

Opportunities for Restoring Nature: The Time is Now

September 2023



[The State of Nature in Scotland Report 2023](#) is a partnership production involving over 50 organisations, many of which are also members of Scottish Environment LINK, but also including scientific institutes, learned societies and government agencies including NatureScot. The report gathers and collates the most systematic and statistically valid studies and data series on wildlife in Scotland - much of it gathered by volunteer naturalists across the country - and analyses it scientifically to derive the best, most objective and most accurate picture of how nature is faring in Scotland today.

The findings show that Scotland, while still retaining precious and globally important wildlife, is also a highly nature-depleted country, following historic losses of species and habitats over centuries. It also shows that the loss of nature continues today - most of the measures revealed by the State of Nature 2023 report show ongoing declines. The report also highlights, however, that there are many genuinely successful conservation projects and initiatives operating across the country, often led by LINK members. We have the knowledge and experience to start halting nature losses and restoring our habitats and species now - if we can collectively find the will to scale-up and resource these efforts.

Forthcoming legislation on the natural environment, agriculture and more, and the Scottish Government Biodiversity Framework consultation launched in September 2023, offer an unprecedented and progressive chance to secure that step-change for Scottish nature. Below we outline the key opportunities, and LINK's view on how we capitalise on them.

Natural Environment Bill

The Scottish Government has committed to introducing statutory nature recovery targets in the forthcoming Natural Environment Bill.

There is an urgent need for decision makers and the public to commit to effective action to halt the 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.

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's recent report '[Nature recovery targets: Statutory targets to drive the recovery of nature in Scotland](#)' sets out robust proposals for nature targets to be included in the Natural Environment Bill that would ensure the best possible outcomes for nature and people in Scotland. It highlights the need for strong, meaningful SMART targets to deliver real gains for nature, as well as statutory processes that will ensure we deliver on these targets.

The UK Government brought in binding targets in the Environment Act, but they are widely considered to not go far enough. Scotland has a big opportunity to show leadership and make better progress to tackle the nature crisis.

Scotland's Strategic Framework for Biodiversity

The Scottish Government published its [Scottish Biodiversity Strategy](#) (SBS) in December 2020, which defines how Scotland will respond to the global nature crisis here at home from now until 2045.

LINK welcomes the publication of a major consultation, [Tackling the Nature Emergency - strategic framework for biodiversity](#), outlining the next steps in the Scottish Government's approach to reversing nature loss. The consultation includes elements of the forthcoming Natural Environment Bill such as the introduction of legal targets for nature restoration as well as the details of the first delivery plan for the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.

Scottish Environment LINK welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Biodiversity Framework and will work to ensure the Scottish Government's approach is ambitious enough to halt the loss of nature by 2030 and make significant progress to restoring nature by 2045.

The Scottish Biodiversity Framework must be ambitious, and must focus not just on nature protection, but, crucially, on restoration. Our battered ecosystems need to be rebuilt if they are to function properly. Business as usual will not be enough.

This transition will require a whole of society approach. As stewards of our lands and seas, communities and industry have an important role as we work together to restore nature and create a greener, fairer and more prosperous Scotland for all.

Protecting 30% of Scotland's land for nature by 2030

Scotland's Protected Areas are fundamental to the journey towards restoring nature by 2045 and require specific action to help them deliver for threatened species and habitats. In Scotland there are over 1,800 protected areas, covering 18% of Scotland's land and targeted at protecting a range of species and habitats.

Protecting at least 30% of Scotland's land for nature by 2030 will be a vital part of nature recovery efforts. It is critical that these places are effectively managed and protected, and not just lines on a map.

Evidence shows that protected areas are most effective if they are integrated within wider landscapes that are also managed in a way that supports nature. Efforts must be made to deliver resilient ecological networks that tackle habitat fragmentation and ensure larger areas of good quality habitat, allowing species to move throughout Scotland's Landscapes: Scotland's nature networks. Put simply, if we effectively protect 30% of land for nature but we are failing nature in the other 70%, then we stand no chance of halting and reversing the nature crisis. The commitment to new financial support for Nature Networks in the [Programme for Government 2023-24](#) is an important step, and we look forward to seeing details.

LINK's [30x30 report](#) sets out a roadmap for making 30 by 30 meaningful in Scotland. The report says that, as well as increasing the coverage and quantity of protected areas, and exploring new ways to protect land for nature, it is the quality of our best nature sites that is vital to make the 30 by 30 target effective.

Scotland's New National Park

The Scottish Government has committed to introducing at least one new National Park in this parliamentary term. Scotland's National Parks already cover 7% of Scotland's land; therefore, inevitably they will play a major role in our efforts to tackle the nature and climate emergency. Almost 80% of the public want Scotland's National Parks to have a stronger focus on restoring nature and tackling climate change, according to an [opinion poll](#).

The existing Parks are already doing some great work, but it is absolutely critical that all of Scotland's National Parks take a leadership role in tackling the twin crises. For example, through demonstrating how deer management can deliver nature restoration at scale while providing local employment opportunities.

There must be a balance of local interest with national interest within the National Park. This includes working with communities to ensure they are not negatively impacted, for example through increased traffic, tourism numbers, housing development, or infrastructure development.

The final Appraisal Framework for new National Parks is due to be published soon, ahead of the Scottish Government's launch of the Nominations process.

We look forward to continuing to engage in this process to ensure National Parks lead the way on demonstrating how nature recovery can be delivered at scale and in a way that helps create a just transition locally and nationally.

Reforming the Agriculture Bill

Farming is vital to Scotland's Future. As well as producing food, farmers and crofters manage three quarters of Scotland's land. But the dominant farming methods of today make farming Scotland's second biggest source of climate emissions, and a major cause of the depletion of our nature.

The Scottish government's Agriculture Bill, expected this autumn, is a once in a lifetime opportunity to make farming work for nature, climate and people.

Scotland's outdated farm funding system is failing to help farmers and crofters make the transition to sustainable farming. The [Farm for Scotland's Future campaign](#), advised by farmers' groups, calls on the Scottish Government to replace the decades-old system of farm funding with a new system that helps farmers and crofters manage their land in ways that protect and restore nature, tackle climate change, and revitalise rural areas.

The Scottish Government must ensure better funding for nature-friendly farming through the Agriculture Bill. Currently, 70% of Scottish land is used for farming but less than 10% of public funding helps farmers and crofters do the right thing for nature. The new farm funding system should be focused on using public money to achieve public policy objectives, including restoring nature and mitigating climate change.

Food production, and ultimately food security, depend on the health of soil, pollinators and natural pest and disease regulators. All of these are compromised in industrialised farming systems with high levels of chemical inputs. Without a stable climate and healthy ecosystems, our ability to produce food will increasingly be threatened.

Establishing Ocean Recovery Areas

Scotland's marine environment is a treasure trove of biodiversity, encompassing coastal habitats, deep-sea ecosystems, and some of the world's most productive fishing grounds. They are a vital resource that supports a diverse range of marine industries, including fishing, aquaculture, tourism, or renewable energy. However, scientific evidence shows our marine environment is in severe decline. The Scottish Government's commitment to enhancing marine protection provides a key opportunity to restore the health of our marine environment and achieve ocean recovery. Most recently, LINK's commissioned report on the effectiveness of Scotland's MPA network highlights significant gaps that must be addressed.

LINK members call for the new legal powers to establish ocean recovery zones in Scotland. We believe ocean recovery zones are crucial for the restoration and conservation of marine ecosystems, aligning with international targets to protect and sustainably manage our oceans. Pilot ocean recovery areas must be in place by 2026. This will serve as a testing ground for best practices and strategies to drive ocean recovery up to scale in Scotland. Successful pilot areas should include stakeholders' participation with clear expectations, wider strategy and support mechanisms for affected activities, use of best available science and independent scientific scrutiny of proposals.

LINK members urge the Scottish Government to strengthen the existing MPA network, by completing the fisheries management measures in offshore and inshore sites. Enhanced monitoring, enforcement, and engagement with stakeholders is instrumental in ensuring that these areas are optimally managed, contributing to the conservation goals.

Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill

The Scottish Parliament is expected to debate and vote on the Wildlife Management and Muirburn Bill in late October 2023.

The bill's proposals include measures to licence grouse moors. A licensing scheme could result in the loss of the right to shoot grouse and this threat should act as a meaningful deterrent to prevent crimes such as bird of prey killings. LINK supports a licensing approach because it introduces a stronger regulatory framework into what has been a poorly regulated form of land management.

The Bill aims to create a licensing scheme for muirburn, the rotational burning of patches of vegetation to encourage new heather growth for grouse to feed on, as the current legislation and Code of Practice are ineffective at preventing bad practice in what is a high-risk land management activity.

The blanket bogs in our uplands are globally important as a carbon store. These bogs contain more than 2000 years' worth of locked-up carbon and, when in a healthy state, are home to a wide range of species. Unfortunately, the majority of our blanket bogs are now classed as degraded and, alongside agricultural drainage and overgrazing by livestock, muirburn is known to be one of the main drivers of this. Degraded peat bogs can emit more CO₂ than they sequester, leading to net carbon loss. Dried out peat is highly flammable and anybody who undertakes muirburn should be trained to reduce wildfire risk.

Scotland's uplands have the potential to be amazing places for nature, climate and people - but only if they are managed for the benefit of all and for a sustainable future.

[Click here](#) for LINK's response to the Scottish Government's consultation on Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill.

Circular Economy Bill

Biodiversity loss and carbon emissions can largely be traced back to the products and services we use and consume. This is due to land use change to produce food and fibre, degradation and pollution of land, freshwater and sea caused by the extraction and processing of natural resources. [Research](#) shows global consumption of natural resources has tripled since the 1970s and is set to further double by 2060, and 90% of biodiversity loss is caused by resource extraction and processing. [Carbon footprint data](#) shows that over 80% of Scotland's carbon footprint is derived from emissions embedded in goods we consume and [Material flow accounts](#) for Scotland, published in 2023, show our material footprint to be more than double sustainable levels. Addressing the quantity of raw materials used in our economy is therefore key in meeting biodiversity and climate goals.

Moving to a more circular economy, wasting less and prolonging the life of the materials already in use, is key to reducing our raw material consumption¹. The [Circular Economy \(Scotland\) Bill](#) brings in provisions for Scottish Government to set circular economy targets to drive a reduction in our consumption of raw materials; and to produce a Circular Economy Strategy with reporting requirements. Other measures include provisions for putting restrictions on destroying unsold goods and charges on single use items. The Bill could achieve a step change if the provisions are fully used but could also do more². Of particular concern to LINK members is the absence of focus on the 'bioeconomy'. A circular economy increasingly relies on renewable natural resources and, as such, regenerative approaches to agriculture and land use are an essential element as is optimisation of bio-arisings and sound soil management. This latter element is in danger of not being covered in upcoming legislation more broadly.

Although not perceived to be directly related to biodiversity, a move towards a circular economy is essential and the Circular Economy Bill, and policies that flow from it, has the potential to be a key element of [Scotland's Economic Strategy](#) vision of a nature positive economy.

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¹ Scottish Environment LINK: [Call for a strong Circular Economy Bill for Scotland](#)

² Scottish Environment LINK: [Circular economy \(Scotland\) bill – LINK evidence to NZET committee](#)

