



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

April 2026

### Key points:

- Delivering 30 by 30 in Scotland requires protected areas, Nature30 areas, Nature Networks and landscape-scale projects to work together to achieve real, measurable biodiversity recovery.
- Scotland still has major gaps in ecological condition, connectivity and representation of key habitats, with monitoring and transparency too weak to track progress.
- The briefing presents a 2026-2030 timeline of priority actions, from improving site condition and setting statutory targets to integrating Nature Networks and expanding protected areas, all aimed at reaching 30% effectively protected land by 2030.

### Current state of land protection

- [12.6% of Scotland's land](#) is effectively protected for nature and contributing to 30 by 30 (i.e., in Favourable or Recovering condition).
- 17.8% of land is designated as SSSI, SAC, SPA, or Ramsar, but only 71.1% of features show verified ecological improvement.
- Scottish Government reports 18.2% of land as protected, but this figure includes degraded or poorly managed sites and does not distinguish ecological condition. It also includes National Nature Reserves not underpinned by statutory designations (0.4% of land).
- Lowland farmland, priority grasslands, ancient woodlands, and freshwater habitats remain underrepresented.

Achieving 30 by 30 is not just a question of reaching a numerical target. Effective protection, restoration and connectivity are key. Protected areas alone cannot deliver biodiversity outcomes if management is lacking or if surrounding landscapes are fragmented. Similarly, Nature30 sites and Nature Networks are complementary tools designed to enhance ecological coherence but cannot replace statutory protection. Stakeholder engagement, transparent reporting and robust monitoring are essential for credible delivery.

### Current initiatives and evidence

#### Protected areas

Scotland contains nearly 60% of the UK's terrestrial protected areas, yet the headline extent obscures ecological reality. Key pressures include:

- Invasive non-native species
- Overgrazing, particularly by deer
- Habitat fragmentation
- Lack of active, adaptive management

- Declining proactive engagement between NatureScot staff and protected area owners/managers, limiting support for positive management, adaptive restoration and early problem-solving

In recent years, engagement between NatureScot and protected area managers has become increasingly reactive and compliance-focused, often centred on development casework rather than proactive ecological improvement. Reduced capacity, funding constraints and organisational shifts toward more centralised or desk-based functions have limited on-the-ground advisory support. Rebuilding regular, constructive engagement with land managers will be essential to improve site condition and deliver 30 by 30 effectively.

Stakeholders report that the level of on-the-ground engagement between NatureScot staff and site managers has declined significantly compared with earlier decades. Regular site-based advisory support, monitoring and collaborative problem-solving were previously a core part of protected area management. Rebuilding this field presence will be essential to restore confidence, improve ecological outcomes and support adaptive management.

Monitoring is declining: [in 2024/25, only 309 features were assessed](#), down from 378 the previous year. NatureScot's Site Condition Monitoring Programme provides vital data but requires consistent funding, wider coverage and publicly accessible reporting to support 30 by 30 delivery.

Concerns have also been raised about the lack of a clear and transparent system for how monitoring data will be scrutinised and how results will feed back into management decisions. Without a robust monitoring feedback loop, it is difficult to ensure that sites are delivering real ecological improvement or to determine whether corrective action is needed.

### **Nature30 sites and Nature Networks**

Nature30 sites aim to identify areas where effective, long-term protection already exists. Nature30 recognition does not include a specific requirement for ecological connectivity and does not provide statutory protection. Nature Networks should therefore be integrated alongside Nature30 sites to enhance connectivity across the wider landscape. LINK asks Scottish Government and NatureScot:

- How are Nature30 sites, Nature Networks, and statutory designations linked in practice?
- What is the pipeline for site designation, Nature30 recognition, and integration into broader ecological networks?
- How will Nature30 guidance and criteria evolve so that better alignment with IUCN standards can be achieved?

Nature Networks should also draw on and integrate existing NGO-led and partnership initiatives that support connectivity and species recovery. For example, Buglife's [B-Lines project](#) identifies key pollinator corridors across the landscape, while [Important Invertebrate Areas](#) highlight priority locations for invertebrate conservation. These initiatives provide valuable, evidence-based tools that can strengthen the design and delivery of Nature Networks.

There are also concerns about how conservation priorities and management objectives for Nature30 sites are defined and verified. While land managers play a central role in proposing sites and management approaches, clear ecological guidance and independent scrutiny are necessary to ensure that management proposals are aligned with biodiversity priorities and do not inadvertently undermine existing high-value habitats.

## Landscape-Scale Restoration Projects

Delivering 30 by 30 requires action beyond individual protected areas. [Landscape-scale restoration projects](#) can help by linking protected areas, Nature30 sites and Nature Networks. They can:

- Focus on priority areas for restoration
- Improve habitat connectivity
- Bring together local projects into wider, joined-up networks

A shared spatial evidence base will be important to support this work. The Buglife [GIS Data Hub](#) provides an example of how datasets on connectivity and species priorities can be brought together to inform planning and delivery at scale.

Landscape-scale projects can also support the growth of Nature30. Some Nature30 sites already fall within these areas, and the momentum behind restoration could encourage more land managers to take part. However, Nature30 should be developed across a wide range of landscapes, not just within these projects.

Examples such as Cairngorms Connect, Glenkens, and Appin/Glen Creran show that partnership working and long-term investment can deliver real biodiversity gains. To maximise their impact, landscape-scale projects should be:

- Clearly linked to protected areas, Nature30 and Nature Networks
- Aligned with wider policy frameworks
- Designed to complement, not compete with, other work
- Transparent in how they are selected and funded
- Inclusive of underrepresented places and habitats

With better alignment and transparency, these projects can play a key role in delivering a connected and effective 30 by 30 network across Scotland.

## Case studies demonstrating effective action

Project Laxford ( Atlantic Salmon Recovery): Catchment-scale restoration in northwest Sutherland focuses on riverbanks, hydrology, and deer management, showing that species-focused restoration can simultaneously benefit broader biodiversity and ecosystem health.

LIFE 100% for Nature: Operating across 15 protected areas and 11 RSPB Scotland reserves, this project demonstrates scalable interventions such as invasive species control, wetland restoration, woodland thinning, and adaptive grazing management. Early successes include species returns, improved ecosystem health and landscape-scale restoration.

These projects highlight the practical potential of coordinated action, illustrating how statutory, Nature30 and landscape-scale interventions can combine to deliver measurable outcomes.

## What 30 by 30 needs to look like

- *Effective protection:* Only land in verified Favourable or Recovering condition counts toward credible delivery.
- *Robust Nature30 criteria aligned with IUCN guidance:* Nature30 recognition should be underpinned by clear ecological standards, long-term protection, transparent governance and measurable biodiversity outcomes, ensuring consistency with international best practice.
- *Landscape-scale integration:* Protected areas, Nature30 sites, and Nature Networks must function as connected hubs across the wider landscape.
- *Evidence-based statutory designation:* To meet 30 by 30, NatureScot must designate additional sites, with priority given to under-represented habitats such as lowland grasslands, ancient woodlands and freshwater habitats.
- *Adaptive management:* Overgrazing, invasive species, and habitat neglect must be addressed through targeted interventions and robust monitoring.
- *Transparency and engagement:* NGOs, local communities, and other stakeholders must have access to pipelines, progress updates, and opportunities to collaborate.
- *Independent scrutiny and monitoring:* Monitoring systems must ensure that biodiversity outcomes are assessed transparently and consistently, with clear mechanisms for reviewing site status and management effectiveness.

LINK urges Scottish Government and NatureScot to adopt a coordinated, transparent, and evidence-based pathway to 30 by 30. This requires aligning existing funding, statutory frameworks, Nature30 recognition, Nature Networks, species conservation and landscape-scale initiatives to achieve ecological connectivity and meaningful recovery. Only through this integrated approach can Scotland meet its international biodiversity commitments by 2030.

## Key asks to achieve 30 by 30

### **Public, Transparent Monitoring Framework (by 2026)**

Current monitoring is declining, limiting our ability to track ecological recovery and measure progress toward 30 by 30. Without transparent data, delivery remains unclear and accountability is weak.

Key asks:

- Establish a central, publicly accessible dashboard hosted by NatureScot or Scottish Government to track 30 by 30 progress.
- Include reporting on advisory engagement activity (e.g. number of site visits, management agreements supported) as part of the public 30 by 30 dashboard.
- Fund regular site condition and effectiveness assessments, expanding coverage beyond current gaps.
- Publish annual progress reports on the extent and ecological condition of protected areas.
- Make monitoring data accessible to NGOs, land managers and the public.
- Clarify how monitoring results will be reviewed, who is responsible for scrutiny and how findings will trigger adaptive management or changes in site status where necessary.

Outputs by 2026:

- Live dashboard that is updated annually
- Expanded monitoring program resourced and implemented
- Clear, publicly reported baseline for 30 by 30

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Transparency (by 2026)**

Credible delivery of 30 by 30 requires early, ongoing engagement with NGOs, local communities and land managers.

Key asks:

- Establish a forum or working group to coordinate stakeholders and advise on implementation.
- Provide regular updates on designation pipelines, Nature30 recognition and restoration priorities via online portals.
- Facilitate collaborative input into landscape-scale projects, Nature Networks, and statutory planning.

Outputs by 2026:

- Stakeholder forum convened and terms of reference agreed
- Updated online portal live with designation and restoration pipeline
- Engagement plans for local authorities, NGOs, and landowners

### **Improve Ecological Condition of Protected Areas (by 2027)**

Only protected areas in Favourable or Recovering condition contribute meaningfully to 30 by 30. Many sites remain under-managed or degraded.

Key asks:

- Ensure all protected areas have up-to-date, site-specific management plans reflecting current ecological priorities and risks.
- Fund actions to address overgrazing (including deer), invasive species and habitat neglect on priority sites.
- Ensure expanded monitoring to track progress, with results publicly accessible.

Outputs by 2027:

- All protected areas have up-to-date, effectively implemented management plans
- Targeted interventions delivered on priority sites
- Public reporting shows measurable ecological improvement

### **Set Statutory Targets for Site Condition (by 2027)**

Legally binding targets under the Natural Environment Act ensure accountability and transparency.

Key asks:

- Introduce ambitious statutory targets requiring all protected areas to achieve or show measurable progress toward Favourable or Recovering condition.
- Mandate transparent tracking and reporting on progress.

Outputs by 2027:

- Statutory site condition targets in legislation
- Progress reports publicly accessible
- Clear legal basis for enforcement and adaptive management

### **Expand Protected Area Network (by 2027)**

Lowland, freshwater, woodland and key bird habitats remain significantly underrepresented in Scotland's protected area network. Completion of the SPA network, including implementation of the SPA Review, is essential to ensure Scotland meets both its domestic and international obligations.

Key asks:

- Prioritise statutory designation for:
  - Lowland and enclosed grasslands
  - Ancient woodlands
  - Freshwater habitats
- Publish a public, time-bound designation pipeline to ensure transparency and enable stakeholder input.
- Complete the SPA network and implement the SPA Review, ensuring all qualifying bird species and important sites are adequately protected through statutory designation.

Outputs by 2027:

- Pipeline published and regularly updated
- Key underrepresented habitats designated

- Integration with Nature Networks and landscape-scale initiatives

### **Restore Proactive Engagement with Protected Area Managers (by 2027)**

Effective site condition depends not only on designation and funding, but on consistent, trusted relationships between regulators and land managers.

Key asks:

- Rebuild proactive, advisory engagement between NatureScot area staff and protected area owners/managers.
- Establish minimum engagement standards (e.g. regular site visits or structured contact).
- Ensure adequate resourcing of regional teams to support positive management rather than focusing primarily on casework and enforcement.
- Develop partnership-based management agreements that incentivise restoration and adaptive management.
- Publish a transparent engagement framework outlining how NatureScot will support protected area managers to improve ecological condition.
- Engagement should extend beyond protected areas where appropriate, including Nature30 sites and other areas contributing to the wider ecological network.

Outputs by 2027:

- Published engagement framework
- Increased frequency of advisory contact and site-based support
- Positive management agreements in place for priority sites
- Evidence of improved site condition linked to proactive engagement

### **Integrate Protected Areas, Nature30 Sites, and Landscape-Scale Projects into Nature Networks (by 2027)**

Connectivity and scale are fundamental to delivering resilient ecological networks. Nature Networks must act as a core delivery mechanism for 30 by 30, not a late-stage coordination exercise.

Key asks:

- Publish a national, spatially explicit map identifying priority areas for restoration and connectivity, linking Nature30 sites, statutory protected sites and landscape-scale projects.
- Ensure this mapping incorporates existing datasets, including Important Invertebrate Areas and other NGO-led evidence, to support a collaborative and evidence-based Nature Network.
- Nature Networks should be embedded in Regional Spatial Strategies, Local Development Plans and Regional Land Use Partnerships to guide habitat restoration and connectivity.
- Provide improved guidance, funding and capacity support for local authorities and land managers to ensure consistent use of the Nature Networks tool across Scotland.
- Provide ring-fenced funding, technical guidance and capacity to support local authorities and land managers in implementing Nature Networks on the ground.
- Landscape-scale projects should be incorporated into Nature Networks planning frameworks to avoid fragmentation.

Outputs by 2029:

- Protected areas, Nature30 sites and landscape-scale projects fully integrated into Nature Networks
- Restoration and connectivity priorities identified, funded and acted on
- Local authorities and land managers equipped with guidance and consistency to deliver
- Funding and implementation pathways clearly established

## **Achieve 30 by 30 Goal (by 2030)**

The goal is not just numerical coverage, but effective protection, restoration and connectivity across Scotland's landscapes.

### Key asks:

- At least 30% of Scotland's land is effectively protected for nature, contributing to measurable biodiversity recovery.
- Regular evaluation of interventions, with adaptive management to address emerging pressures.
- Continued stakeholder engagement, ensuring ongoing collaboration and transparency.

### Outputs by 2030:

- Scotland meets or exceeds 30 by 30 target in effective ecological condition
- Connected, resilient habitats supporting species recovery
- Long-term monitoring and adaptive management embedded in policy and practice

## **This briefing is supported by:**

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