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a home

# A lost decade **for nature**

How the UK has missed its targets for nature  
Why we must act now to revive our world

## **In 2010, the world signed up to a set of global targets to halt the disastrous loss of biodiversity – the abundance and variety of life on earth upon which we all depend.**

The Aichi Biodiversity Targets were agreed by 196 countries under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, the UN Treaty that aims, quite literally, to save life on earth). Their aim was to halt the loss of biodiversity globally by 2020. It is now 2020, and on 15 September the final “stocktaking” report on the world’s progress will be published. **This report (Global Biodiversity Outlook 5) will say that we have failed to take enough action to turn the tide of biodiversity loss.** Things continue to get worse.

According to the UK Government’s own assessment of performance<sup>1</sup> **the UK has also failed in its contribution towards this global goal.** The UK’s Sixth National Report, published by the UK Government in March 2019, shows the UK will miss nearly all its commitments for nature made in 2010 (14 out of 20).

This global stocktaking report comes before world leaders are due to gather in 2021, to agree a new set of 10-year global targets for nature. This will again be billed as a last chance to act; and will take place at a time when the connections between people and nature have never been more apparent. Scientists agree that the destruction of natural habitats and the trade in wild animals increase the risks of disease outbreaks like Covid-19<sup>2</sup>. They have also made it clear that without action to protect and restore nature, we have no chance of controlling climate change, or adapting to its impacts.

The report will paint a grim picture of continuing nature loss; but it will also show that **there are solutions and success stories, that if scaled up and implemented over the next decade** could indeed halt the loss of biodiversity, and put it – and us – on a path to recovery by 2030.

The UK Government, as host of the upcoming 2021 UN climate summit in Glasgow, has already expressed its ambition to be a global leader in the fight to save nature, and to implement nature-based solutions to climate change. It is expected to repeat these promises at a forthcoming UN summit on biodiversity on 30 September.

But if these claims of leadership are to be credible, the UK will need to show precisely how it plans to fill the gap between rhetoric and reality in its own backyard. It will need to demonstrate how signing up to a new set of global targets will make a difference this time, because governments will take the urgent action needed to change the fortunes of wildlife on the ground. This means transforming the way we farm and fish, the way we generate electricity, and the way we plan the built environment; and it means providing the funding to deliver for nature at a meaningful scale.

Now is the time to turn promises about global environmental leadership into action. The response to a “lost decade” of action for nature cannot be more of the same. This RSPB report analyses the UK’s performance on a suite of pivotal targets under the 2020 Aichi framework; identifies what went wrong; and points the way forwards, towards a more ambitious, robust and inspiring framework for the decade to come.

## **RSPB analysis of UK performance against key targets**

The RSPB has analysed UK achievement against the Aichi Targets and compared this to the UK Government’s own assessment of progress in the Sixth National Report. We have focused our analysis on a



set of key targets under the Aichi framework which we believe to be crucial to efforts to save nature, and which will offer particularly useful lessons for the decade to come. These include progress on protected areas, species conservation, and funding for solutions. The first two are crucial in understanding what is happening on the ground, to special places and endangered wildlife. The third is a key indicator of government commitment to action. The assessment below is based on existing published information from the UK Government's own data, the most recent *State of Nature* Report (2019), and the most up-to-date peer reviewed literature. While this is a UK assessment, some elements of our recommendations are relevant to reserved policy areas, and some apply to actions at the devolved level.

## 1. Species (Aichi target 12)

*"By 2020 the extinction of known threatened species has been prevented and their conservation status, particularly of those most in decline, has been improved and sustained."*

**UK Sixth National Report Assessment: Progress towards target but at an insufficient rate**

**RSPB Assessment:** We feel that at best this should be **"no progress" although there is a serious case to be made for "moving away from target"**.

**What is happening?**  
**According to *State of Nature* (2019)<sup>3</sup>, 41% of UK species are in decline since 1970 with no sign of the rate of loss slowing, and 133 species have been lost completely from our shores since the 1500s.**

15% of the 8,418 species assessed are regarded as threatened with extinction in Great Britain, and the Farmland Bird Index has declined by 57% since 1970. What's more, between 1970 and 2016, the index of

distribution of priority species in the UK declined by 27%. This was 3% lower in 2016 than 2011.<sup>4</sup>

The UK Government's own biodiversity indicators (2019)<sup>5</sup> show ongoing decline in most of the measures based upon trends in species; of 11 relevant indicators (of species of European importance, of UK conservation priority, and of the wider countryside) seven are assessed as deteriorating over the long-term, and only two are improving.

**Why?** The *State of Nature* (2019) reviews the major pressures on the UK's nature - agricultural management, climate change, urbanisation, pollution, hydrological change, invasive non-native species and woodland management - and finds that species and their populations are under threat in the UK primarily because of the way we manage our land and seas.

Changes in farmland management over the past 50 years have had one of the greatest impacts on UK nature. We have seen an increased use of pesticides and fertilisers; increased numbers of animals grazing the same area of land, changes in crops and patterns of planting; a focus on either arable or livestock farming; greater mechanisation and increase in farm size; and loss of nature-friendly features such as field margins, hedgerows, and wooded areas<sup>6</sup>. In combination these have had significant consequences for our wildlife. Whilst an increasing number of farmers are supporting nature friendly farming and would like to do more, incentives through farm subsidy systems have done too little to support them, including under the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, which has largely failed to deliver for nature and the environment. Though there are encouraging signs of an intention to shift away from damaging subsidies, there is much to do to secure the required reforms if positive change is to be realised from next year onwards.

At sea, climate change and overfishing are having the most significant impact on our marine species. Despite legal obligations under the EU Common Fisheries Policy to end overfishing of all stocks by 2020 (at the latest), overfishing persists in UK waters and we continue to take more from our stocks than is being scientifically advised<sup>7</sup>. Improved fisheries management has led to signs of recovery from low baselines, but overall implementation is poor and 33% of quota managed fish stocks are still harvested unsustainably<sup>8</sup>. Bycatch is also a problem for vulnerable species such as porpoise, dolphins, and seabirds, especially in longlines and gillnet fisheries. It is estimated that 1,500 small cetaceans are caught as bycatch each year<sup>10</sup> and approximately 5000 seabirds such as the northern fulmer<sup>10</sup>. While the best available evidence gives us cause for concern, the total scale of the problem is hard to see as measuring accurate bycatch estimates for these species is problematic, especially for smaller fishing vessels, due to a lack of monitoring of fishing activity.

## 2. Protected areas (Aichi target 11)

*“By 2020, at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water, and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes.”*

**UK Sixth National Report Assessment: Meeting or exceeding this target**

**RSPB Assessment: moving away from the target**

### What is happening?

The UK’s assessment paints a misleading picture based on the extent of protected areas alone (claiming **28% on land and 24% of seas<sup>11</sup>**). This ignores the fact that only “effectively managed” protected areas or “other effective area-based conservation measures” count towards Target 11. On land, the UK’s figures include landscape designations (National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Scenic Areas (NSAs)), despite evidence suggesting that these areas are consistently failing to deliver for biodiversity across the UK. For example, in England the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is worse inside National Parks and AONBs than it is outside<sup>12</sup>. Across the UK, around half of all confirmed raptor persecution incidents have taken place in National Parks, AONBs and NSAs<sup>13</sup>, despite only covering a quarter of the land area. Protected areas for nature on land<sup>14</sup> are now in a worse state than they were in 2010 despite bold promises made by governments across the UK to improve them, as shown in the table below.

**Ongoing work estimates that only around 5% of the UK’s land is, as required by Target 11, both protected and effectively managed for nature<sup>23</sup>.** This is based on an estimate that only around half of the UK’s terrestrial protected areas are in favourable condition and therefore

Country	Baseline protected area condition (% favourable)	Latest protected area condition (% favourable)
England	43% (2010) <sup>15</sup>	39% (2020) <sup>16</sup>
Northern Ireland	62% (2010) <sup>17</sup>	55% (2020) <sup>18</sup>
Scotland	67% (2007) <sup>19</sup>	65% (2020) <sup>20</sup>
Wales	47% (2006) <sup>21</sup>	30% (species) 23% (habitats) (2015) <sup>22</sup>

can be said to be effectively managed. While all UK countries have failed to meet the target and all have presided over a decline in condition, the UK wide figure does mask a high degree of variation. Scotland, for example, has the largest percentage of its land designated (18%), and the highest percentage of that land in favourable condition.

At sea the last decade has seen considerable progress in increasing the area of our seas designated as protected areas, and on paper the UK now has protected areas covering more than 10% of its seas, with sites covering a quarter of UK waters. However, effective management of UK's marine protected areas is severely lacking, especially in offshore waters<sup>24</sup>. **Management measures have only been fully implemented in 10% of marine sites, and only 13% of sites have full monitoring in place<sup>25</sup>**, meaning that here too the UK is failing the target.

**Why?** In the absence of **clear and legally binding domestic targets** on the extent or condition of protected areas on land and at sea, all four Governments of the UK have failed to prioritise protected areas.

Governments have made significant cuts to the **resources** available for their identification, designation, monitoring and management. For example, in England spending on protected area monitoring on land has fallen from around £2 million at the start of the decade to £700,000 in 2019<sup>26</sup> and in Scotland from £1.1 million in 2010 to £265,000 in 2019<sup>27</sup>. In Scotland, these cuts have left each staff member monitoring approximately 250,000 hectares of protected areas each, 100,000 hectares more than the size of all the RSPB's reserves combined<sup>28</sup>.

While there has been considerable progress with site designation (especially at sea), the large-scale failure to **monitor** sites both on land and at sea means that data on their condition is either absent, partial

or significantly out of date. In both England and Scotland, over 50% of SSSIs have not been monitored in the last six years. In Northern Ireland this figure rises to 74% and in Wales the most recent data we are aware of on SSSI condition is from 2006.

Even where problems with condition have been identified, there has been neither the political will nor the resources to address these. The main causes of poor condition are well-known. On land, the main causes are water and air pollution (especially from agriculture), inappropriate land management including overgrazing and intensive grouse moor management, and invasive species. At sea, climate change and unsustainable fisheries activity are the key drivers. Yet, the statutory agencies charged with protecting and restoring protected areas have faced reductions in resources and have been either unwilling or unable to use their extensive powers to tackle these drivers of decline. For example, Natural England has only brought two prosecutions under laws to protect SSSIs in the last six years<sup>29</sup> and, as far as we know, has only used its powers to enforce appropriate SSSI management once in the last 20 years<sup>30</sup>.



Mark Hamblin (rspb-images.com)

### 3. Financing (Aichi target 20)

*“By 2020, at the latest, the mobilization of financial resources for effectively implementing the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 from all sources, and in accordance with the consolidated and agreed process in the Strategy for Resource Mobilization, should increase substantially from the current levels. This target will be subject to changes contingent to resource needs assessments to be developed and reported by Parties.”*

**UK Sixth National Report  
Assessment: Progress towards  
target but at an insufficient rate**

**RSPB Assessment: Moving away  
from the target**

#### What is happening?

Ultimately, our ability to act to conserve the UK's nature is constrained by resources. Since 2006, Defra have done considerable analysis to understand the amount of resources needed to achieve our biodiversity targets - both in terms of quantity and quality of priority habitats and priority species actions. Annual management, restoration and compensation costs amount to approximately £2.9 billion for the UK. This is equivalent to the aggregate annual subsidy UK farming has received through the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. While funding for nature conservation increased up to 2008, it never reached levels commensurate with funding needs, and has since declined<sup>31</sup>. According to the Government's own figures, there has been a substantial **decline**

**in public sector spending on biodiversity in the UK which has fallen by 29%**, from £641 million between 2012/13 to £456 million in 2017/18<sup>32</sup>. **This corresponds to a tiny proportion, 0.02%, of UK GDP.**

As UK consumption and the resources we demand increase, so does our impact on nature globally. Our land footprint overseas currently amounts to a staggering equivalent 88% of the total UK land area<sup>33</sup>, driving deforestation and other damaging effects. While UK public sector funding of international biodiversity has increased 111% over the last five years (£205 million), our contribution to global efforts is comparably small against the collective effort required (US\$ 76 billion<sup>34</sup> estimated in 2012) if we are going to successfully achieve our current and future targets.

**Why?** Substantial funding cuts were made in the wake of the financial crisis in the context of historic underfunding of conservation action. Added to the decline in public finance, leveraging of private finance is hindered by a lack of statutory or compliance-based frameworks. The major source of biodiversity funding has always been through the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, yet the bulk of this funding has been directed towards production and supply objectives which have frequently undermined the underlying biodiversity upon which food productivity depends. Leaving the EU gives us the ability to redirect future subsidies, essentially paid for through UK taxation, towards achieving environmental outcomes, which achieve biodiversity targets and ensure a sustainable future for UK farming.







## Making the next decade count: an action agenda for nature

**It is clear that the approach taken in the UK to achieving its nature targets – including neglect of basic monitoring and compliance, a reliance on voluntary approaches and unwillingness to regulate, and dwindling public resources for action – has comprehensively failed. Only a total re-set will do.**

There is abundant evidence that by making the UK a wilder, healthier, place to live, we will also boost the economy, improve our shared well-being, tackle climate change and make our buildings, infrastructure, farming and fishing industries more resilient for the future. This is a vision that inspires millions of people, and which polling shows is hugely popular across generational and political divides. There has never been a better or more urgent time to act.

By putting our commitment to reviving nature into law, and backing this up with transformative policy changes in key areas, we will also unleash the energy of the whole of society – of rewilders, farmers, business and community leaders, gardeners, and school children – all of whom have their part to play in making a more nature-rich world.

We need our leaders, the Prime Minister and the First Ministers, to answer these calls to action and respond to the nature and climate emergency, committing to drive change from the top. This cannot be a once a decade issue. It needs to be central to our political strategies and reach across the whole of government.

The steps outlined below will help to make good on claims to international leadership and turn the UK from a country of nature-lovers, to a country where nature truly thrives.

### **1. Ambitious global and domestic targets for nature recovery.** We must commit to act for nature.

Globally through the CBD negotiations in 2021 we need a commitment, by 2030, to halt and start to reverse the loss of all biodiversity and to put nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of all people and the planet. This goal needs to be underpinned by ambitious targets for species and habitats recovery, and a framework that sets tangible actions to tackle the drivers of biodiversity loss. To ensure a decade of success, we must focus on committing resources and financing to implement the targets, mainstream our national plans for nature across all of





government, and develop more accountable and transparent reporting. Without this the world will agree yet another set of targets with no concrete commitment to delivering them.

Nationally, all four countries of the UK should seize the opportunity to take world leading action and put in place robust, legally binding, long-term targets to achieve nature's recovery within a generation. Such targets can drive action by making our national commitments binding, visible to all, part of a long-term vision, and owned across governments. They must comprise outcome measures of the state of nature including species population abundance and distribution, extinction risk, and habitat extent and condition, and could adopt a 'failure on one, failure on them all' approach. To be successful, these targets need to be underpinned by milestones, appropriate policy instruments, and supported by monitoring systems to track progress.

## **2. A UK-wide 30% by 2030 commitment for effectively protected and managed areas** We must make our protected areas work for wildlife.

They need to be big, connected, and bursting with life<sup>35</sup>. That means making the recovery of the natural world central to their protection and management. On land, the inclusion of National Parks, AONBs and NSAs within this figure will only be appropriate if these places are transformed into exemplars of thriving landscapes, where we can see populations of wildlife recovering and ecosystems coming back to life. These places should be the very best – which means their condition should be better, not worse, than the rest of our SSSI network. We need to see significant improvements in the actual performance of protected areas (e.g. in England up to 75% of sites in favourable condition by 2043, with 5-yearly milestones, from a current baseline of 38.6%)<sup>36</sup>, and an expanded protected area network.

The UK's marine environment is home to some of the most diverse habitats and species in Europe, and the waters around our UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies hold wildlife populations of global importance, such as breeding populations of albatross. Accordingly, we have taken world-leading steps to substantially increase the area of these special places that are protected. Yet as on land our MPAs are not yet well managed for nature. To prevent degradation and continue to drive recovery, our marine protected areas also need to be actively managed and monitored effectively, and we need plans in

place to steer damaging developments away from sensitive areas.

Good condition will not only mean our protected areas deliver for nature, but they can also help to tackle the climate crisis<sup>37</sup> as our best places for nature; peatlands, nature rich woodlands, extensive grasslands, and coastal mudflats and saltmarsh, are crucial for storing carbon. If we target effort in the right places, we will make a major contribution to tackling both the climate and ecological emergency.

## **3. Strong UK fisheries bill and implementation**

We must focus on resilience and recovery of marine ecosystems.

We know we are continuing to fish our seas beyond their limits and are not on track to deliver healthy seas by 2020. Significant change is needed to help restore our fish stocks to healthy and sustainable levels. The Fisheries Bill is a once in a generation opportunity for the UK government and devolved administrations to achieve real and lasting change on our waters as we leave the EU and become an independent coastal state<sup>38</sup>. The Bill, currently in the House of Commons, could provide ministers with the opportunity to chart a new course towards recovery. Governments must use these new post-Brexit powers to introduce and enforce fisheries management measures in offshore marine protected areas as soon as possible. We also need regulation and funding that accelerates a shift to lower impact fishing, and support for methods that aim to minimise damage to habitats and bycatch of vulnerable species, such as monitoring with cameras that can fully document our fisheries so we can take targeted and informed actions.

## **4. Fundamental reform of agriculture and food policy** We must grasp the opportunity to do things differently.

The emergence of a new generation of nature-friendly farmers offers a unique opportunity to put the UK at the forefront of the transition to a new, truly sustainable model of food production and land-use, that enables the recovery of nature and helps mitigate and adapt to climate change. But to make this a reality, we need to see farm payments systems that truly rewards these farmers by paying them for the great work they do for nature, rather than rewarding people based on the land they own.

**5. A substantial increase in funding** We must commit resources to delivering nature recovery.

Committing resources is essential if the UK is serious about meeting its domestic commitments and leading on the global stage. Given that the drivers of biodiversity loss have only increased, and funding has decreased, we need to see an increase of spending to beyond the levels seen in 2008. For example, we estimate that over the next ten years, we need to spend a total of £2.9 billion annually on environmental land management, including £615 million each year on restoration and creation of natural habitats<sup>39</sup>. This estimate of need is equivalent to the collective annual subsidies currently paid to UK agriculture through the flawed EU Common Agricultural Policy. Transformed to reward farmers for the appropriate work they do for nature, it would enable the UK to achieve its habitat and species targets whilst contributing to a sustainable farming future. Specifically, it would fund support for farmers to deliver environmental improvements; capital spending on habitat restoration, including nature-based solutions to climate change; investment to modernise monitoring and enforcement of environmental progress; and improved funding for bodies that protect nature in the public interest. Much, though not all, of this funding could be secured through

reform of the existing farm payments systems, coupled with intelligent use of planning gain policies, and more effective use of budgets such as flood risk management support; it the government puts in place the right regulatory and policy drivers. If designed effectively, this public investment would also unlock billions in private sector finance.

## UK Progress Towards the Aichi Targets

The table below is a comparison between the UK Government’s assessment of progress across the four countries of the UK and the RSPB’s assessment. There are several targets where we feel progress has been over-estimated or feel the data does not support the conclusion made. The targets highlighted in blue are the ones we felt as an organisation we had significant expertise and evidence to be able to comment. We have collated evidence to support our assessment in a supporting document.

- Green:** Meeting or exceeding the target
- Amber:** progress towards the target at an insufficient rate
- Red:** no progress or moving away from the target
- Grey:** Insufficient data to draw a conclusion
- White:** Not included in RSPB assessment

Aichi Target <small>Blue = RSPB assessed    White = not included in RSPB assessment</small>	UK sixth national report	The RSPB’s own assessment
Target 1 – Communication and Awareness		
Target 2 – Biodiversity Values into National Plans		
Target 3 – Eliminate Harmful Subsidies		
Target 4 – Sustainable Production and Consumption		
Target 5 – Halve Rate of Habitat Loss and Degradation		
Target 6 – Sustainable Fish Stocks		
Target 7 – Sustainable Agriculture, Aquaculture and Forestry		
Target 8 – Tackle Pollution		
Target 9 – Invasive Alien Species		
Target 10 – Coral Reefs		
Target 11 – Effective Protected Areas, 17% Land and 10% Sea		
Target 12 – Species Extinctions and Populations		
Target 13 – Genetic Diversity		
Target 14 – Ecosystem Services		
Target 15 – Carbon Stocks, 15% Restoration, and Resilience		
Target 16 – Nagoya Protocol		
Target 17 – National Biodiversity Strategy		
Target 18 – Indigenous People and Local Communities		
Target 19 – Knowledge and Technology		
Target 20 – Mobilise Financial Resources		





David Tilling (spb-images.com)

## Endnotes

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