



Sustainable Development Goals and World Wetlands Day

January 2020

- **SDG progress is stalled. A joined-up approach is needed to fully achieve any of the Goals: Agenda 30 was designed to be interconnected – but the current approach is fractured.**
- **Natural climate solutions can help achieve multiple Goals and reflect the interconnectedness of climate change and biodiversity in both rural and urban areas.**
- **Ministers should show decisive action in protecting wetlands and coasts by rejecting the [Coul Links](#) application so it does not set a precedent for unsustainable development.**

As we enter 2020, the crucial year for action on the climate, the environment, and sustainability, the Trust believes that:

- No single Sustainable Development Goal can be fully achieved without all Goals being achieved. However, the Oxfam-UWS led SDG review finds that progress has been slow, while **some Goals are in a worse state** than in 2015.
- The Scottish Government has actively promoted the Year for Coasts and Waters and the SDGs specifically reference wetlands and coasts in multiple Goals. As we celebrate World Wetlands day **Ministers can show action now** by rejecting the damaging application for a golf course at Coul Links – a triple-protected coastal wetland of international importance.
- The Trust authored the chapter on *Life on Land*: Scotland's nature is in net decline with 11% of species at risk of extinction. A step change in narrative, policy, and practice is necessary to reverse this and address the climate emergency. A [follow-up review](#)ⁱ for the Royal Scottish Geographic Society showed the importance of natural climate solutions.
- Tackling Goal 13, *Climate Action*, will require both urgent decarbonising of the economy and changes in land use. **Natural climate solutions** could help achieve multiple Goals: affordable, immediately available, and delivering multiple benefits to people and planet, urban and rural. **They can deliver up to 37% of the emissions mitigation necessary by 2030.**
- The UK Committee on Climate Change said in its recent [progress report](#)ⁱⁱ to the Scottish Parliament that Scotland must take “decisive action to strengthen climate change policy in all parts of the economy” and that decisions taken over the next 12 months “are likely to determine the direction of the next 25 years”.
- These next few months are going to be critical for Scotland if we are to show **global leadership** in our approach to nature, climate change and sustainable development. There will be a letter from Scottish Government to Parliament setting out how we will deliver a step change in biodiversity, a phase 1 report from the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland and an updated Climate Change Plan. This will be followed by the National Planning Framework 4 and Regional Land Use Frameworks.
- It is imperative all this work is ambitious, complementary, and coordinated to deliver the scale of natural climate solutions and land use changes required to meet the biodiversity and climate crises, whilst pursuing radical decarbonising of the economy across every sector.

Background

Life on Land, Life Below Water and *Climate Action* depend on re-orienting our priorities, tackling climate breakdown through natural climate solutions and urgently decarbonising the economy, and taking meaningful action in 2020.

Scotland will welcome the world in 2020, if it expects to lead it must do so by example. In the Year of Coasts and Water and given the unprecedented importance of 2020 for Scotland and the world, now is the time to consider how Scotland's priorities match those of the SDGs.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust contributed the chapter on Goal 15, *Life on Land* to the [Oxfam-UWS review](#)ⁱⁱⁱ of Scotland's progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. One key conclusion of the review is the implementation gap between rhetoric and reality:

Overall, rhetorical commitments and strategies are numerous, and often promising. But it is rare that we see substantial follow-through on those. (*Review of Goal 15: Life on Land*)

...in some cases there is still a sizeable gap between rhetoric and reality. There are fundamental contradictions in policy such as... the expansion off the aquaculture and oil and gas sectors. (*Review of Goal 14: Life Below Water (Marine Conservation Society)*).

Since being written, the Scottish Government has declared a climate emergency, while various Ministers have pointed out the climate interconnections, urgency, and scale of biodiversity loss. Welcome targets have entered law: we now have 10 years to tackle three-quarters of Scotland's domestic emissions pollution, compared to 1990 levels. We welcome the changing narrative around climate breakdown and biodiversity loss, but we still require clear, joined-up action commensurate with the scale of the crisis. **The Trust would welcome less debate on targets, and more debate on how to scale up action for a just transition.**

The 2019-2020 Programme for Government contained some welcome but limited announcements for biodiversity. [These do no match](#) the rhetoric of the Scottish Government, nor the ambition necessary to contend with the interrelated climate and biodiversity emergencies. 2020 must be the year actions match words.

Goal 15 | Life on Land

The Goal 15 review recognises that Scotland's ecological footprint is unsustainable: If everyone were to live as we do it would require three planets. We urgently encourage a transition to One-Planet Prosperity thinking, as the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency acknowledges, to limit the burden of ecological debt we pass on to future generations.

The [2019 State of Nature Report](#)^{iv} highlights that "there has been no let-up in the net loss of nature in Scotland", while 49% of species have decreased in abundance and 11% are threatened with extinction. The global picture is similar:

The biosphere, upon which humanity as a whole depends, is being altered to an unparalleled degree across all spatial scales. Biodiversity – the diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems – is declining faster than at any time in human history. ([IPBES Global Assessment Report, 2019](#)^v.)



The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, though Scotland is the last haven for some globally rare species now absent or highly threatened elsewhere in the UK, particularly butterflies and moths. This should encourage protection and responsibility, not complacency.

Wetlands receive special mention in the SDGs under Goal 6, *Clean Water and Sanitation* (Target 6.6) and Goal 15, *Life on Land* (Target 15.1). Coastal ecosystems, often supporting wetland habitats, are specifically mentioned in Goal 14 (Targets 14.2 and 14.5). Wetlands form part of a globally interconnected network with multiple benefits for nature and society, including clean water, carbon storage, and biodiversity. Yet a rare, triple-protected site is under threat from development which would permanently damage its features and set a precedent for unsustainable development. To demonstrate their commitments to coasts and waters and show they have learned from previous mistakes, on World Wetlands Day the **Ministers should remove this threat to save the [Coul Links](#)^{vi} site in East Sutherland.**

Life on land and below water is not just a nice-to-have – it is foundational to our life-support systems, from water to soils to food to carbon storage. Scotland’s biodiversity has seen net-decline for decades. This means our attempts to ‘maintain’ biodiversity merely reflect an already depleted baseline. **We urge a step-change in narrative and action to *restore* and *enhance* biodiversity so that nature thrives, and society continues to derive numerous benefits from it.**

Goal 14 | Life Below Water

The oceans play a fundamental role in supporting life on Earth, but [due to human activity](#) and extensive exploitation of its natural resources, the health of marine ecosystems across the globe are in decline and have reached a tipping point^{vii}. [IPBES estimates](#)^{viii} that 66% of the world’s seas have been significantly altered by human activity and, due to increasing atmospheric CO₂ levels, are becoming warmer, more acidic and less productive, sea levels are rising, and the severity of storm events [is increasing](#)^{ix}.

Direct exploitation of marine organisms (particularly fish and shellfish), and changes in how we use the seas and coasts (e.g. for coastal development, offshore aquaculture, and bottom-trawling) have had a significant impact on marine environments across the globe. Meanwhile, climate change is intensifying the impact of other drivers (such as pollution, exploitation, changes in sea-use and invasive species), making the oceans [less resilient to change overall](#)^x.

A [recent assessment](#) of the UK’s progress to achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) for its seas demonstrated that the predominant pressures preventing achievement of GES on a UK-wide scale were commercial fishing and the introduction of marine litter^{xi}. It also highlighted the concerning reality that some descriptors may not achieve GES before 2020 and the societal cost of degradation if it is not achieved. On a national scale, [Scotland’s Marine Atlas](#) (2011) highlighted climate change and commercial fishing activity as the two most widespread and significant impacts on our marine environment^{xii}.

The marine environment in Scottish waters represents [an essential carbon store](#) even greater than peatlands – tackling these drivers of change is essential to maintaining and increasing this. As [the Scottish State of Nature report](#) (p.16) shows, “Protecting and enhancing blue carbon habitats will ensure these stores of carbon are protected, while at the same time enhancing their health”.

Making the connections and taking action

Climate change and biodiversity loss are inextricably interlinked, while the other Goals show the intersectional nature of the crises we face. At their conception, the Sustainable Development Goals were intended to tackle this. The 2030 Agenda declared that **“The Sustainable Development Goals and targets are integrated and indivisible” – we need to achieve all to fully achieve any.**

Natural climate solutions can help bridge connections between biodiversity, climate action, and community engagement. Done sensitively and appropriately, [by restoring nature we can increase the natural stores of greenhouse gas emissions](#)^{xiii} primarily in peatlands and soils, with additional benefits from sensitively restored and regenerated biodiverse woodlands. In urban areas, this includes trees and other green infrastructure, with a focus on proactively engaging local residents and communities of space.

Worldwide, natural climate solutions have the potential to store around 11 billion gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent – up to 37% of the mitigation necessary by 2030 to meet the Paris Agreement targets. Scottish peatlands already store around 140 years’ worth of current emissions – but with 80% degraded, much of this is being emitted. As a result of historic and continuing damage, **peatlands are a net-loss of carbon dioxide equivalent.** This must be reversed. The UK Committee on Climate Change recommended a 2045 net-zero target for Scotland, 5 years ahead of the rest of the UK, based on its unique capacity for natural climate solutions.

The Trust has previously [outlined](#)^{xiv} how biodiversity and climate breakdown are inextricably interlinked. With that comes the ability to target both crises: protect, enhance, and restore biodiversity so it can help store carbon away in better-functioning soils, in growing trees and restored peatlands. Neither crisis can ignore the other.

Natural climate solutions are already set to be discussed at the UN COP15 in China, with the host country saying a new deal must include natural climate solutions^{xv}. [Nationwide action](#) is already taking place around the world^{xvi}. In Scotland, “grow more trees” was a popular action at the *Big Climate Conversation*. Scotland is uniquely well-placed for these actions and existing carbon storage is most effective in the most biodiverse regions with greater above-ground biomass. As such, natural solutions tackle both the biodiversity and climate emergencies, while delivering a wide range of cost-saving services and public goods.

Community engagement is essential to build knowledge about the kind of green transformations people want to see. Moreover, engaging people in the restoration of local spaces, including urban projects, instils a greater sense of environmental care, and channels urgently needed action without individualising responsibility.

Natural climate solutions deliver more than carbon storage: they help alleviate flooding, provide green urban infrastructure, improve resilience to environmental change, provide spaces for recreation, and help alleviate spend elsewhere by improving mental and physical health. This would help address the current underperformance in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in a coordinated, systemic way.

These next few months are going to be critical for Scotland if we are to show global leadership in our approach to nature, climate change and sustainable development. The independent UK Committee on Climate Change said in its recent [progress report](#) to the Scottish Parliament that “Scotland must



match the ambition of its world-leading Net Zero 2045 target with decisive action to strengthen climate change policy in all parts of the economy.” They were also clear in highlighting that decisions over the course of the next year “are likely to determine the direction of the next 25 years”.

In the first four months of 2020 we will see a letter from Scottish Government to Parliament explaining how we will deliver a step change in biodiversity, a phase 1 report from the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland on our 30-year strategy for infrastructure investment and an updated Climate Change Plan. This will be followed by the development of National Planning Framework 4 and Regional Land Use Partnerships. These should centralise the climate and nature emergencies, providing the spatial planning and proactive community engagement necessary at national and regional levels. It is imperative all this work is complementary and coordinated to deliver the scale of natural climate solutions required to help meet the biodiversity and climate crises, whilst pursuing radical decarbonising of the economy across every sector.

The full chapter on Goal 15 *Life on Land* is available from p.70 at <http://uwsoxfampartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/On-Target-July-2019-Web-FINAL.pdf>

A summary article of Goal 15 is available on p.31 in the SDG edition of *The Geographer* at <https://www.rsgs.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=f51421bd-c197-45ee-9123-d61b672e400e>

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 - ^v <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment-report-biodiversity-ecosystem-services>
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