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planning and nature positive



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Earlier this year ‘biodiversity net gain’ became mandatory for all major development in England. This measure is being seen by some commentators as bringing new challenges for planning; heralding the start of an era of nature positive development. Here I outline the concept of nature positive and offer some thoughts on the challenges it poses for development and planning.

‘Nature positive’ emerged from a widespread recognition of the global scale at which nature is being lost and the threat consequent existential threat to humanity. Much of the interest in the concept reflects an early commitment to it by campaigning conservation organisations and more recently by international political initiatives. For example, the COP15 Global Biodiversity Framework, adopted December 2022, seeks to use nature positive approaches to achieve a world living in harmony with nature by 2050.

That said, there is little consensus in defining the concept. The Global Commons Alliance, defines ‘nature positive’ as ‘enhancing the resilience of our planet and societies to halt and reverse nature loss’. Others think that it involves interactions with nature that are restorative and regenerative rather than only extractive or that it means having more nature in the future than we do now. Perhaps more critically, the business research body, GreenBiz, sees it as disruptive – forcing us to think differently about our place in the world – and as a ‘new business model based on regeneration, resilience and recirculation, not destruction and pollution’.¹

Whilst the concept of nature positive may sound attractive, realising its potential seems likely to pose a number of contested challenges for developers and local planning authorities. These challenges include measurement, greenwashing, and the need for systemic change. Developers may have the resources to commission consultants to measure nature gains, but the metrics they choose

to employ may favour their development proposals. Local planning authorities must review and check the metrics submitted by developers, but may not have the resources to effectively discharge such responsibilities.

Greenwashing, namely deceptive and/or false claims to being nature positive, must be recognised as a danger. Unless independently verified, developers may simply be ‘jumping on the nature positive bandwagon’ for their own commercial ends.

More fundamentally, there are also radical views that a nature positive future is dependent upon a shift to a new global economic model, centred on abandoning economic growth and instead prioritising nature and the welfare of the planet. Currently, this vision of the future seems unlikely to commend itself to businesses or governments, and Mace² has questioned the viability of ‘a truly regenerative business model of nature-positive actions’.

Nevertheless, if the dire consequences predicted for biodiversity and nature loss do materialise, possibly sooner rather than later, then alternative economic systems may seem increasingly attractive.

Notes

- 1 DKN Waughray: ‘Why being nature positive is the key to our future’. Webpage. GreenBiz, 1 Jul. 2021. <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/why-being-nature-positive-key-our-future>
- 2 M Mace: ‘Is nature-positive business a possibility or a paradox?’. Webpage. Edie, 15 Jun. 2023. <https://www.edie.net/is-nature-positive-business-a-possibility-or-paradox/>