

Tackling the Nature Emergency - Scotland



Introduction

On 7 September the Scottish government published a lengthy consultation covering three major elements of a new framework for nature recovery in Scotland. This includes a revised Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, details of its first five-year Delivery Plan and elements of a new Natural Environment Bill. The Delivery Plan is indicative of the government's legislative and policy programme for the next five years and contains several actions relevant to land managers. This note summarises the [consultation](#) document and background material that was published with it. References in this note to "government" are to the Scottish government unless otherwise stated.

The Biodiversity Strategy to 2045: tackling the nature emergency in Scotland

A draft of the biodiversity strategy was consulted on in 2022 and has since been updated to reflect Scotland's new international commitments and stakeholder feedback. In announcing the updated [Biodiversity Strategy](#), Lorna Slater MSP, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, acknowledged that the nature and climate crises are intertwined and merit an emergency response both within Scotland and globally. Long-term statutory targets are needed to outlast short-term political cycles - the Biodiversity Strategy proposal is expected to sit alongside Scotland's Climate Change Plan, Vision for Agriculture and land reform ambitions as part of the government's overall environment strategy.

The draft Biodiversity Strategy sets out a high-level 'vision and outcomes' ambition as well as the framework through which long-term accountability for nature recovery will be delivered. The overarching ambition is for Scotland to be 'Nature Positive' by 2030 and to have restored and regenerated biodiversity across the country by 2045. Nature positive means that the downward curve of biodiversity loss has been reversed: the strategy sets out a downbeat evidence summary of the state of Scotland's nature, noting that it is in the bottom 25% of all nations for retained historic land-based biodiversity and that key species abundance has declined a further 24% since 1994. Agricultural practices, upland management, woodland management, water pressures on freshwater and poor fishing practices are all noted as contributors to the overall problem. Examples of positive practice are given throughout the strategy as starting points for action, including the South of Scotland Golden Eagle project, woodland creation achievements and the Glen Muick catchment restoration project.

The strategic vision and outcomes

To reverse the downward trend and regenerate biodiversity, a three-pronged vision places the 2045 restoration goal alongside ambitions for a diverse, thriving, resilient and adaptable natural environment that is driving a sustainable economy and thriving communities. A series of outcomes have been set out in the strategy to define what success will look like, including eight overarching outcomes, plus multiple outcomes for specific ecosystems.

Overarching outcomes for 2045 include:

- Species **abundance and distribution** will have recovered and diversity within species maintained.
- Scotland's internationally **important species** will have larger, healthy, resilient populations.
- **Natural capital** will be embedded in policymaking.
- **Nature-based Solutions** will be central to efforts to deliver NetZero and adapt to climate change.

Land-based outcomes for 2045 include:

- **Farmland** practices will have resulted in a substantial regeneration in biodiversity, ecosystem and soil health and significantly reduced carbon emissions while sustaining high-quality food production.
- Management of deer ranges, grouse moors and upland agriculture will be contributing to the regeneration of biodiversity in **upland areas**.
- **Towns and cities** will include nature-rich environments close to all communities, contributing to Nature Networks and measurable increases in urban biodiversity.

Water-based outcomes for 2045 include:

- **Riparian woodland** will have expanded, reducing the average temperature of our rivers and burns, leading to increases in freshwater fish species and other wildlife.
- A substantial, widespread and ongoing programme of **peatland restoration** will have led to most of Scotland's peatlands being in good condition.

The delivery plan

Five-year rolling delivery plans are one of five elements of the Biodiversity Delivery Framework, which also includes the Biodiversity Strategy, a Natural Environment Bill, an Investment Plan, and a reporting framework. The ambition is that each delivery plan sets out in detail the range of actions needed to deliver the outcomes and vision set out in the strategy. The detail of the first plan is incorporated within the consultation document, based around six objectives set out in the strategy; the consultation asks for feedback on each of the objectives and its actions. The table below sets out some of the most relevant actions for land managers under each of the objectives:

Objectives	Proposed key actions (examples)
1. Accelerate restoration and regeneration	• Introduce statutory Nature Restoration Targets through the Natural Environment Bill • Substantially reduce deer densities • Ensure grouse moor management sustains healthy biodiversity through the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill • Develop a national peatland monitoring framework
2. Protect nature on land and at sea, across and beyond protected areas	• Ensure that at least 30% of land and sea is protected and effectively managed to support nature in good health by 2030 ("30 by 30") National Parks • Designate at least one new National Park by 2026 • Ensure National Parks, National Nature Reserves and protected areas are exemplars in better delivery of biodiversity outcomes by 2030 Planning • Incorporate and embed Nature Networks into policy frameworks and decision-making processes as a component of Local Development Plans and Regional Land Use Partnerships nationally by 2030 • Explore options for developing a biodiversity metric or related tool, for use in Scotland • Champion new planning and development measures for protecting and enhancing biodiversity, including: <i>Ensuring that development relating to renewables and essential infrastructure provides positive effects for upland biodiversity and peatland habitats, by developing clear guidance on NPF4</i>
3. Embed nature-positive farming, fishing and forestry	Soil health • Revise and update Scotland's Soil Framework and action/implementation plan by 2030 • Develop evidence-based soil health indicators that can be considered for inclusion in Whole Farm Plans and forest management plans • Improve information for land managers on how to assess soil erosion risks and implement measures to avoid erosion • Reduce inputs of nutrients to freshwaters that cause enrichment impacts on biodiversity, by controlling diffuse pollution through effective nutrient management Agricultural support • From 2025 farmers and crofters will be required to adopt the following practices as the foundations of the whole farm planning approach to qualify for agricultural payments: soil testing, animal health and welfare declarations, carbon audits, biodiversity audits and supported effective business planning • Ensure that rural support mechanisms incorporate a mandatory requirement for a farm-level biodiversity audit in return for support. Shift 50% of direct payments for farming and crofting to climate action and funding for on-farm nature restoration and enhancement by 2025 Woodland management • Update woodland management guidance and plans (between 2023 and 2030) to reflect greater emphasis on actions that will improve biodiversity • Increase woodland biodiversity through diversifying age and species mixes, increasing woodland extent and connectivity

4. Protect and support the recovery of vulnerable and important species and habitats	• Revise the Scottish Biodiversity List of species and habitats • Develop effective species recovery, reintroduction and reinforcement programmes drawing on existing partnership work • Raise public awareness of science and practice around conservation translocations • Deliver the actions set out in the Wild Salmon Strategy Implementation Plan 2023-2028
5. Invest in nature	Market development • Develop a biodiversity investment plan for Scotland • Align the development of high integrity value-led markets for responsible private investment in natural capital with the development of public funding streams for biodiversity • Support the development of the Woodland Carbon Code/Peatland Code for improved biodiversity benefits and the development of new codes with direct or associated biodiversity benefits Advisory services • Establish supported nationwide information and advice for land managers on biodiversity management including best practice and innovation through the complimentary tier of the new agricultural payment framework • Develop guidance to support a programme of training/education for land managers
6. Take action on the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss	Engagement and education • Develop a communication and engagement programme by 2024 to raise awareness and understanding of the importance of biodiversity • Encourage more community ownership of local and national nature reserves and other land managed for nature by 2030 • Embed biodiversity and nature in curriculum development Mainstream and integrate biodiversity policy across government • Subject to final decisions on the government's future legislative programmes, place specific requirements on public bodies and local government through Bills on Land Reform, Wellbeing and Sustainable Development, and the incorporation of the human right to a healthy environment in the Human Rights Bill • Support global and regional efforts to enable businesses to more effectively monitor and report on their national and global impacts on biodiversity

Nature Networks Framework

The detail of the Nature Networks proposal can be found on the [NatureScot](https://www.naturescot.gov.uk/) website. A nature network is a means of promoting ecological connectivity to enable fully functioning ecosystems and healthy populations. It can work at any spatial scale, but in the context of the Biodiversity Strategy, nature networks are intended to be a bottom-up mechanism driving local decision making that in turn supports national outcomes for nature and people. The framework proposes that each local authority in Scotland will have a spatially defined nature network, mapping protected areas and other sites of local importance such as local nature reserves. Nature networks are embedded in the fourth National Planning Framework as a means of ensuring development has positive effects on biodiversity. A toolbox has been provided to help local authorities adopt nature networks. The consultation asks for general feedback on the Nature Networks Framework.

30 by 30 policy framework

The commitment for 30% of land and sea to be conserved for nature is an outcome of the COP15 Global Biodiversity Framework. On land, currently 18.2% of Scotland is formally designated, meaning an additional 990,000 hectares needs to be protected to meet the goal. The principles for designation have been co-designed with stakeholders. The consultation asks for feedback on the framework, which covers the outline process by which sites will be selected, designated, managed, funded and monitored.

Statutory targets for nature restoration and the Natural Environment Bill

Part B of the consultation deals with the proposed Natural Environment Bill and the creation of binding targets for nature restoration. The consultation is an early-stage enquiry intended to minimise the risk of adverse consequences from misdirecting funds to poorly considered targets. Successful targets should incentivise policy and drive actions that address critical shortcomings in the current regulatory landscape. The consultation proposes that the Natural Environment Bill will contain the framework and high-level topics, but that specific details of figures and targets will be included in secondary legislation, allowing a responsive and agile approach to

unforeseen events. The process for selecting statutory targets, reviewing them, and reporting on them are considered as consultation questions.

National Parks

The current legislation around National Parks dates back to 2000. Consultation in 2022 highlighted a public appetite for more National Parks, and that National Parks should be playing a stronger role in nature restoration. To address this, the current consultation proposes amendments to the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. The legal purpose of National Parks in section 9(1) of the 2000 Act will be amended to include nature restoration and tackling climate change. The aims of National Parks would also be updated, to include references to biodiversity, sustainable management, visitor management and the wellbeing economy. Critically, the proposed redrafting of the first aim (from 'conserve and enhance' to 'protect, restore and enhance') would update the over-riding National Park 'principle'. A further proposed amendment would require other public sector bodies and organisations working in the National Park to have regard to the National Park aims and 'principle', and National Park Plans. Proposals are also made to enable National Parks to directly enforce byelaws and to update their governance structures.

Analysis

There is no shortage of content within the consultation and its accompanying documents, but most of it should not be a surprise to land managers in Scotland. The overall structure mirrors what has been delivered in England through the Environment Act 2021, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the most recent Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP23). However, taking its time means that Scotland's response to the nature crisis is already more coherent than England's melange of policies, strategies and governance mechanisms. For example, Scotland has already made progress in reforming its planning policies through NPF4 to account for nature; the new proposals – including for Nature Networks and possibly a biodiversity metric for Scotland – will help extend this further. A relatively light-touch ambition for urban biodiversity is perhaps one area for further improvement.

As with the EIP23, delivery plans are becoming the key place to look for details of what's coming, as the government reflects on its overall targets, how it has performed against them, and consequently what more it needs to do in the delivery period to drive change. In this first Delivery Plan, land managers in Scotland will be interested to see the government's restated commitment to nature finance, skills development, and human management of landscapes to achieve biodiversity-positive outcomes. However, there is an implicit finger of blame pointing firmly at land management and just a seven-year window to turn current unsustainable practices around. The Scottish government will be watching the deployment of Environmental Land Management in England to see where the take-up of schemes is best and what the barriers to delivering nature-positive land management practices are. The baseline and conditionality approach being taken in Scotland is a much tougher ask than that being placed on English farmers; it may prove to be a challenge if farmers resist the increased bureaucracy for a reduced amount of funding after 2025. Much of the success will depend on good leadership and persuading all farmers that they have a role to play in making a difference. The whole-of-society approach advocated by the Biodiversity Strategy may help here, but farmers are well-versed in arguing for exceptions for agriculture.

The overall framework proposed in the Biodiversity Strategy seems coherent, largely because of careful consultation and its reach into education, business and political decision-making frameworks, leaving no stone unturned in the scale of the response to the biodiversity crisis. However, coherence may also be because there is less pressure on land in Scotland to deliver against all of these objectives. In England, the need for a land use framework to prioritise actions is urgent.

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