



Scottish
Environment
LINK

Nature recovery targets: Statutory targets to drive the recovery of nature in Scotland

Summary



Photo: Mark Hamblin/2020VISION

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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 all rely on.

The Economics of Biodiversity – an independent review,
commissioned by HM Treasury

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Nature recovery targets:

Statutory targets to drive the recovery of nature in Scotland

Scotland's biodiversity, or wildlife, is rich and diverse. This richness is often lauded – it is used to promote the tourism industry, food and drink products and is intrinsically linked with the Scottish identity. However, despite these positives, wildlife has suffered and declined considerably over the years and remains in danger.

The recovery of nature is essential to safeguard the future of our societies and economies, as well as of the wildlife itself. This must now be acted on as an urgent priority. As a collective of environmental organisations, we believe that there is a fundamental and moral Imperative to save nature for its own sake. However, naturally diverse ecosystems support all life and without them, life on earth simply cannot survive. The pressures of climate change mean that our ecosystems need to be even more robust and resilient. The fact is they are neither.

There is an urgent need for decision makers and the public to commit to effective action to halt this loss and restore nature. Setting targets is one way to measure progress towards that goal, and better understand both our complete reliance on the natural world and the jeopardy facing our society and economy if we do not act.

There has also been increasing recognition in recent years that recent and current declines are happening against a backdrop of much more significant degradation of nature. The 2020 Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII) found that Scotland is 28th from the bottom in a ranking of 240 countries and territories. Importantly, the BII reflects the historical context and allows us to look beyond the inadequate timescale of a few decades that humans tend to perceive and to truly understand the ecological and ecosystem changes that have occurred in recent centuries.

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Biodiversity loss jeopardizes nature's vital contributions to humanity, endangering economies, livelihoods, food security, cultural diversity and quality of life, and constitutes a major threat to global peace and security.

UN Commitment on Biodiversity

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We are collectively
failing to preserve
our ecological life
support systems

Recovery of nature: why and what?

Biodiversity is in decline and has been for many years. It is also broadly agreed that efforts must be made to halt and reverse this decline. To this end, a range of international and national policies are in place, often supported by the efforts of NGOs, businesses, land managers and private citizens.

In many places, these efforts have started to be successful – the return of the red kite to the UK's skies or otters and salmon to our formerly polluted rivers being two obvious examples. However, overall progress has been decidedly unsuccessful – and the decline continues. Such a situation arises, in part, as legislation to date has largely focused on protecting the best of the remaining nature, rather than on reversing widespread declines and on restoration. The need to address this has led to the agreement to introduce targets – first to halt the decline and, secondly, to secure recovery. Despite not yet achieving the former, it is important to set out ambitions in relation to the latter – to underline long term vision and to focus efforts to achieve the former as a first step towards achieving the latter. It is obvious that 'business as usual' is insufficient, and targets can have the effect of ensuring that efforts are redoubled.



Photos: Sandra Graham, Danny Green/2020VISION, Mark Hamblin/2020VISION

Thus, there is widespread agreement about a long term vision for the recovery of nature. However, recovery to what? The word 'recovery' suggests a return to a past state. In part, this is true – as it will need to include a reversal of declines. However, in addition, it will be forward looking – seeking to ensure that species and habitats are at "favourable conservation status"; being when all species reach an abundance and distribution that is consistent with their long-term survival and (semi) natural state in resilient and thriving ecosystems. In taking this approach, recovery will also address long-term, historical losses/declines that occurred before routine and systematic monitoring was developed.

So, the concept of recovery, while including a reversal of decline, does not depend on setting any one date in the past and seeking to recreate what existed then. Rather, while it will include some species/habitats reaching numbers/extents previously recorded, it is also about regenerating healthy ecosystems that are self-sustaining – and better able to provide ecosystem services to benefit the human population. This long-term aim is also reflected in the draft vision set out in the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.

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Targets are essential for driving change across all parts of Government and the economy. Whilst we know much more needs to be done to tackle the climate emergency, we have seen how the Net Zero targets have led to climate change being mainstreamed into the consciousness of governments and sectors and seen as a priority. Without a similar approach for nature, we run the risk of a fragmented and insufficient, rather than unified and effective, response to the nature emergency.

LINK and its member organisations have been campaigning for statutory targets for nature recovery¹ for a number of years. NGOs therefore welcomed the Scottish Government's commitment to the introduction of statutory targets for the recovery of nature to: *"put in place key legislative changes to restore and protect nature, including, but not restricted to, targets for nature restoration that cover land and sea, and an effective, statutory, target-setting monitoring, enforcing and reporting framework"*.²

The full report (available [here](#)), prepared for Scottish Environment LINK by our Fellow, Lloyd Austin, explores the background to the concept of such targets, considers the global and regional context into which they will fit, seeks to further the debate about their nature and operation, and makes initial proposals for how such targets might be delivered through forthcoming legislation. As is clear from its content, it does not seek to provide an answer to every question but is offered for wider review and discussion by all relevant stakeholders, and as a contribution to the debate ahead of the formal consultation on this issue. It seeks to explore the legislative options that might be available to implement this commitment, and the policy development that will be necessary to support and implement such a change in the law.

¹ <https://www.fightforscotlandsnature.scot/>

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-scottish-green-party-shared-policy-programme/>



In its **report**, LINK and its members bodies have set out **the features of such targets** that should:

- **Incorporate a clear date for achievement, and milestones leading to that date;**
- **Achieve *both* a reversal of current negative trends and an effective regeneration of biodiversity in relation to past and historic losses;**
- **Be relevant and specific to the outcome to be achieved;**
- **Be measurable – to allow clear monitoring and reporting of progress; and**
- **Be achievable and realistic – especially in relation to means/interim targets to underline and demonstrate the viability of the ultimate objective.**

They have also sought to describe **the content of such targets**, addressing:

- **Species abundance;**
- **Species distribution;**
- **Species extinction risk;**
- **Habitat quality and extent;**
- **Drivers of biodiversity decline; and**
- **Overall integrity, connectivity and resilience of ecosystems.**

Key features of these target areas are set out in the summary table opposite – these are discussed in greater detail in the full report. The report also describes how such targets might be framed in legislation and the enabling framework of monitoring, reporting, accountability, funding and finance that is necessary to successfully deliver against these targets. The statutory framework, provided in the forthcoming Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill must, therefore, provide for an appropriate ‘action planning cycle’ (via amendments to the existing provisions for the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, and its monitoring/reporting) as well as the allocation of new advisory functions to Environmental Standards Scotland.

Summary of LINK's proposed targets for the recovery of nature

Target area	Targets to be proposed (description and metrics)
Direct species and habitats targets ("ends")	
Species Abundance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Overall species abundance; ➤ Abundance of species at risk; ➤ (Optional) abundance of other particularly important species or species group – e.g., seabird abundance. ➤ (Additional 'means' target on increasing the number of species for which data is available/decreasing number that are 'data deficient')
Species distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Overall species distribution; ➤ Distribution of species at risk.
Species Extinction risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Targets to reduce number of species at risk of local extinction to zero in the long-term.
Habitat quality and extent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Extent and quality of priority habitats;³ ➤ Protected area targets (area covered, and site condition, for both terrestrial and marine sites).
Targets related to conservation action ("means")	
Changing use of land and sea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Targets related to the integration ("mainstreaming") of nature protection/recovery into agriculture, forestry, game/deer and upland management, and fisheries (freshwater and marine). ➤ EU nature restoration law targets (and cross-reference to 30x30).
Direct exploitation of organisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Targets for population level of species subject to legal killing/capture. ➤ Targets to reduce the indirect impact on species & habitats (including legal/illegal predator control) as a result of management to increase the numbers of (or access to) target species. ➤ Targets for the prevention of bycatch.
Climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ For mitigation, adopt/cross-refer to targets set by the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, as amended; ➤ Adaptation/resilience targets (e.g., potentially riparian woodlands/planting, and/or link to seabirds re marine resilience).
Pollution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Targets to reduce chemical/pesticide use and increase freshwater, seawater and air quality.
Invasive non-native species (INNS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Targets to reduce the rate of introduction and establishment of INNS. ➤ Targets for the eradication/control of INNS, with a priority for islands, and ongoing biosecurity.
Overall integrity, connectivity and resilience of ecosystems	
Overall ecological condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To further our understanding of and develop a route map to improve BII; leading to the adoption at a later date of BII as a target (as below). ➤ To improve BII, either in absolute or relative terms.

³ LINK's proposals for priority habitats were set out in 2021 paper, Scottish Biodiversity Strategy 2022: Key Elements for success; see <https://www.scotlink.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/LINK-elements-of-success-for-Scottish-Biodiversity-Strategy-2022.pdf> (page 2)

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One difference between the climate targets in Scottish legislation and this proposed approach to nature targets is that, the nature recovery targets require a wide range of interlinked targets (as opposed to one simple metric). This is necessary because of, and reflects, the complexity of nature. It also illustrates that adopting insufficiently wide-ranging, ambitious and robust targets risks inadequate coverage, failure to halt and reverse declines. Moreover, if over-simplification is attempted, inadequate targets have the potential to be counter-productive and generate damaging impacts.

We hope that this report is a useful contribution to the discussion halfway through the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. The ideas and proposals presented will continue to evolve and we look forward to refining and discussing them with a wide range of stakeholders.

In this spirit, Scottish Environment LINK looks forward to further discussion with the Scottish Government, NatureScot, and other stakeholders – and considers the **report** to be a ‘first edition’ to be developed, through further iterations, as a result of those discussions. Updated versions of the report and/or its summary, will be produced and published as/when appropriate.



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