



Scottish
Environment
LINK

Protecting **30%** of Scotland's land for nature

Making '30 by 30'
meaningful

Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by Isobel Mercer, with contributions from Alasdair Lemon, Calum Duncan, Esther Brooker, Alistair Whyte, John Mayhew, John Thomson, Juliet Caldwell, Sarah McKain, Suzie Saunders, Nikki Sinclair and Jeff Waddell.

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Scottish Environment LINK

Phone **01738 630804**

Email information@scotlink.org

Web www.scotlink.org

Twitter [@scotLINK](https://twitter.com/scotLINK)

Instagram [@scottishenvironmentlink](https://www.instagram.com/scottishenvironmentlink)

Facebook [@scotenvlink](https://www.facebook.com/scotenvlink)

Scottish Charity SC000296. Scottish Company SC250899. Registered office: 5 Atholl Place, Perth PH1 5NE
Designed by Emma Quinn



Contents

Protecting 30% of Scotland for nature	4
Defining protected	5
The benefits of protected areas	7
Protecting Scotland's land: where are we now?	8/9
Making 30x30 meaningful for nature	10/11
A roadmap for achieving 30x30 on land	12/13
In more detail: OECMs	14/15
In more detail: National Parks	16/17
In more detail: Nature Networks and the wider 70% of land	18
Conclusion	19
Endnotes	20

Protecting 30% of Scotland for nature

Protecting land and sea effectively for biodiversity is critical for securing nature's recovery.

Protected areas are our best places for nature, safeguarding parts of important habitats like Scotland's vast expanses of blanket bog, ancient Caledonian forest, rivers and lochs, Scotland's rainforest, wildflower-rich machair, coastal saltmarsh and the species that they support. They are the frontline of defence for nature against growing pressures from human activity and climate change and are vital for supporting our species and habitats.

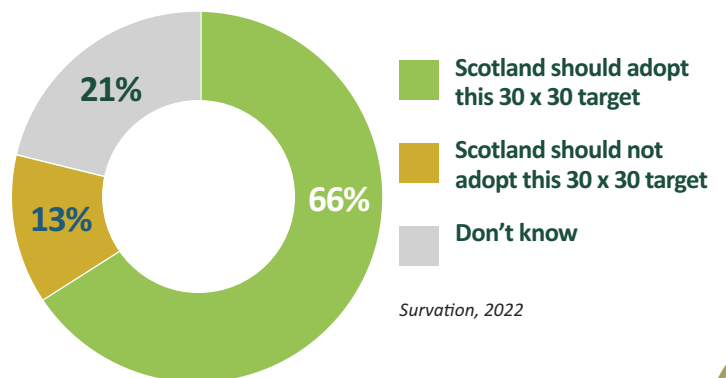
A goal to protect at least 30% of the planet's land and sea by 2030, known as '30x30', is a flagship target of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework,¹ agreed at the COP15 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in December 2022 and is also a core commitment in the European Union's 2030 Biodiversity Strategy.

The Scottish Government has committed to protect at least 30% of Scotland's land and seas for nature by 2030.²

The global and Scottish 30x30 targets cover both land and sea, however given that the target is being met through separate mechanisms and processes in Scotland, this report focuses only on delivering 30x30 on land.

Nature is in trouble. Species in Scotland have decreased on average by 15% since 1994.³

This comes on top of large historical losses in nature: the Biodiversity Intactness Index ranked Scotland as coming 212th out of 240 countries and territories on how intact its biodiversity remains.⁴ We urgently need to start actively restoring our ecosystems and species at scale and 30x30 can help drive this recovery and ensure that these areas are protected for nature long into the future. Scotland has a chance to lead the way in making 30x30 meaningful for nature, and in demonstrating how the target can be achieved through collaboration with communities and businesses.



Defining 'protected'

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines a protected area as: A clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.⁵

In Scotland the most important protected areas for nature are:

- **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)** which protect nationally important species, habitats, geology and landforms.
- **Special Protection Areas (SPAs)** and **Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)** which protect internationally important species and habitats. These are known in Scotland as European sites.
- **Ramsar sites**, which protect internationally important wetlands.

There are a range of other types of protected areas and designated landscapes such as National Parks, Regional Parks and Local Nature Conservation Sites which provide important benefits to nature and people, but these aren't all designated primarily for nature conservation or given the same level of legal protections as the protected areas listed above.





The benefits of protected areas

Protected areas are vital as part of a mix of approaches to tackling the nature and climate emergency in Scotland.

Protected areas are proven to be effective for protecting nature. For example:

- Protected area coverage is the most important predictor of Red List vascular plant species richness across Britain.⁶
- Wildlife does better in countries with more and bigger protected areas. Wildlife does better in countries where that level of protection has been in place for longer.⁷
- One study found that the most important factor in a species' conservation status is whether or not it has benefited from this protection. This was found to be even more important than the species' vulnerability to the levels of climate change we've seen so far.⁸

Protected areas deliver many benefits to people beyond supporting wildlife,⁹ including delivering vital services such as carbon storage¹⁰ and flood mitigation, providing opportunities for the public to connect with and learn about nature, and improving people's health and wellbeing¹¹:

- The Dasgupta Review commissioned by the UK HM Treasury found that the benefits of protecting 30% of land and ocean would exceed costs and would provide better financial and higher non-monetary benefits than currently and deliver significant social benefits.¹²
- The benefits of protecting European sites in Scotland have been estimated at more than 7 times annual costs of their management, based on recreational values alone.¹³
- The benefits of Natura 2000 sites in the EU have been estimated at between 200 and 300 billion euros annually, compared to the 6 billion euros estimated to be required annually to maintain and restore the network.¹⁴

Evidence also tells us that protected areas are absolutely insufficient on their own and must be embedded within wider landscapes and nature networks that are also managed ways that supports nature's recovery.

We need more protected areas and for these places to be bigger, better and more joined up.¹⁵

30x30 in the European Union

The European Commission has been leading the way on 30x30 and the Scottish Government has committed to stay aligned with EU environmental laws and standards. The EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030¹⁶ includes a number of key commitments:

- Legally protect a minimum of 30% of the EU's land area and 30% of the EU's sea area and integrate ecological corridors, as part of a true Trans-European Nature Network
- Strictly protect at least a third of the EU's protected areas, including all remaining primary and old-growth forests
- Effectively manage all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitoring them appropriately.

The European Commission has published initial guidance on how the 30% protection and 10% strict protection should be interpreted. The Commission has also recently brought forward a proposal¹⁷ for a legally binding Nature Restoration Law, with a target for 20% of the EU's land and sea area to be under area-based restoration by 2030, to work in tandem with the Nature Directives that create the framework for the Natura 2000 network in Europe.

Protecting Scotland's land: where are we now?

Land protected for nature

18%
of land protected
for nature
made up of

4%
Ramsar wetlands
of international
importance

15%
European
sites

12%
Sites of Special
Scientific Interest
(SSSI)

1 in 5
features (20%)
in unfavourable
condition

Over
1,800
protected
areas

65%
of designated
features in
favourable
condition

The top pressures affecting the condition of designated sites in Scotland are invasive species, overgrazing and water management

The last few decades saw progress on the designation of protected areas in Scotland: 18% of Scotland's land is now legally protected for nature.¹⁸ However, not all of these places are working as well as they should for nature and progress to improve the condition of our protected areas has stalled.

Protected areas are designated to protect specific 'features', which are the species, habitats or geology that make the site important. In 2023, 65.2% of designated features were assessed as being in favourable (good) condition.¹⁹ This represents a decrease since 2007. More features are now classed as recovering or as having positive management in place that should help the site to recover, however overall the data imply a failure to significantly improve the condition of our protected areas over the last 15 years. This means that the proportion of land **effectively** protected for nature is certainly less than 18%. There have been significant and persistent issues with management, monitoring and adequate resourcing of protected areas. The reduction in levels of monitoring means that there is less certainty over the current condition of sites.

A more strategic approach is required for improving the condition of protected areas, such as tackling pressures like *Rhododendron ponticum* and deer management at landscape scales. NatureScot announced in June 2022 that they would be developing a new approach to deliver strategic improvements to protected areas as part of 30x30.²⁰ This approach should set out the role of protected areas within a wider programme of ecosystem restoration.

In the past the Scottish Government has included National Parks when it reports on protected area extent, bringing the coverage from 18% to around 23% of Scotland's land.²¹ LINK does not support the inclusion of National Parks to the target, in their entirety and in their current form, but National Parks do have potential to contribute more land to the target over time, see p.16 – 17.

Issues affecting the effectiveness of protected areas on land:

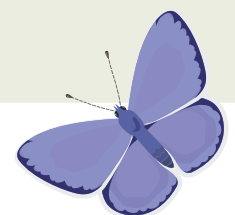
- > Climate Change
- > Landscape-scale pressures such as deer, invasive species and pollution (including non native conifer regeneration)
- > Declining budgets for management and monitoring
- > Insufficient monitoring within appropriate timescales
- > Insufficient use of enforcement powers
- > Continued threats from inappropriate development
- > Negative perceptions about protected areas

Making 30x30 meaningful



In order to be counted towards the 30% target, areas must meet three conditions:

- 1** Be identified as important places for biodiversity and ecosystem services.
- 2** Be protected for nature in the long-term: the entirety of the 30% should be afforded long-term protection against damage including from pollution, overexploitation, invasive species, habitat destruction and development.
- 3** Be well managed and in good or recovering condition: land that counts towards the 30% should be well-managed for nature and must be regularly monitored at appropriate intervals as part of a programme of active management and investment. This monitoring should show clear evidence both of good management for nature and that the land is either in good condition for nature or is showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery.



Done well, 30x30 is a chance for a real step change for our protected areas, resulting in increased political will, targeted action and long-term funding to properly protect and effectively manage these places so that they really work for nature.

The evidence has been clear for many years, that to make our protected areas fit for purpose, they need to be better, bigger, we need more of them and they need to be joined up. 30x30 presents an opportunity to finally put these principles into practice and integrate protected areas into our wider landscapes and seascapes, allowing them to play their role as the beating hearts of our ecosystems.

Done badly, 30x30 will result in lines on a map but little benefit for nature.

Failing to meaningfully protect, manage, restore and fund our best nature sites means that they will become little more than paper parks, protected in name only.

As a starting point, a number of key actions are needed to ensure our protected areas are doing the best they can for nature:

- **Management plans prepared and implemented for all sites**
- **A strategic approach to addressing pressures inside and outside of protected areas**
- **Robust monitoring of species, habitats, and ecosystems to track progress and inform management**
- **Aligning government funding and support more fully towards positive management of protected areas and OECMs and ending perverse and conflicting subsidies that negatively impact on protected areas**
- **Long-term funding for monitoring and management**
- **Better use of enforcement powers**
- **Targets for improving the condition of protected areas**
- **Action to ensure protected areas are resilient and dynamic in the face of climate change**
- **Better valuing the many benefits that our protected areas provide**
- **Better including, supporting and incentivising people in the stewardship and positive management of protected areas**
- **Communicating the importance of protected areas to the public and improving responsible access to protected areas**
- **Protected areas placed at the heart of a wider programme of ecosystem restoration and species recovery**



A roadmap for achieving 30x30 on land



1 Secure effective protection, management and restoration for all protected areas

- Secure effective on- and off-site management for all sites, tackling pressures strategically where needed to restore nature in our protected sites
- Put in place robust monitoring for all sites, so that progress can be tracked and management can be adjusted where necessary
- Set new, binding targets for the condition of protected areas
- Commit long-term funding for protected areas

2 Identify protected areas that would complete our existing networks of nationally and internationally important sites

- Implement the recommendations of the UK 2016 SPA Review²² to ensure adequate protections for important bird species
- Identify and protect sites that already meet the selection criteria for SSSI, SPA and SAC, particularly for habitats or species that are irreplaceable and/or currently under-represented in Scotland's protected areas

3 Identify criteria to be used for areas of search for other sites that are important for biodiversity, including:

- Identify and protect the best examples of UK Biodiversity Action Plan habitats in Scotland
- The Important Invertebrate Area network, which identifies places supporting nationally or internationally important populations of invertebrates and their habitats.²³
- The ABCD criteria developed by the British Ecological Society.²⁴
- The Important Plant Area network, which identifies sites based on standardised, internationally agreed, criteria.²⁵

4 Develop a framework for Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs)

- Identification, protection and effective management and identify and classify suitable areas as OECMs using the IUCN and CBD guidelines as a starting point.²⁶

5 Transform and resource National Parks so that a much larger part of these landscapes are truly protected and managed for nature and are developed and delivered inclusively.

- Examine the potential for other designated landscapes such as National Scenic Areas and Regional Parks to be reformed to deliver more effective protection for nature.

6 Embed protected areas and OECMs as key biodiversity sites within wider Scottish nature networks

- Identify sites that are in the right position to help complete the network or provide better connectivity if restored for nature.



In more detail: OECMs

The IUCN recognises that Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) have a key role to play alongside protected areas in delivering the global 30x30 target.²⁷ An OECM is defined by the Convention on Biological Diversity as:²⁸

“A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values.”

The IUCN has established 3 categories of OECMs:

- 1 Ancillary conservation** – Areas that deliver site-based conservation as a by-product of management activities, even though biodiversity conservation is not a management objective. Examples may include sacred natural sites, shipwrecks, or industrial and military areas that conserve important biodiversity over the long-term.
- 2 Secondary conservation** – Areas where biodiversity conservation may be a secondary objective. For example, protection and management of watersheds or wetlands to protect biodiversity in addition to protection of water resources. Sites managed to provide ecological connectivity between protected areas or other areas of high biodiversity, thereby contributing to their viability, may also qualify as OECMs.
- 3 Primary conservation** – Areas governed by government agencies, Indigenous peoples and local communities and other actors that conform to the IUCN definition of a protected area, but which are not currently designated and reported as protected areas. Some of these areas may later be recognised as protected areas if the governance body agrees.



Whilst OECMs have been recognised in other parts of the world, in the UK they are largely new. To date, OECMs have generally been used to recognise situations where effective biodiversity conservation is already being delivered. While there are currently no OECMs recognised in the UK, there are areas that could be suitable for recognition subject to meeting required standards – such as undesignated land effectively managed for nature over the long-term by NGOs, or land managed for other objectives such as water supply and quality where biodiversity benefits are demonstrably being delivered. The creation of OECMs in Scotland offers an opportunity to work in a more bottom-up way with communities and individuals to identify and protect land that is important for nature and being well managed.

Key principles and standards for delivering OECMs in Scotland must be co-developed by the Scottish Government, NatureScot and stakeholders as part of a pathway to protecting 30% of Scotland's land.

Scottish Environment LINK initial principles for OECMs in Scotland:

➤ All OECMs must meet the LINK tests for making 30x30 meaningful, in order to count towards the 30%. Use of OECMs must be accompanied by rigorous standards, evidence and monitoring capacity to avoid becoming a greenwashing exercise.

- Positive management for nature occurring in these areas must be secured over the long-term in order to be considered for OECM status.
- Areas should not receive recognition as OECMs until they are delivering demonstrable and significant biodiversity outcomes, and monitoring will be essential to ensure continued delivery of those outcomes over time.
- The 30% should be focused on protecting our most important areas for biodiversity. Identifying where these areas are across Scotland, as a starting point, will help determine whether a protected area or an OECM is going to be the most appropriate approach to ensure long-term protection and management.
- OECMs should not be seen as a 'lighter touch' approach and must already be delivering biodiversity benefits equivalent to protected areas to be recognised and count towards 30x30. They should only be counted as 'candidate OECMs' until they are demonstrating these benefits, so early action and monitoring will be crucial.
- OECMs must be based on consent of landowners and financial support must be available to help land managers deliver positive management for nature within OECMs.

In more detail: National Parks

Scotland has had two National Parks since the early 2000s – Cairngorms National Park and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park – and there are plans in place to extend the network in the near future.

National Parks support a wide range of nationally and internationally important and threatened species. Designated landscapes like National Parks are an important complement to our suite of statutory nature protected areas, by providing large areas of good quality semi-natural habitats they can act as refuges for species that continue to be squeezed out of the wider countryside and help strengthen ecological processes over larger areas by better connecting habitats.

Scottish Environment LINK strongly supports the creation of new National Parks in Scotland, to not only celebrate and look after the country's astonishingly wide range of fine landscapes but also to demonstrate across the diversity of conditions and habitats that they contain how people can achieve a more harmonious and environmentally sustainable relationship with nature.

Scotland's two National Parks have delivered some significant and successful nature conservation projects, and recently have led the way in setting a progressive direction for scaling up nature restoration in the parks. However, despite this great action, nature still faces many challenges within the National Parks and more is needed to establish the entirety of our National Parks as examples of land managed well for nature, climate and people. Furthermore, National Parks have a range of statutory purposes beyond nature conservation and encompass a diverse range of land uses, including urban areas.

Scottish Environment LINK therefore does not consider it appropriate that new or existing National Parks in their entirety, and in their current format, should count towards the 30%. Only those areas within National Parks that meet criteria of long-term protection and demonstrate positive management for nature should count towards the 30%.

However, there is a huge opportunity for National Parks to expand their role in nature restoration and protection at-scale. With support and reforms to build on the existing positive direction the parks are going in, more and more areas within the parks should meet the criteria and, over time, count towards the 30% target. Other areas of the park managed well for nature will play an important role in helping buffer our most important nature sites and joining them up in a nature network. Any new National Parks must be designated to have a key focus on nature recovery and achieving Net Zero.



Proposals for transforming National Parks for nature:

- Set targets for increasing the proportion of National Parks effectively protected for nature that can count towards the 30%
- Set clear nature recovery targets for all National Parks and reporting requirements
- Require and resource comprehensive monitoring of biodiversity and ecosystems within National Parks
- Identify Nature Recovery Zones with the National Parks
- National Park Authorities to coordinate a pipeline of priority projects for nature restoration amongst key stakeholders
- Require all National Park boards to include members with expertise or experience in biodiversity and environment
- Strengthen National Parks legislation to empower and support National Parks to lead nature restoration and protection
- Establish National Parks as test beds for delivering local nature-positive economies, including ensuring funding streams to encourage and support landowners and managers to support the recovery of nature within the National Parks

In more detail: Nature Networks and the wider 70% of land

Evidence shows that protected areas can only be effective in the goal of improving ecosystem health if they are integrated within wider landscapes that are also managed in a way that supports nature and improves ecological connectivity.

Protected areas need to be part of a wholesale transformation in the way that we use and manage land across Scotland. However, without improvements to the sustainability of wider land use practices, protected areas become the 'last islands of biodiversity' in an otherwise nature-deprived landscape.

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.

A holistic approach is needed which reflects the way species and habitats interact.

Efforts must be made to deliver resilient ecological networks which tackle habitat fragmentation and ensure larger areas of good quality habitat, allowing species to move throughout Scotland's landscapes: Scotland's nature networks.

Scotland's protected areas, managed appropriately to help nature recovery and strengthen ecological processes, should form the core of Scotland's nature networks. However, such protected areas must be part of a wider nature network, where existing areas of natural habitat are enhanced, new areas of habitat are restored and created, and land managed for other purposes is managed in a way that supports nature.

In the Bute House Agreement²⁹ the Scottish Government committed to embed nature networks across Scotland into the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), and to use the Nature Restoration Fund to establish them across Scotland. They made further commitments to Nature Networks in the Programme for Government 2021–22,³⁰ sparking NatureScot's work to develop Scotland's Nature Network framework, alongside their 30 x 30 programme. NPF4 was adopted in February 2023 and states that Local Development Plans should also promote nature recovery and nature restoration by facilitating the creation of nature networks and strengthening connections between them to support improved ecological connectivity. The new requirements of Policy 3 for developments to deliver biodiversity enhancement also create a great opportunity to strengthen nature networks.



NatureScot have proposed the following objectives for nature networks:

“Expand and enhance Nature Networks and ecological connectivity. By 2030 each Local Authority in Scotland will have a spatially defined Nature Network. Important areas for biodiversity, other sites of local importance for biodiversity (e.g. Local Nature Reserves) and areas being restored for nature will also contribute to Nature Networks.”

NatureScot have also produced an implementation framework to sit alongside this.³¹

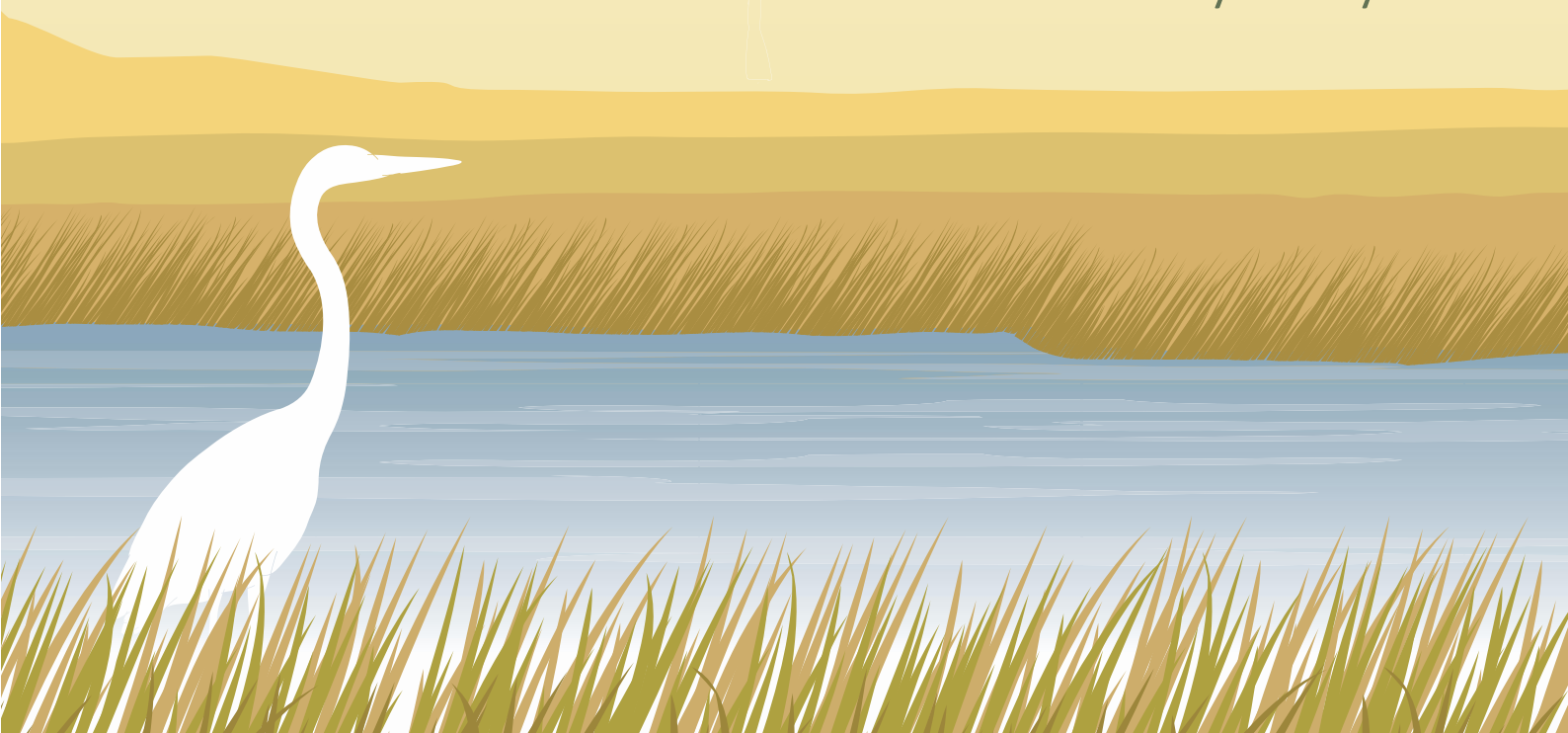
Using opportunity mapping and landscape scale prioritisation to identify nature networks will ensure that land is managed in a more strategic, integrated and nature-positive way. Scotland’s Land Use Strategy and the forthcoming Regional Land Use Partnerships and Frameworks have a crucial role to play in delivering this integrated vision for Scotland’s land, including helping to coordinate and deliver Scotland’s Nature Network. Transforming Scotland’s future agricultural subsidy scheme to support nature-friendly farming at scale will also be vital here, we would like to see nature network prioritisation helping to guide future agri-environment spend.

Conclusion

Nature is being squeezed into ever smaller areas because of human activities; Scotland’s nature is in free fall – since 1994 species in Scotland have declined on average by 15% and 1 in 9 is at risk of national extinction.³² Protected areas create refuges for our remaining wildlife. If we do not look after these places, restore them, expand them and join them up across our land and sea then we will not save Scotland’s nature.

‘30x30’ is a chance for a real step change for our protected areas to make them really work for nature and ensure they aren’t just lines on a map but are drivers of nature’s recovery and at the heart of a wider programme of ecosystem restoration.

This will deliver many wider benefits across Scotland, helping place us on a pathway to a nature-positive economy, and a resilient healthy society.



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