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tackling the nature crisis in the UK

Peter Jones looks at some of the recent policy measures and initiatives aimed at tackling the nature crisis

Pollution is one of many significant drivers of the global nature crisis

For many, climate change and the nature crisis are closely linked. Van Griffiths, Deputy Director for Sustainable Business at England's Environment Agency, for example, has argued that the 'two emergencies are inextricably linked, and that we need to play our part in tackling them together—with urgency—as part of the Agency's mission to create better places for people, wildlife and the environment'.[1] However, the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority,[2] an organisation closer to nature than most, has claimed that 'the nature crisis is as crucial as the climate emergency. The two are closely interlinked but the nature crisis is a distinct and crucial challenge in its own right which requires a specific and targeted response.' With this in mind, this article offers a review of some of the recent policy measures and initiatives developed to tackle the nature crisis.

Nature—a global crisis

While there is growing recognition in the UK of the nature crisis, it is very much a global crisis. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) reported that 'nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history, and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating with grave impacts on people around the world now likely'.[3] Equally ominously, Sir Robert Watson, Chair of IPBES, has claimed that 'the health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.'[3]

There seems to be a broad consensus on the principal causes of the global nature crisis. A typical assessment has been offered by the United Nations

Environment Programme,[4] which identified the 'five major drivers of biodiversity loss' as 'changes in land and sea use', 'climate change', 'pollution', 'direct exploitation of natural resources', and 'invasive species'. More specifically, it identified the ways that people use the land and the sea as the major drivers of biodiversity loss, including the conversion of forests, wetlands and other natural habitats for agricultural and urban use, and the harvesting of minerals from the ocean floor.

Pollution has a particularly devastating effect on freshwater and marine habitats. Marine plastic pollution has increased dramatically since 1980, and has affected a range of animal species, including marine turtles, seabirds, whales, dolphins, and porpoises. At the same time, plant and insect populations continue to decline because of the commercial use of insecticides.

The WWF's *Living Planet Report 2022*[5] noted that:

'Nature loss is now rarely perceived as a purely moral or ecological issue, with a broadened sense of its vital importance to our economy, social stability, individual well-being and health, and as a matter of justice. The most vulnerable populations are already the most affected by environmental damage, and we are leaving a terrible legacy to our children and future generations to come.'

It emphasised that 'we need a global plan for nature, as we have for climate'. In working towards such a plan, the WWF suggested that following the climate model by pursuing net-zero loss for nature was 'certainly not enough', and that what is required is 'a nature- or net-positive goal to restore nature and not simply halt its loss'. The plan would set 'a measurable and time-bound global goal for nature', it would be 'agreed globally and implemented locally', and, arguably more elusively, it would be a plan 'that unites the world in dealing with this existential challenge'.[5]

Addressing the UK's nature crisis

The scale and the extent of the nature crisis in the UK has been clearly spelt out in a variety of arenas. The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee,[6] for example, described the UK as 'one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world', and reported that '15 percent of UK species are threatened with extinction' and that 'of the G7 countries, the UK has the lowest level of biodiversity remaining'. More specifically, the Environment Agency[7] reported that, over time:

'Large areas of habitats have been lost, with 99.7% of fens, 97% of species-rich grasslands, 80% of lowland heathlands, up to 70% of ancient woodlands, and up to 85% of saltmarshes destroyed or degraded. The impacts on species have been severe, with a quarter of mammals in

England and almost a fifth of UK plants threatened with extinction. A third of British pollinator species have declined.'

The State of Nature Partnership[8] emphasised that:

'there has been growing recognition of the value of nature, including its role in tackling climate change, and the need for its conservation among the public and policymakers alike [but] despite progress in ecosystem restoration, conserving species, and moving towards nature-friendly land and sea use, the UK's nature and wider environment continues, overall, to decline and degrade.'

In a critique of proposed changes to UK Government legislation on the environment, Friends of the Earth[9] argued that 'the destruction of nature is insidiously weakening the life-support systems we need to survive'.

A variety of policy measures and initiatives have been proposed and introduced to tackle the nature crisis within the UK. Measures and initiatives outlined here are drawn from various parts of the UK, and, while some of their constituent elements are focused upon specific problems, the majority look to address a number of general objectives. The aim here is simply to summarise, and provide some illustrative details of, a variety of these measures and initiatives, but not to examine their respective merits, nor to champion one, or more, of them.

In July 2023, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced the launch of six new 'nature recovery' projects across England, led by Natural England and the government with the overall aim of strengthening the existing national Nature Recovery Network and showcasing the delivery of nature recovery at scale. These projects will be supported by £7.4 million of public funding and will cover some 176,000 hectares. The aim is 'to create improved and better-connected habitats for wildlife and improve public access to nature'.[10] The six projects embrace habitat creation in the eastern Eden Valley, in Cumbria; wetlands across Lancashire and Cheshire; nature recovery in the Tees Estuary; restoring, enhancing and connecting heathlands in Surrey; peatland restoration around Bradford and the southern Pennines; and integrated habitat and natural flood management from Seaford to Eastbourne, in Sussex and Kent.

The Lancashire and Cheshire wetlands project, for example, extends over 5,000 hectares, and the aim is to restore and re-wet a mosaic of wetland habitats in southern Greater Manchester and North Cheshire, previously lost to industrialisation, urbanisation, and agricultural intensification. A network of wetlands will be restored to provide habitats for a number of what were once local animal and plant species, including large heath butterflies, bog bush-crickets, the white-faced darter

Habitat creation for curlews is one of the aims of the 'East of Eden' project in Cumbria

dragonflies, hare's-tail cotton grass, and cross-leaved heath.

The 'East of Eden' project stretches over 100,000 hectares, covering fertile farmland in the Eden Valley, the western slopes of the northern Pennines, and up into the high moorland. Here, the aim is to support land managers in creating habitats for curlew, black grouse, the wart-biter bush-cricket, the twite, and the Teesdale violet, and to introduce natural flood management measures designed to reduce the risk of flooding and improve carbon absorption.

The Scottish Government's Biodiversity Strategy, subtitled *Tackling the Nature Emergency in Scotland*,[11] was published in December 2022. The strategy sets out a framework for the Scottish Government's response to the crisis, and proposes a series of key actions designed to deliver a vision for the restoration of Scotland's natural environment and for supporting wildlife. The framework is to be underpinned by an investment plan that will identify potential funding sources for biodiversity restoration, develop a market for responsible investment in biodiversity restoration, drive efficiency in the use of public funds, and encourage partnership projects.

In focusing on halting biodiversity loss and working towards 'nature-positive' outcomes, the strategy includes a number of priority actions — accelerating restoration and regeneration; expanding Scotland's protected areas to cover at least 30% of the land surface; fostering nature-friendly farming, fishing and forestry; and recovering and protecting vulnerable and important species.

In addressing nature-friendly farming, fishing and forestry, for example, there is a recognition that farming, fisheries, aquaculture and forestry must be managed more sustainably. More specifically, the strategy aims to ensure that measures are put in place 'to ensure that farming practices result in increased uptake of high diversity, nature-rich, high soil carbon, low intensity farming methods, while sustaining high quality food production'.[11] The strategy will also look to ensure that productive forests and woodlands are managed in ways that deliver increased biodiversity and habitat connectivity.

In the wake of the *State of Nature Report, Wales 2019*,[12] which painted a picture of the decline of nature within Wales, WWF Cymru published *Wales's Nature Crisis: Recommendations for an Immediate Emergency Response*.[13] The report centred on four policy themes — ambition, innovation, collaboration, and knowledge — which each included a number of policy recommendations for the Welsh Government. These recommendations cover a range of scales, and WWF Cymru emphasised that they will need to be implemented across government through different mechanisms.

One of the recommendations under the policy theme of ambition, for example, addresses agricultural pollution, and here the argument is that the level of avoidable agricultural pollution is a significant threat to nature. WWF Cymru argues that tackling these pollution problems would deliver huge biodiversity benefits, by supporting the recovery of freshwater ecosystems and fisheries; and more generally that the Welsh Government

should have the ambition to lead a culture in which no avoidable pollution is acceptable. Under the knowledge theme, two policy instruments are highlighted, namely incorporating the ecosystem approach and the relationship between nature recovery and wellbeing within the education system in Wales, and requiring all public officials in Wales to undergo training on the relationship between nature and wellbeing.

The creation and publication of the *People's Plan for Nature*[14] represents a different approach to the nature crisis from those discussed above, in that it is the output from a large-scale public conversation about people's perceptions of nature and its future within the UK. The plan was developed through 'a creative, innovative and inclusive participatory process'[14] that involved two phases. The first phase was an open call, conducted over social media in the autumn of 2022, for ideas and responses from the public, which led to some 30,000 responses drawn from throughout the UK. The second phase centred on the 'People's Assembly for Nature',[14] which involved four weekend sessions, two held in person in Birmingham and two conducted online.

The assembly led to 26 calls to action, embracing vision and leadership; regulation and implementation; nature-friendly farming; food production and consumption; marine protection for coastal waters; waterway and catchment management; local access to nature; and using evidence effectively. In addressing regulation and implementation, for example, the assembly called for 'greater government accountability through a permanent Assembly for Nature made up of NGOs, industry and public expertise',[14] while one of the calls to action on food production and consumption was for 'a national conversation on how and why we should change our diets to support nature'.[13]

Concluding reflections

This article has outlined a number of the recent policies and initiatives proposed, and introduced, to tackle the UK's nature crisis. While each has its own distinctive characteristics, some general themes — including partnership and collaboration, the need for increased funding, and sustainable development — appear regularly. All three will surely be vitally important in taking the policies and initiatives forward. However, two wider issues — namely the role that planning might, or might not, play in helping to solve the nature crisis, and the underlying causes of that crisis — merit concluding reflection.

First, nature is often popularly seen as central to the planning system, but the reality is rather different. On the one hand, England's National Planning Policy Framework[15] holds that 'planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment', and many conservation and community organisations have argued that nature should be at the heart of the planning process. On the other hand, much that would be classed as nature lies outside the purview of the planning system — not least in that, while

current agricultural management practices are the main drivers of biodiversity change in the UK as a whole, the planning system has limited scope to intervene, with government responsibilities for the management of farmland lying with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

More generally, Hobbs *et al.*,[16] writing under the banner of the Institute for Public Policy Research, argued that the planning system is not set up to support 'the delivery of […] nature restoration' and that 'housing is generally identified as the key place where the planning system is failing, but this focus on housing alone means that the way the planning system interacts with nature and environment avoids scrutiny'.

Secondly, in addressing the nature crisis, Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, argued that we need to understand 'what's causing it'.[17] In one way, it is difficult to argue with what seems a simple logical approach. A variety of development pressures, including agricultural intensification, continuing urban expansion into the countryside, and the development of forests and wetlands for agricultural, tourism and urban use, are widely cited as being among the causes of the nature crisis, and as such they would seem to hint at specific solutions.

However, there are alternative explanations founded in political economy approaches which might argue that, under capitalism, nature is treated as a commodity in the pursuit of economic growth; and thus it is capitalism that is the fundamental cause of the nature crisis. Put simply, the nature crisis can be seen as a crisis of capitalism. But while some Marxist scholars[18] might suggest that solutions to the nature crisis must be rooted in system change and in confronting capitalism, those currently looking to address the nature crisis within UK policy have little or no empathy with such radical change.

●*Peter Jones is an Emeritus Professor in the School of Business, Computing and Social Sciences at the University of Gloucestershire. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes
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