030 will require the equivalent of one turbine to be installed at sea every weekday for the rest of the decade. Recognising the enormous impact this may have on nature, especially for sea birds and marine life, Natural England has **urged** "partners, stakeholders, government and other marine users to ensure that a thriving marine and coastal environment is a cornerstone of future developments." The advisor also recommends the development of environmental sensitivity maps so planners and developers can avoid ecological harm, alongside compensatory measures if damage occurs. Defra has also **launched** a £7m research scheme called ECOWind to assess how an expanding UK offshore wind sector may impact marine ecosystems.

Experts say that significant challenges remain if the energy and infrastructure sectors are to reverse their impact on nature. Data will be crucial to **enable** planners and developers to accurately assess the likely impact that projects may have on ecosystems. The value of natural capital to infrastructure also needs to be quantified and better understood, to ensure investors are on board. The Dasgupta Review goes some way to achieving this, as well as teasing out the potential economic merits of nature-based solutions, which can help companies lower their carbon output and meet their net zero requirements, while leaving nature in an improved state. This in turn can **deliver** benefits to society, such as flood prevention and improved air and water quality. The government has said it hopes that infrastructure projects across the UK will help to **form** a Nature Recovery Network, creating space for nature and biodiversity to recover, while improving the quality of life for communities living in the area.

While research is in its infancy, **evidence** suggests that some efforts to provide a "net gain" for nature are having mixed and sometimes undesirable consequences. Research **published** by Green Alliance – a think tank focusing on environmental issues – found that net gain policies are leading to a significant loss of green spaces, as ecologically-sensitive countryside is turned into urban settlements, on the condition that developers incorporate habitats or enhance nature throughout the development process. The research finds that many enhancements are of low biodiversity value and are becoming isolated in urban clusters, rather than forming networks of nature as the government envisaged. It found the failure of developers to enhance nature may fall below the threshold used by local authorities to pursue enforcement action, despite being a planning requirement. According to Green Alliance, this means that 95 percent of promised "net gain" improvements for nature may be unenforceable.

Implications for the energy sector are likely to reach beyond infrastructure too. For example, the amount of global agricultural land used to grow non-food crops, such as biofuels, **increased** by more than 35 percent worldwide in the 15 years to 2010. The IPCC **estimates** that global production of biofuels will continue to rapidly expand to meet demand and implement negative emissions technologies such as Bioenergy Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS). The Dasgupta Review warns that such changes in land use practices will have significant consequences for biodiversity. Questions also remain over the impact of energy imports and the supply chain on nature. **Research** from the UK Energy Research Council concludes that the reliance of countries on energy imports makes it difficult to assess how "green" and impactful their energy supplies truly are. It finds many countries shift their impact on nature elsewhere in the world, displacing ecological harm along global supply chains. Solar and wind power had the least impact on nature globally with coal having the highest, although increasing demand for renewable sources is likely to tip the balance in the near future.

Stakeholders are increasingly eager to demonstrate the sustainability of their business practices and endeavours to support nature. Many energy companies now **publish** an annual biodiversity report and National Grid **recognises** that consideration of the natural environment is a “key aspect [of] network development processes.” The Dasgupta Review emphasises the power of “nudging,” whereby companies and customers become aware of actions taken by competitors or neighbours and choose to follow suit. This is likely to “mainstream” biodiversity into business decision-making, although efforts to transition the sectors towards a “nature-positive” approach will be **slowed** by the failure

of the market to value natural assets, combined with the continued profitability of unsustainable ventures. Nonetheless, a changing policy landscape in Westminster, heightened consumer awareness and recognition of the crucial role that nature can play in achieving net zero targets means that companies are increasingly **observing** the merits of considering nature in business decisions. Stakeholders will now be looking to see if ambitions in the Environment Bill and 25 Year Environment Plan are backed up with enforcement and action.

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5.2 Agriculture and environment

On 18 May 2021, Defra **published** a policy paper titled: *Nature for people, climate and wildlife*, setting out the government's actions in England "to protect precious habitats and species in the terrestrial environment." The policies in the paper fall into the categories of targets and guidance, the England Peat Action Plan, and the England Trees Action Plan. New legally binding biodiversity targets have also been included in the Environment Bill, which the government hopes will become law this autumn. Among those targets is a goal to halt species decline by 2030, which was strengthened by an amendment on **26 August**.

The government has recognised that domestic policy alone is insufficient to halt global biodiversity decline, so it has also pushed for a "far-reaching and transformative framework for biodiversity to be adopted at CBD COP15." Although the conference has been repeatedly delayed due to the pandemic, the UK has sought to make progress in other international forums, including helping the G7 commit to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity by 2030 as well as signing up to the global "30x30" initiative, which commits the government to help protect at least 30 percent of the world's land, freshwater and seas by 2030.

The Environment Bill also has targets for including biodiversity and water quality in the Environment Improvement Plan and Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The aim is to integrate considerations of biodiversity gain into other decisions that have an environmental impact and increase the likelihood of the government meeting its wider biodiversity targets.

The government's ambition to improve biodiversity has received widespread backing in the farming community, although there is concern about how related policies might affect the sector. The National Farmers Union (NFU), the largest organisation in England and Wales representing farmers and growers, told Dods Monitoring that it supported the aim, but added

that any new targets must be considered in light of the current landscape, such as considerations of UK produce remaining competitive. There continue to be uncertainties around future trade arrangements following Brexit and what impact they might have on the viability of the British agricultural industry to contribute to the delivery of these targets.

The government peat strategy includes plans to invest over £50m in peatland restoration as part of the Nature for Climate Fund, to restore at least 35,000 hectares of degraded peatland by 2025. Peatlands store a remarkable amount of carbon, the equivalent of all the carbon stored by UK forests, as their waterlogged nature prevents plant material from fully decomposing and organic matter grows on these areas that removes additional carbon. This makes them an important element in the government's carbon sink strategy and wider effort to reach net zero.

The government plans to introduce legislation to limit managed burning on protected blanket bog unless it is covered by a licence in limited circumstances and phase out the use of peat in horticulture. The Lowland Agricultural Peat Task Force – a group tasked with improving the condition of England's farmed lowland peat – is coordinating work and developing new solutions to manage peatlands for food and farming, with recommendations due to be published in mid-2022. Peatlands also have a series of other benefits such as reducing flood risk and regulating the flow of water, making these areas powerful tools for adapting to the risks of climate change. Wildlife and Countryside Link, the largest coalition of environment and wildlife groups in England, **welcomed** most of the announcements in the government's Peat Action Plan, but added that it "stops short of committing to binding targets for the protection and restoration of our peatlands, and the burning of peatlands remains as a loophole."

The England Trees Action Plan aims to better protect existing trees and woodland and set the UK on the path to having at least 12 percent woodland cover by the middle of the century."

Defra plans to create a new Centre for Forest Protection and develop a Woodland Resilience Implementation Plan to improve the condition of woodlands and increase resilience to climate change, pests and disease. These adaptation measures aim to complement the mitigation initiatives of carbon sequestration to support the UK's wider climate change ambitions. The Centre for Forest Protection and Woodland Resilience Implementation Plan will support a new Great Britain Plant Biosecurity Strategy, which is to be published by 2022. The Horticultural Trades Association **welcomed** the England Trees Action Plan, but warned that "market place confidence is needed by the industry if the government's plans are to be realised."

By Dr Joshua Wells, Dods Political Consultant for Environment and Climate Change – @Dr_jrwells

5.3 Health and wellbeing

Despite scientists' longstanding concerns about the inextricable connection between people's health and the state of the natural world around them, government policy on health and wellbeing has not reflected this worry. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has for many years highlighted this connection and warned in a joint report with UNEP in 2015 **that** "there is growing concern about the health consequences of biodiversity loss."

Although the origins of COVID-19 have yet to be confirmed, the pandemic has triggered fresh debate about our connection with nature and the risk of outbreaks of new infectious diseases due to land-use changes, species exploitation and greater human interaction with virus-prone species resulting from the decline in biodiversity. An OECD **report** on biodiversity and COVID-19 published last year highlighted this, stressing that nearly three-quarters of emerging infectious diseases in humans come from other animals. Former Health Secretary Matt Hancock described the COVID-19 pandemic as a "once in a century crisis." Acknowledging the impact of biodiversity

loss on human health is key to understanding why this will probably not be the case.

In a recent **report**, the UK parliament's Environmental Audit Committee said that the pandemic should be a "wake-up call" for the government to review such threats. The Dasgupta Review also said that the pandemic had **reinforced** the role of nature in maintaining our physical and mental health and warned that if humans continued to encroach on natural habitats, pandemics would become more likely. It said that "If health is an end, then biodiversity is a means to that end."

Government efforts to increase preparedness for future pandemics have tended to focus on preventing the loss of life, rather than stopping viruses from emerging in the first place. The Pandemic Preparedness Partnership (PPP), created as part of the UK's G7 presidency, produced a **100 Days Mission** report that detailed a roadmap for slashing the time required to develop and deploy high quality vaccines for new diseases from 300 days to 100. The **partnership** of the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have similar concerns, with a new Centre for Pandemic Preparedness established as part of the UKHSA to improve disease surveillance, genomic sequencing worldwide and accelerate COVID-19 recovery. Peter Daszak, who chaired the IPBES workshop, has likened policies such as these to treating symptoms instead of causes.

However, warnings from an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) **report** published in 2020 demonstrate that future pandemics will emerge more often and spread more rapidly unless there is a transformation in the global approach to dealing with infectious diseases, both the prevention and reaction. Both the IPBES report and Dasgupta Review said the costs of lowering the risk of a pandemic was a fraction of the cost of tackling an actual pandemic.

Some stakeholders have **argued** that the UK government's response to the pandemic

was slow, insufficient and characterised by firefighting amid a lack of suitable equipment and poor communication. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said there will be a frank and candid public inquiry into the government's handling of the COVID crisis during the current parliament, with the government responding to criticism of its COVID response by pointing to the success of its vaccine rollout.

There is a well-established link between biodiversity and wellbeing. The government's 25 Year Environment Plan **published** in 2018 committed to exploring how NHS mental health providers could establish new working arrangements with environmental voluntary sector organisations to offer appropriate therapies such as gardening, outdoor exercise and care farming. The NHS Long Term Plan **focuses on an initiative** in the health and social care sector called green social prescribing, a method of alternative medication for patients typically experiencing mental health issues. It consists of nature-based interventions and activities such as walking for health schemes, community gardening and local food-growing projects. Although some experts have **said** that "evidence fails to provide sufficient detail to judge either success or value for money" of the initiative, other studies have shown that such schemes can also help to regenerate vacant urban areas and support development of species in cities.

By Emma Delgado, Dods Political Consultant for Health and Life Sciences, and Dean Sabri, Dods Principal Political Consultant for Health, Social Care and Welfare

5.4 International Development

Biodiversity and the maintenance of natural resources is a key focus of ongoing development policy and UK aid spending. Without proper access to ecosystems, habitats, food systems, land and natural resources, communities and countries are affected by drought, famine, and natural disasters such as wildfires, all

of which can lead to mass displacement and conflict. Enshrined in Goal 15 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, those ascribed have committed to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

The UK government has sought to meet this goal by directing overseas development assistance spending into projects ranging from deforestation prevention to protecting marine environments via the **Blue Belt Programme**. Setting out the Overseas Development Spending (ODA) for 2021-22 in April, the then Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, allocated £534m of the total budget of £8.1bn towards climate change and biodiversity.

In July 2021, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), which scrutinises UK aid expenditure, **published a report** on UK aid spending targeted at halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss. It found that the work the government had done in these areas was "satisfactory in most areas and making a positive contribution, but could do more to ensure it achieves impact." It recommended that UK bilateral programmes should be guided by social impact analysis and safeguarding measures.

Before that, in January 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson **announced** that the UK would dedicate at least £3bn of international climate finance towards "protecting nature, whether it's marine life or timber conservation or sustainable food production." The investment is part of the UK's wider £11.6bn contribution to the International Climate Finance initiative, which aims to support developing countries to respond to the challenges and opportunities of climate change.

However, there remains concern that biodiversity is not being given the same importance as other climate related issues in this initiative, **with the ICAI highlighting** that just three percent of ICF spending to reduce emissions goes towards protecting forests and other ecosystems, even

though tropical forest loss currently accounts for eight percent of the world's annual carbon dioxide emissions. The carbon emissions from deforestation are a product of many variables, ranging from the release of carbon stored in these sinks when they are damaged or removed through to emissions from machinery used for deforestation.

Environmentalists and those within the aid sector have called for more work on recognising the nexus between biodiversity and human rights, with many identifying COP26 as an opportunity for the UK to lead the way on defining a rights-based approach to biodiversity and climate change. The right to life, and the rights to food, water and sanitation, health and culture, are dependent on thriving ecosystems and biodiversity. Communities that are reliant on nature for day-to-day life are the most impacted by biodiversity loss, with a recent UN report highlighting that traditional indigenous territories encompass around 22 percent of the world's land surface and coincide with areas that hold over 80 percent of the planet's biodiversity.

The G7's [Nature Compact in June](#) committed to "working collaboratively with partners and stakeholders to drive global system change that works for all, prioritising the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples as well as local communities in co-design, decision-making and implementation, and recognising the interests of vulnerable and marginalised groups including people living in poverty, women and girls, people with disabilities, and youth."

The UK government has said a significant proportion of its international climate finance between 2021/22 and 2025/26 will be invested in new green technologies, including up to £1bn for developing and testing new technology for energy storage and industrial decarbonisation. The government [has also opened](#) a number of ODA funds for innovative projects related to biodiversity, food security and global health.

By Laura Hutchinson, Head of UK Political Intelligence at Dods – [@LauraHutch_Dods](#)



6. Conclusion

Despite clear evidence that biodiversity is in dangerous decline and ever more alarming warnings from the UN and conservation groups, governments around the world – the UK included – have been slow to rise to the challenge. As the Dasgupta Review states, the failure of society to respond to these warnings is a signal of institutional failure, as well as a failure to recognise that we are embedded in nature rather than external to it. However, the response of governments to the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, while imperfect and mixed, has fuelled optimism that they can also design and implement policies to encourage the recovery of biodiversity.

This briefing has set out how the UK government has taken significant steps in 2021 towards recognising the importance of developing new laws and social norms to curb our excesses and work within the boundaries of nature. This is becoming apparent in the energy and

infrastructure sector, where many new projects are required to demonstrate a “nature-positive” impact, as well as through the introduction of green bonds and carbon markets supporting nature and sustainable finance.

The growing importance of nature in UK policymaking has been aided considerably by increasing recognition that the climate and biodiversity emergencies are twin crises that require joint solutions. In particular, nature-based solutions are often shown to be more cost-effective than engineered solutions in addressing both crises, while also creating employment and enhancing wellbeing. As governments conclude the first phase of talks at COP15 and prepare for in-person negotiations in April 2022, it has become increasingly clear that UK businesses should be aware of the rising importance of biodiversity concerns for policy and economics at home and abroad.



MONITORING

The Biodiversity Emergency: Implications for UK policy

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