

Biodiversity loss

Westminster Hall debate

15th May 2024



Background

- Biodiversity is in freefall across the world. We are facing twin climate and nature crises and neither can be tackled without urgent action to address the other.
- The UK Government has a series of targets and strategies designed to reverse the decline in biodiversity, but the [Office for Environmental Protection](#) believes the country is “largely off track” to meeting these.
- The Environment Act 2021 [set legally binding targets](#) to address biodiversity loss, including a commitment to end the decline in populations of certain species by 2030, and then increase populations by 10%, on average, by 2042. Other targets include increasing tree and woodland cover to 16.5% of total land area in England by 2050 and restoring 70% of designated features in Marine Protected Areas to a favourable condition by 2042, with the rest in a recovering condition.
- The UK is a signatory to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the headline pledge of which commits us to protecting 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030. In November, the UK will attend biodiversity COP16, where countries will report on progress on implementing this framework.

What is the state of the UK's nature?

- One in six species are threatened with extinction in the UK and wild populations are, on average, 3% smaller than in 2010, and 19% smaller than in 1970, [according to](#) the 2023 State of Nature report.
- Nature has been in decline for centuries, primarily due to habitat loss due to industrialisation. England is [thought to have lost](#) 99.7% of fen habitat, 97% of species rich grasslands, 80% of lowland heaths, 70% of ancient woodlands and 85% of saltmarshes.
- No progress has been made towards meeting the UK's commitment to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030, which it first committed [to in 2020](#). Three years on, between just [3%](#) and [6.5%](#) of England is adequately protected – land designations like National Parks offer no specific protections for nature.
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the ‘crown jewels’ of the UK's nature network, but [many are in poor or declining condition](#). Only 36.82% of SSSIs by area are in favourable condition, a decline from 39% in 2022.
- The UK is the [most nature depleted country in the G7](#) and amongst the bottom 10% globally.

What is the impact of biodiversity loss?

- Nature is a vital tool in tackling the climate crisis. Peatlands, trees and woodlands, saltmarsh, seabed, and other habitats have an incredible ability to trap carbon, store and regulate water supply, protect our coastal communities, and cool our urban environments. But these natural carbon stores are hugely depleted and at high risk of degradation from the extreme climatic conditions that are already inevitable over the next 30 years.
- Access to nature is linked to improvements in physical and mental health, but this access is very unequal, [particularly for those](#) from deprived areas or areas with high proportions of

minority ethnic groups. Improving access to nature, can tackle health inequality and save the NHS money – [analysis of The Wildlife Trusts programmes](#) found that investment of £5.34m would improve the mental health and well-being of 1.2m people, saving the NHS £635.6m.

- Biodiversity loss could cut 12% from the UK's GDP by the 2030s, [according to](#) the Green Finance Institute. This is equal to or more than the financial threat posed by climate risks.

How do we restore nature?

- Nature can bounce back quickly when given the chance. Reversing the decline of habitats is essential to doing this.
- Woodlands must be expanded and irreplaceable ancient woodland protected at all cost. Trees are an important carbon store, but our oldest woodlands are also [home to rare wildlife](#) like purple emperor butterflies and lungwort lichens.
- Peatlands and wetlands must be restored, both to reduce the [6% of UK-wide emissions that arise from peatlands](#) and to replicate success stories like the bittern, which has staged a major comeback thanks to target creation of wetland habitats.
- As farming uses 70% of land in England, how we farm has a significant impact on nature. It is essential that the opportunity presented by the new Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM) is harnessed and farmers are given the support and incentive they need to adopt more sustainable methods.

What do voters think?

- Polling from [The Wildlife Trusts](#) suggests that nature policies could impact the result of a general election, with 61% of The Wildlife Trusts' supporters saying they will vote based on environmental policies offered by candidates, and a further 32% considering doing the same.
- Nature protection is a unifying priority across the British population, [according to](#) Climate Outreach.
- More than half of people want to see more public money spent on nature-friendly farming, [says polling](#) for Sustain and the Nature Friendly Farming Network.

Suggested interventions

- Will the Government take a spatial approach to its Land Use Framework, setting out where land is best protected for nature and where it is best suited to food production and other uses?
- Will the Government confirm if funding for nature restoration, like the Nature for Climate Fund and the Blue Belt Programme, will be renewed when they end in 2025?
- How is the Environmental Land Management Scheme delivering progress towards the Environment Act targets on nature?