



30 x 30: Land for Nature's Recovery in Northern Ireland

1st June 2021

This briefing sets out current thinking around the need, and pathways to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030 ('30x30'). In combination with more sustainable management across Northern Ireland, 30x30 could create the foundation for recovery of habitats and species, provide the backbone of a country wide Nature Recovery Network, and foster a nature-positive economy for everyone.

This briefing is part of a series and should be read in conjunction with Nature Targets for Northern Ireland's Seas.

Global and local context:

We welcome international calls to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030 (30x30), and the UK's recognition of the need to agree an approach across the four devolved administrations¹. The UK¹ and Scottish² governments have pledged to meet this target, and the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Minister has publicly endorsed it³. **We call on the Northern Ireland Government to commit to effectively protecting and managing well 30% of land for nature by 2030.**

Nature is in crisis, and current strategies and actions haven't stopped the decline. We know that existing protected sites alone will not achieve wildlife's recovery or help us in our fight against climate change. If we want a resilient and prosperous future, we need to take bold steps for a network of wild places that are bigger, better, more and joined up.

Recent research evidences that NI ranks as the 12th-worst performing country for biodiversity loss out of 240 countries⁴. We have lost more wildlife than anywhere in the UK, with 97% wildflower meadows gone, 11% species at risk from extinction from the island of Ireland⁵, and just 1 of 21 lakes in good quality⁶.

74% of people across Northern Ireland are demanding a nature rich country.⁷ The NI Biodiversity Strategy (2015-2020) has run its course, failed to halt biodiversity decline⁸ and is

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-commits-to-protect-30-of-uk-land-in-boost-for-biodiversity>

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-biodiversity-strategy-post-2020-statement-intent/>

³ <https://niassembly.tv/question-time-agriculture-environment-and-rural-affairs-tuesday-25-may-2021/>

⁴ <https://community.rspb.org.uk/getinvolved/b/steppingupnorthernireland/posts/the-prime-ministers-30-30-pledge;>
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/new-report-shows-the-uk-is-the-least-effective-g7-member-at-protecting-nature/>

⁵ <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/water-framework-directive-statistics>

⁷ <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2020/06/11/news/rspb-ni-survey-finds-majority-want-new-laws-to-better-protect-nature-in-aftermath-of-covid-19-pandemic-1969886/>

⁸ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/rspb-ni-northern-ireland-biodiversity-strategy-failing-after-years-of-inaction/>

unlikely to be replaced until 2022 at the earliest⁹. Now is the time for the Executive to commit to save nature including a pledge to meet 30x30 and a new, binding and ambitious Biodiversity Strategy.

Scientific evidence demonstrates that protecting at least 30% of land can have a significant impact on extinction risk and climate change.¹⁰ Commitment to 30x30 provides a significant opportunity to protect the last remnants of natural and semi-natural habitat in Northern Ireland, and to restore and enhance degraded terrestrial ecosystems that are most important for wildlife, people and our response to climate change.

This 30% target should not be seen as a ceiling but as a minimum achievement required to contribute towards nature's recovery across Northern Ireland, and globally.

Getting this right is critical for the survival and recovery of many species that have been in decline for decades. Showing that it can be done in a way that supports a nature-positive economy would be a powerful contribution to global diplomacy, as the UN will likely adopt the 30x30 target at the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 15).

Getting to 30x30

The effort required to deliver 30x30 cannot be underestimated. Including the Areas of Outstanding Landscape (AONB) landscape designation, 28.4% of land is currently designated in Northern Ireland¹¹. However, excluding AONBs, which do not provide a specific nature conservation designation, just 9.8% of land is statutorily designated for nature's protection¹². This includes many poorly managed sites that are not in a good condition for nature. Only 20% of terrestrial protected areas are under favourable management, 54% of ASSI biological features are in favourable condition¹³ and many designated sites have not been monitored for years - in 2019, 74% of ASSIs had not been monitored in the last six years¹⁴. Furthermore, lack of publicly available data means that the overall area in favourable condition is unknown.

With targeted reform of existing designations and a programme of identifying and protecting new sites, the 30% effectively managed and protected target in Northern Ireland is achievable by 2030.

How should the 30% target be defined on land?

In order to contribute towards a 30% target, protected areas need to meet three criteria:

- 1. They are protected for nature in perpetuity:** the entirety of the 30% should be afforded long-term protection for nature and long-term protection against damage such as pollution, overexploitation, invasive non-native species, habitat destruction and development.
- 2. They are well managed and in good or recovering condition:** land that counts towards the 30% should be well-managed for nature, with strategic management plans that are adaptable to changing ecological circumstances that creates demonstrable improvement of feature condition. Management may vary from highly species-specific

⁹ <https://www.nienvironmentlink.org/cmsfiles/Assembly-News-December-2020.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/4/eaaw2869>

¹¹ <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/ukbi-c1-protected-areas/#indicator-description-table-c1i-extent-and-percentage-cover-of-protected-areas-by-country-up-to-2020-n1-for-all-site-types-included-in-the-indicator>

¹² <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/ukbi-c1-protected-areas/#indicator-description-table-c1ii-extent-and-percentage-cover-of-terrestrial-protected-areas-by-country-as-at-24-july-2020-n1-for-assi-mcz-ncmpa-nnr-ramsar-sac-and-spa-site-designations>

¹³ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2021.pdf>

¹⁴ https://ww2.rspb.org.uk/Images/A%20LOST%20DECADE%20FOR%20NATURE_tcm9-481563.pdf

and interventionist approaches such as long-term agri-environment systems to much more hands-off approaches.

- 3. They are regularly monitored:** land that counts towards the 30% must be regularly monitored at appropriate intervals as part of the programme of active management and investment. Robust monitoring should show clear evidence both of good management for nature and that the features are either in good condition, or are showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery. Monitoring data should be publicly available to facilitate good management for nature.

What should count towards the 30% target on land?

With reform and better management, existing designations could meet our conditions of long-term protection and effective management for nature's recovery. In addition, other areas, including those with novel designations, could also contribute. In order to contribute to 30% all protected sites must be regularly monitored and in favourable condition or showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery.

1. Strict statutory protection for nature's last enclaves

Early proposals for the 2030 Action Targets for the Convention on Biological Diversity include at least 10% land area designated for strict protection¹⁵ (IUCN categories I-IV¹⁶). To establish resilient ecological networks, 10% or more of land should be designated for strict protection and be in good condition. This wildlife-rich core of sites would be the backbone of a Nature Recovery Network, (NRN). **These core areas, as the finest nature sites, must be given the highest levels of legal protection (Ramsar, SAC, SPA, underpinned by ASSI).** Currently, these designations afford incomplete protection from a range of threats. The process for selection, extent and level of protection of our designated sites receive, therefore, needs strengthening, and supported by accurate and up to date monitoring data.

In Northern Ireland, there has been a failure to complete crucial protected terrestrial area designations for a range of internationally important species and habitats.¹⁷ NIEA must immediately and fully implement the recommendations of the SPA reviews¹⁸, and identify other species and habitats that should be designated so as to protect wildlife populations and remaining fragments of unspoilt habitat across Northern Ireland.

2. A connected network across Northern Ireland

The connectivity of areas of habitat has been identified as a key criterion in nature's recovery¹⁹. In addition to core areas, corridors, linear features, stepping stones, buffer zones and urban green space will play a crucial role. While these areas may not always themselves contribute towards the 30%, NIEA must set targets and introduce policies that will 'soften the matrix', increasing the physical and functional connectivity of areas of habitat and increasing the permeability of the surrounding wider landscape.

3. Strengthened Landscape Designations (within which more areas will contribute to 30x30)

AONBs currently contribute the majority of the 28.4% of designated land in Northern Ireland. However, AONBs are not designated for nature conservation and have only one statutory

¹⁵ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/efb0/1f84/a892b98d2982a829962b6371/wg2020-02-03-en.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories>

¹⁷ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/rspb-ni-northern-ireland-biodiversity-strategy-failing-after-years-of-inaction/>

¹⁸ <https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/3634580a-cabc-4218-872f-8660a1760ad8>; <https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/d1b21876-d5a4-42b9-9505-4c399fe47d7e>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/making-space-for-nature-a-review-of-englands-wildlife-sites-published-today>

purpose relating to natural beauty²⁰. This does not give effective purpose to require the restoration of nature across the protected landscape. Although AONBs have the potential to contribute significantly to the 30% and to the wider Nature Recovery Network, **only those sections (rather than their entirety) that meet the criteria of long-term effective protection and management for nature, and good condition, should count towards 30%.**

In future, AONBs could make a crucial and genuine contribution to biodiversity's recovery, but only if they are given significantly greater resources and a clear requirement to play a greater role in nature's recovery. For example, and although focused on England, the Glover Review recommendation to strengthen statutory Management Plans with clear priorities and actions for nature's recovery can be applied in NI as a necessary first step to ensure that parts of those areas could qualify for the 30%²¹. This should be used as a guide to target resources and funding to deliver environmental outcomes in AONBs, integrating with their wider statutory purpose.

4. Other areas effectively protected and managed for nature.

These areas are likely to vary enormously, from areas owned and managed by public bodies and NGOs to privately owned land. Some will be farmed, some will be parks, some will be specifically held for nature. To contribute to nature's recovery, these areas will need to have a similar mosaic of dynamic management measures.

Areas that could contribute, where they meet the conditions above, include: National Nature Reserves (NNR), Nature Reserves (NR), Local Nature Reserves (LNR), sites of irreplaceable habitats, land under long-term environmental farming schemes and land owned by conservation NGOs, as long as it is designated or required to be effectively protected, managed and monitored for nature.

Novel designations may also contribute to 30% if they meet the criteria for long-term protection and enhancement of nature. For example, a new designation, implemented through the planning system, such as a 'Wildbelt'²² could identify and protect areas that present the most significant opportunities for nature's recovery, building on the current designations which focus on protecting existing features. This would enable land that is currently of low biodiversity value to be designated for nature, and so speed the creation of the Nature Recovery Network.²³

Key delivery mechanisms to achieve 30% by 2030 on land in Northern Ireland

Legal underpinning of 30% by 2030: There must be a statutory requirement to effectively protecting and managing well 30% of land by 2030, in addition to the commitment to delivery in the subsequent Biodiversity Strategy.

Nature Recovery Networks: Nature cannot be confined to 30% of the country. Other areas must deliver for nature even if not formally included in the 30%. NRNs are widely recognised as an effective response to conserve wildlife in environments that have become fragmented by human activities.²⁴ NRNs have joint aims, for nature and people, delivering multiple benefits to both: supporting abundant wildlife whilst providing ecosystem services such as carbon storage and flood alleviation²². **The Executive must implement the principles of the Lawton Report – better, bigger, more and joined-up habitats - and establish an**

²⁰ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1985/170/article/14>

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review>

²² <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Wildbelt%20briefing%20September%202020.pdf>

²³ https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Nature_Recovery_Network_Handbook_LO_SINGLES.pdf

²⁴ <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/5955403202691072>; https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Nature_Recovery_Network_Handbook_LO_SINGLES.pdf

ecosystem approach as was acknowledged, yet not delivered upon, in the now expired NI Biodiversity Strategy²³. Strategies to implement NRNs must ensure that there are ambitious plans to restore nature everywhere, underpinned by effective regulation and monitoring.

Planning system reform: It's imperative that planning system reforms address the nature and climate crises by supporting nature's recovery, providing long-term protection, and improving management. Implementation through the planning system is the key mechanism by which investment of time and resource in nature's recovery on land can be protected for the future.

Local Development Plans (LDPs) have an important role to play in responding to the climate and nature emergencies. Guidance and legislation should be updated as appropriate to facilitate net gain for nature²⁵, and to ensure a clear link and role for LDPs in delivering nature's recovery. This includes proactively planning to deliver more nature, appropriately scaled and interconnected, rather than simply seeking to mitigate the impacts of development. NRNs will identify areas where there are the most significant opportunities for managing land better to enhance the natural environment and should be reflected in new planning frameworks.

Vital reviews need to take place, including a review of the 'Strategic Planning Policy Statement' to ensure that measures to promote nature in planning decisions remain appropriate. Reviews of existing planning permissions, such as for minerals, need to be carried out regularly and stronger protection put in place where priority species and habitats are found. If Department for Infrastructure proceeds with planning reform, alongside input from expert stakeholders, new areas could be identified for strict protection and nature's recovery, and net biodiversity gain introduced.

Sustainable agricultural and land-use strategy: With effective management for nature and sufficient funding, long-term sustainable agricultural land management agreements will be vital to contribute to achieving nature's recovery both in protected areas and beyond. This is of particular importance in Northern Ireland given that 75% (approx. 1 million ha.) of the land area is farmed.

Future agricultural policy must ensure area-based schemes deliver public goods for public money whilst ensuring there is recognition that inclusion within the 30% protected for nature and the wider NRN, will not necessarily preclude farmland from being actively farmed.

Future policy can seize the opportunity to recognise and reward 'non-market' outputs provided by sustainable agricultural systems and High Nature Value (HNV) farming, such as carbon storage, clean water and soil conservation, as well as maintaining many landscapes that underpin rural tourism, economies and communities. A robust monitoring and evaluation framework must ensure these schemes deliver for nature's recovery as well as value for money.

The multiple benefits of sustainable agricultural land management have been demonstrated through projects such as the Heart of the Glens Landscape Partnership's Farm and Farmland Sustainability Project. The Woodland Trust worked in partnership with 13 landowners in the Antrim Glens to develop farm plans that identified and delivered new green infrastructure in the area. This included the planting of new native farm woodland, hedgerows and riparian woodland to improve drainage, provide shelter for livestock and deliver an extended habitat for wildlife including priority species red squirrel and pine marten.

Public bodies also have an important role to play. The Biodiversity Duty Guidance for Public Bodies must be strengthened and more robustly implemented across government. Embedding

²⁵ <https://community.rspb.org.uk/getinvolved/b/specialplaces/posts/a-net-gain-for-nature>

opportunities for the recovery and enhancement of nature in decision-making, policy-making, and general administrative work will be instrumental in effectively achieving 30x30.

Transboundary cooperation: Transboundary cooperation is essential across the UK countries, the island of Ireland, and the broader global community. Nature and the environment are global assets, benefiting us all, but impacted and managed by the laws and policies of individual jurisdictions. Actions to address nature's recovery and climate change require a transboundary approach, not just with those either physically or geopolitically closest but internationally.

Conclusion

Protecting and effectively managing 30% of land for nature will help to shield our most precious species and habitats and improve the quality of our air, water and soils. Biodiversity is intrinsically important but also vital for our health, wellbeing, and economy.²⁶ Restoration of the natural environment and ensuring that protected areas are in good condition for nature will also help to deliver effective climate action. Targeted efforts will enable Northern Ireland's nature-rich habitats to be a contributor to tackling both the climate and biodiversity crises.

The 'zero draft' for the UN post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework includes the proposed target to protect at least 30% of land and seas for biodiversity.²⁷ Northern Ireland must take the international aspirations of the Convention on Biological Diversity COP 15 and use them to boost our domestic ambition, to deliver effective protection and management of 30% of land for nature by 2030.

We welcome the DAERA Ministers endorsement of the 30x30 target, and call on a binding commitment and extensive stakeholder engagement to make this a reality.

By completing the strictly protected network of Northern Ireland's last remaining natural habitats, modernising existing designations to focus on nature, and identifying a range of new areas most important for nature's recovery, delivery of the 30x30 commitment can help to reverse the long-term decline of wildlife in Northern Ireland and set the UK on the path to a nature-positive economy.

²⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>

²⁷ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/recommendations/wg2020-02/wg2020-02-rec-01-en.pdf>