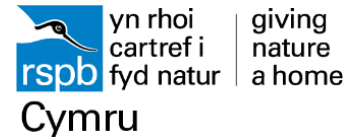


Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd a
Materion Gwledig
Bioamrywiaeth ac Ailwyltuo
CCERA(5) BR 03
Ymateb gan RSPB Cymru

Welsh Parliament
Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs
Committee
Biodiversity and Rewilding
CCERA(5) BR 03
Evidence from RSPB Cymru



RSPB Cymru is part of RSPB, the UK's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home. Together with our partners, we protect threatened birds and wildlife so our towns, coast and countryside will teem with life once again. We play a leading role in BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of nature conservation organisations.

RSPB Cymru has played a key role in supporting the development of the Summit to Sea Project, and is now hosting this project for the current phase of its development.

Summary

- The recovery of nature and the restoration of the resources and services that nature provides, including nature-based solutions, must be central to Wales' Green Recovery.
- In the absence of a domestic framework of nature recovery targets, Wales is failing to deliver against international biodiversity commitments. The outlook – in Wales and globally – is stark. Securing the transformational change we need to restore nature requires a framework of legally binding targets and accountability, building on our existing Welsh laws.
- Future land management policy must focus on the sustainable management of natural resources, to restore healthy ecosystems and biodiversity and secure climate change mitigation and adaptation through nature-based solutions.
- RSPB Cymru is currently hosting the Summit to Sea project. At present this project is in a co-design phase, working alongside communities and a range of stakeholders to explore a vision for a land- and sea- scape where nature and people thrive.

Biodiversity and the green recovery, including current progress against biodiversity targets

Green Recovery

In 2019, the [IPBES Report](#) found that around 1 million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction, many within decades, and called for a “fundamental, system-wide

reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values". Over the last year, the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of our current economic systems and had provoked a re-thinking of 'business as usual' to rebuild a system more resilient to the expected shocks of the climate and biodiversity crisis.

In Wales, the pandemic has shown the Welsh Government's willingness to fundamentally rethink existing economic systems under a 'Green Recovery', and ahead of elections next year there has been a collective call for continued commitments to a green – and just – recovery¹. There is clear evidence that a Green Recovery can deliver economic recovery while setting the framework for a fairer and healthier society.²

A healthy natural environment is a critical foundation for long-term societal and economic benefits. Ecosystems can and do provide essential 'services', such as holding flood water, storing carbon, supplying clean air and water. The connection between access to nature and public health has long been recognised. An investment in our natural environment, supported by employment opportunities in large scale nature restoration, provides a unique opportunity to respond to the economic impacts of the current public health crisis and help Wales transition to a new, sustainable, economy.

Crucially, Wales' Green Recovery must drive meaningful actions to prepare for and respond to the climate and nature emergency, and build back the carbon-zero, nature-rich, resilient Wales that was envisaged under the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Nature-based Solutions

Nature-based solutions are a priority of the Natural Resources Policy (NRP) to address the climate crisis and the catastrophic loss of biodiversity. Nature-based solutions have a crucial role both in the mitigation of climate change (i.e. taking Carbon out of the atmosphere) and in helping people and nature adapt to change (e.g. through improved retention of water in landscapes). An investment in nature-based solutions as part of a Green Recovery therefore remains crucial in securing our social, environmental, and economic well-being. Examples include:

Peatland restoration: This includes blocking and reprofiling drainage ditches, felling and removing inappropriately located forestry (also provides an income from removed timber. Post restoration sustainable grazing of peatlands can provide income through food production of high quality naturally fed meat. There is also potential to explore other methods of sustainable production from peatlands that could provide income without damaging the underlying habitat.

Woodlands: Bringing the large area of unmanaged woodland in Wales back into active sustainable management can, as well as providing income from harvested wood products, make habitats better connected and more resilient to climate change impacts. There is also the potential for sustainable grazing of woodlands to provide additional income; establishing what sustainable grazing of woodlands looks like is something RSPB Cymru is working on at the moment through the Celtic Rainforests LIFE Project. Led by Snowdonia National Park Authority the project is focussed on restoration of some of our most important woodlands, but is also looking at the potential to establish 'payment for ecosystem services' (PES)

¹ See RSPB Green Recovery Manifesto:

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/getinvolved/wales/b/wales-blog/posts/the-future-is-green>

² Will COVID-19 fiscal recovery packages accelerate or retard progress on climate change? Hepburn C et al, 4th May 2020. Oxford Uni

opportunities and how sustainable grazing could be part of the management toolkit for woodland sites.

Focusing woodland expansion, through the National Forest Programme and grant funded woodland expansion through Glastir Woodland Creation schemes, on buffering and connecting existing woodlands can both improve the resilience of woodland habitats through greater connectivity and protect them from the impact of external factors such as airborne pollution and encroachment of INNS. Ensuring these woodlands are well designed and managed to provide the maximum range of possible benefits/services including biodiversity benefits, carbon capture and storage, flood alleviation where appropriate and access and recreation opportunities is critical. This must be done in a way that avoids placing further pressure on already struggling nature. If well designed and managed sustainably these woodlands can also provide an income through harvested wood products, payments for carbon capture and storage such as the Woodland Carbon Code and potentially through post Brexit land management support where the focus is on delivery of public goods.

As with peatlands and woodlands there is the potential for restoration of other habitats including coastal saltmarsh, heathland, meadows and wetlands to support climate mitigation and adaptation, help biodiversity recover and also provide income. Whether through contract work for restoration and the ongoing management of the habitats through sustainable livestock grazing, future support through public goods delivery and the potential for the increased access and recreation opportunities to attract additional income to the local economy.

Biodiversity targets

We have welcomed the Welsh Government's support of the Edinburgh Declaration³, under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The Declaration emphasises the critical role of sub-national governments under the CBD and calls for transformative change to turn around biodiversity decline.

The [Global Biodiversity Outlook Report](#)⁴ published last month concluded that the UK – and the rest of the world - has failed to take sufficient action to reverse nature's decline. The [UK's Sixth National Report](#)⁵ to the CBD (prepared by JNCC on behalf of the four administrations) showed the UK will miss 14 out of the 20 Aichi Targets. The RSPB's [Lost Decade Report](#)⁶ found an even worse picture. The [State of Nature 2019](#)⁷ Report highlights that 1 in 6 species in Wales are threatened with extinction, and the 2016 State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) concluded that none of our ecosystems are resilient.

Decades of international targets under the CBD have not been able to drive the action needed to stop the loss of biodiversity in Wales. The international framework of the UNIPCC has led to decarbonisation targets being set, and reviewed, in domestic law. The international recognition of the nature crisis and calls for transformative change must similarly be met with improvements in domestic ambition and accountability – i.e. **legally binding nature recovery targets.**

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/edinburgh-declaration-on-post-2020-biodiversity-framework/>

⁴ <https://www.cbd.int/gbo/gbo5/publication/gbo-5-spm-en.pdf>

⁵ <https://data.jncc.gov.uk/data/527ff89f-5f6b-4e06-bde6-b823e0ddcb9a/UK-CBD-6NR-v2-web.pdf>

⁶ http://ww2.rspb.org.uk/Images/A%20LOST%20DECADE%20FOR%20NATURE_tcm9-481563.pdf

⁷ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/state-of-nature-report/#:~:text=The%202019%20State%20of%20Nature,Arctic%20skuas%20and%20Scottish%20wildcats.>

The Environment (Wales) Act requires an integrated approach to managing natural resources in order to improve the resilience of our ecosystems and the benefits they provide us. The framework for the sustainable management of natural resources set out in the Act involves an iterative approach – evidence (the State of Natural Resources Report/ SoNaRR) informs policy (the Natural Resources Policy) which should drive delivery (including via Area Statements). However, the framework does not set out what success looks like – what progress must be made, in the longer term and in a five year cycle, to assess whether we are on track to turn around nature’s decline before it is too late?

As we have for decarbonisation, we need both long-term targets and five-yearly milestones against which the Welsh Government can be held to account for nature’s recovery. If a milestone is not met, Government will need to analyse and explain why, and effect the necessary policy and regulatory changes to address this.

Natural resources (including biodiversity) and the aspects of resilience of ecosystems set out in the Environment (Wales) Act provide a framing to identify the appropriate targets.

The UK Government’s Environment Bill, currently on its passage through Westminster, places duties on the Secretary of State to set targets for England, including biodiversity targets, in secondary legislation. We want to see a similar approach in Wales – a time-bound duty on the Welsh Minister to set targets via secondary legislation to enhance the framework that already exists under the Environment (Wales) Act. The opportunity of promised legislation on post-Brexit environmental principles and governance should be used to bring forward a target setting framework, securing greater Welsh Government accountability for turning around biodiversity decline in line with international commitments.

Nature targets will be key to monitoring whether a green recovery is being successfully delivered, and public investment is securing the right results. For example, the CCERA Committee has recognised the importance of specific targets for biodiversity restoration in relation to monitoring the effectiveness and value for money of the future Sustainable Farming Scheme⁸ in its 2019 report on the role of the scheme in restoring biodiversity. Targets set in law will provide stability across successive governments, giving clear context for public delivery and innovation by business.

Biodiversity and rewilding in the context of the future of land management policy proposals

‘Rewilding’ is a term that is diversely described and understood, and has proved divisive in Wales. Our understanding is that the objective of rewilding is to restore nature and natural processes. This is an objective we support, and which we consider can be achieved through a range of approaches e.g. restoring peatlands, connecting and buffering woodlands, targeted conservation actions and high nature value farming aimed at restoring and maintaining habitats.

Being a potentially confusing term, rewilding should not in itself be an objective for Wales’ future land use policy. Instead, future policy should be firmly grounded in Wales existing legislative framework, as established in the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, and focus on securing the sustainable management of natural resources (SMNR) – the objective of which is to maintain and enhance the resilience of ecosystems and the benefits they provide. It should be an effective means of delivering the priorities of Welsh Government’s Natural

⁸ <https://www.assembly.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld12831/cr-ld12831%20-e.pdf>

Resources Policy (NRP) to restore nature and tackle climate change, in particular through nature-based solutions.

Future land management policy should also promote sustainable production by (a) driving supply chain efficiencies and (b) by restoring the nature and natural resources essential to maintain production (including of food) for this and future generations.

Farm businesses should be encouraged to work *with* nature and operate within the natural carrying capacity of the land. The [Less is More Report](#) shows that many farms can be more profitable by reducing stock, which can also lead to environmental benefits, from boosting soil health and the ability of land to hold back floodwaters, to locking in carbon and increasing biodiversity. Since the advent of the CAP sheep numbers in Wales increased from 5 to 12 million before dropping to 9.6 million today. Despite sheep numbers being at historically high levels hill farming in Wales is largely unprofitable with many farm businesses running at a loss when subsidies are not taken into account. Applying the Less is More approach to upland farming in Wales has the potential to deliver benefits to nature and farming.⁹

To ensure future farming and land management policy delivers maximum benefit to the public it should be based on the principle of public money for public goods, principally environmental public goods. As such all future payments for land management should be based on the value the public derives from it.

Ongoing biodiversity loss and the continued fall in the number of Welsh farms¹⁰ indicate a failure of existing land management policy (i.e. the CAP) to protect nature and the communities depending on it. Leaving the EU presents a unique opportunity to develop integrated policies and practises that help restore and maintain farming (and land management), rural communities and nature, and delivers value for public money.

Summit to Sea

Our work as partners in, and now hosts of, the Summit to Sea project in mid Wales offer RSPB Cymru the opportunity to explore the potential of sustainable farming and broader land management practises which create a future in which a resilient ecosystem and local economy can help both nature and communities recover and thrive. At present this project is in a co-design phase, working alongside communities and a range of stakeholders to explore a vision for a land- and sea- scape where nature and people thrive. This process will last until at least June 2022, and is about holding an open conversation with those whose futures depend on the resilience of the ecosystems and economy to thrive. By co-designing solutions to challenges together this project hopes to create an inspiring vision embedded in the locality and culture. The RSPB's involvement in this project is to ensure this co-design phase succeeds, and we're looking forward to the vision, emerging themes and potential interventions that develop from this process.

⁹ RSPB Report; [Farming, the environment and the Welsh Uplands](#)

¹⁰ e.g. the total number of active farm holdings in Wales has reduced by 830 since 2013 (*Ref Agriculture in Wales, 2019, Welsh Government*)