

# 30 x 30 in England

2024 Progress Report

Wildlife and  
Countryside





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# INTRODUCTION

**The reports are numerous and unequivocal: nature is in decline in England.<sup>1</sup> The evidence is also clear that what wildlife needs to thrive are more habitats free from pollution, disturbance, fragmentation, and poor management choices.<sup>2</sup>**

A new global compact to effectively protect and manage at least 30% of land, waters and sea for nature was negotiated at the international Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP15). This target, known as 30x30, is just one of 23 global targets that were agreed in 2022 as part of the Global Biodiversity Framework.

The UK Government has committed to meeting this international target at home.<sup>3</sup> Governments have committed to deliver this target in each of the four countries of the UK. The UK played an important role in securing the 30x30 target at COP15 and effective implementation of the target domestically can help the UK demonstrate its continuing commitment and leadership on the international stage at the next CBD COP in October 2024.



Protecting and managing 30% of land, including inland waters, and sea for nature can contribute to the Government's aim to expand nature-rich habitats such as wetlands, peat bogs and seagrass and will be essential to meeting the legally-binding target to halt the decline of species abundance. Doing so has the potential to restore and support biodiverse ecosystems that provide essential services such as pollination, improving water quality and sequestering and storing carbon dioxide.

**Done well, protecting and managing 30% of land and sea by 2030 could be the cornerstone of a healthy natural environment upon which our society and economy can flourish.**

The scale of the challenge is daunting: currently only 2.93% of England's land is effectively protected and well managed for nature and a maximum of 9.92% of English seas are protected from the most damaging form of fishing and are moving towards effective protection for nature.<sup>4</sup>

On land, these figures show that there has been a decline in the area of land that can currently be counted towards the 30% target (the 2023 figure was 3.11% of land effectively protected for nature).

In reality, it is likely that more land could make the grade, meeting international standards for 30x30, including those areas of NGO nature reserves, Local Wildlife Sites, and portions of National Parks and National Landscapes where effective protection, good management and positive outcomes for nature can be demonstrated.

Without a national framework for 30x30 in place, including final criteria, up to date monitoring, and

a reporting process, the Government cannot do its own accounting for 30x30. The Government should publish 30x30 criteria for land and sea, which are at least as robust as the draft criteria for land published last year,<sup>5</sup> identify how much land and sea currently meets the 30x30 standard, and set out a delivery plan to close the gap and meet the 30% target.

On land, the 30x30 delivery plan should identify and secure protection and effective management and a commitment to monitoring of ecologically significant areas, putting them into a pipeline for 30x30, so that over time, an increasing area of land will be delivering good biodiversity outcomes and contributing to the 30% target. At sea, management measures that restore and enhance the Marine Protected Area (MPA) network must be at the core of the plan.

With decisive action and significant investment, it is possible for the Government to accelerate nature recovery efforts in England and achieve 30x30. The

solutions needed to protect and manage at least 30% of land, including inland waters, and sea for nature should be set out in the Government's review of the Environmental Improvement Plan.

Expanding the area protected and managed for nature through identifying, designating, protecting, and connecting up more of the most important nature sites on land and sea will require robust strategic spatial planning approaches. The Government's plans for the expansion of renewable energy infrastructure and housebuilding must be complemented by parallel plans for the expansion and protection of nature-rich habitats.

**Strong action on management will be needed, including by investing in protected sites on land and at sea, speeding up the agricultural transition to promote good management choices for nature, and improving water quality.**





# ACHIEVING 30x30 ON LAND

## Summary

### *Only 2.93% of land in England is effectively protected and well-managed for nature in 2024*

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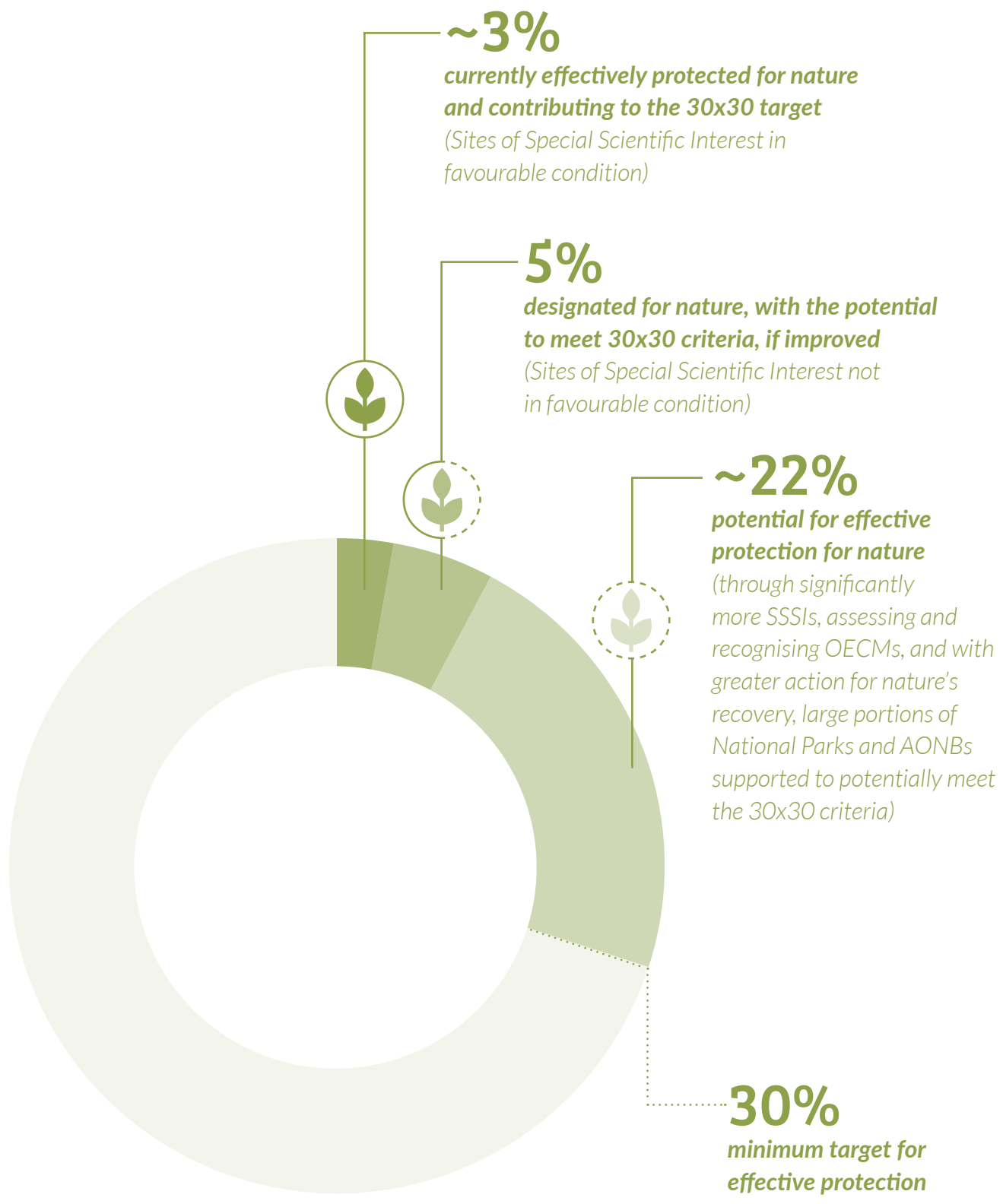
This is the amount of England's land, including inland waters, that is in a protected area and has management for nature in place to ensure nature is in good or in recovering ecological condition. Outside of protected areas, there are not currently any sites in England which are formally recognised as Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) in order to count towards 30x30.

Existing protected sites for nature on land, and the most important habitats and areas supporting wildlife beyond their boundaries in England, should be brought into a 'pipeline' towards 30x30 by securing

their long-term protection and positive management for nature, either through designation as protected areas or identification as potential OECMs. When monitoring demonstrates these sites are in good or genuinely recovering ecological condition and delivering positive biodiversity outcomes, these sites can then count towards the 30% target.

With rapid and decisive action to get updated monitoring of protected sites in place, improve and expand England's network of protected sites, and to identify and support other important areas for nature outside of protected sites to meet the 30x30 standard, such as large portions of National Parks and National Landscapes and eNGO reserves, the new Government can achieve the target of protecting at least 30% of land in England by 2030.

## 30x30 Progress: On Land



## Overall Assessment

Since the last Link 30x30 annual progress report, the previous Government outlined draft criteria for 30x30 on land in England in December 2023. These stipulated that to count towards 30x30, areas need a purpose for biodiversity, protection from harm to biodiversity, and 'effective manage[ment] in order to deliver positive long-term outcomes for biodiversity.'

The Government's draft criteria for 30x30 on land are consistent with the 30x30 criteria that Wildlife and Countryside Link has set out and used in all previous reports evaluating England's progress towards 30x30 on land, as well as at sea.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, there is clear recognition in the Government's draft 30x30 criteria that areas need to be both protected and well-managed for nature, and need to be demonstrating evidence of good outcomes for biodiversity. Thus this 2024 progress report assesses progress towards 30x30 on land using the Link 30x30 criteria, which in our view are aligned with the draft Government criteria. The Government should finalise and publish 30x30 criteria which are at least as robust as the draft criteria published last year.

There are two ways for land to be counted towards the target to effectively protect and manage 30% of land for nature: either by being a protected area or by being recognised as an Other Effective area-based Conservation Measure (OECM).

Protected areas on land in England that meet the 30x30 standard of being protected from harm in the long-term and well-managed for nature are those Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas for Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar sites that are in favourable or genuinely recovering condition. These designations provide strong legal and policy protection from harm and require management and regular monitoring, safeguarding some of the most vulnerable and rare habitats and species, both nationally and internationally.

The network of protected sites in England covers approximately 8.5% of the country,<sup>7</sup> and could be considered part of a 'pipeline' for 30x30 on land. While the Government's initial assessment of land in England that could contribute to 30x30 includes all protected sites (covering approximately 8.5% of England's land), this is inconsistent with their own draft 30x30 criteria, because many protected sites are not currently in favourable condition and therefore not delivering positive outcomes for biodiversity. Only when regular monitoring demonstrates that these sites are in good or genuinely recovering ecological condition can they contribute towards the target.

**Currently, only 34.67% of SSSIs are in good condition for nature.<sup>8</sup> Thus only 2.93% of England's land is effectively protected for nature and can contribute to the 30% target.<sup>9</sup>**

This figure has declined since the Link assessment in 2023, at which time 36.82% of SSSIs were in a good ecological state, and therefore 3.11% of England's total land area could be said to be effectively protected for nature.<sup>10</sup>

Protected sites in which biodiversity is not in good condition, but could be demonstrated to be genuinely recovering, could also meet the 30x30 criteria and contribute to the target. The previous Link 30x30 annual progress reports have not counted SSSIs in 'Unfavourable – recovering' condition towards 30x30, because previously SSSIs could be classed as 'recovering' simply because they had a management plan – regardless of whether the management plan was being implemented. Without demonstrable evidence of good management in action, 'Unfavourable- recovering' SSSIs did not meet the 30x30 criteria and could not contribute towards the target.

However, Natural England has taken welcome action to address this issue by updating monitoring methods and assessments. In Spring 2024 Natural England published an updated definition of 'Unfavourable –

recovering' condition, which requires that SSSI actions to achieve favourable condition are on track.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, SSSIs assessed in line with that updated definition as 'Unfavourable – recovering' could now be said to be in genuinely recovering ecological condition and could meet the 30x30 criteria to be counted towards the target. Of course, this approach must be supported by management plans and actions that are appropriate for the habitats and species on site and by long-term and regular monitoring demonstrating that the management actions are indeed working. Unfortunately, it is not clear how many 'recovering' SSSIs have been classed as such using the new definition, and therefore this 2024 progress report has not been able to recognise any additional contributions towards the 30% target from genuinely recovering SSSIs.

**With updated monitoring of protected sites using the updated 'recovering' assessment methodology, there is potential for some of the 47.76% of SSSIs in 'Unfavourable – recovering' condition, representing 4.03% of land in England,<sup>12</sup> to contribute to the 30% target in the future.**

Outside the protected sites network, areas protected for nature through legal or other effective means, such as NGO nature reserves, can also potentially contribute to the 30x30 target by being recognised and reported as an OECM. However, currently there are no OECMs reported in England.

The 30x30 criteria being finalised by Government are expected to apply to OECMs as well as protected areas, paving the way for a framework or process by which potential OECMs can be identified, assessed and then reported as contributing towards the target if they are found to meet the necessary criteria.



## Improving and expanding the protected sites network

Protected sites in England safeguard some of the last remnants of wildlife and habitats across the country. These site designations are some of the most important and most effective conservation tools at our disposal, providing space for undisturbed shelter, food and rest for wild plants and animals. A network of protected sites, connecting habitats for species, can provide a foundation from which wildlife can recover and thrive.

The protected sites network in England, covering approximately 8.5% of England's land, could significantly support nature's recovery in England, as well as make a sizable contribution to the target to effectively protect and manage at least 30% of land by 2030. The protected sites network must be improved and significantly expanded, so that it covers, protects, and most importantly, supports the restoration and flourishing of the most important habitats, including inland waters, and wildlife in England.

Significant action and investment will be needed to arrest the past decline of the protected site network. Only 34.67% of SSSIs by area are in 'favourable' condition for nature.<sup>13</sup> The condition of protected sites has declined since last year, when 36.82% of the area of the SSSI network (or 3.11% of England's total land area) were in a good ecological state.<sup>14</sup> While 47.76% of SSSIs by area were in 'Unfavourable - recovering' condition, again, this assessment does not necessarily indicate that nature in these sites is actually recuperating.<sup>15</sup> The condition of SSSIs in England has been steadily declining over the past decade. Climate change, water pollution and overgrazing are among the top reasons for habitats and wildlife suffering in these protected areas.<sup>16</sup>

While there are clear long-term and short-term downward trends in the state of SSSIs, the decline in area of SSSIs in good condition from 2023 to 2024 is also likely due to updated monitoring, and therefore more accurate assessments of condition, being in place. In 2022, 66% of SSSIs had not been monitored in the past ten years.<sup>17</sup> Regular and updated monitoring

is essential to have a more accurate understanding of the condition of the protected sites network – both to recognise any sites that might actually be in good condition and could contribute immediately towards the 30x30 target and to identify the right actions needed to get protected sites into good condition in order to contribute towards the target.

The challenge is enormous but the solutions are well-known and the Government has the building blocks of the targets and regulatory and monitoring framework in place. With leadership, urgent and significant action, and the funding to deliver, the new Government can support restoration of all protected sites to good or genuinely recovering condition.

**The Government should set out a fully-funded action plan to deliver the existing commitments to improve protected sites in the Environmental Improvement Plan:**

- 1) to have updated condition assessments for all SSSIs by 31 January 2028,
- 2) to have actions on track to achieve favourable condition (in other words, to be in 'Unfavourable - Recovering' condition) for 50% of SSSIs by 31 January 2028, and
- 3) to get 75% of SSSIs into favourable condition by 2042.

This plan should include better implementation of existing legal protection and management measures for SSSIs, including by better resourcing Natural England for advice, monitoring, and enforcement.

The Government has a strong mandate on affordable housing and clean energy, alongside its clear commitments to restoring nature, including to deliver 30x30. Without careful consideration there is a risk these goals come into conflict. The Government should build on existing planning reforms and the

acceleration of housebuilding and renewable energy development to reinforce and boost the protected sites network. **By restoring nature now through better implementation of existing site protection rules and through more upfront and strategic investment in habitats and species so that protected sites are in better condition and well-connected, the Government can help enable the right development in the right place whilst building the resilience of the natural environment and ensuring that harm to habitats is avoided.**<sup>18</sup>

The Government should also take the opportunity to plan for nature, including the achievement of 30x30, through integrated national and local spatial planning, optimising use of space on land and at sea to deliver 30x30 and ensure development is in the right place. **The land use framework and any strategic planning for infrastructure, new towns, and across local authority boundaries, should have the achievement of 30x30 at its heart, building on the protected sites network and Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs).** River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) are important an important mechanism to help improve the freshwater environment, including in and beyond the protected sites network, but they must be strengthened with specific, timebound and adequately funded measures to deliver their objectives.

There have been no designations of protected sites in the past year (since August 2023), despite numerous reviews finding that the protected sites network needs to be expanded to ensure its ecological integrity. There are existing reports and evidence which identify some of the most important areas for biodiversity, as well as carbon sequestration, in England that remain unprotected, including Important Plant Areas, Important Invertebrate Areas, Important Freshwater Landscapes, irreplaceable habitats such as ancient woodlands, and areas with potential for designation as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for birds.

**The new Government should set out a programme of designations to significantly expand the protected sites network in England, starting with those areas where evidence already shows an urgent need.**

This should include publishing and implementing



Photo: Roger Leitch, Pexels

the detailed 'Phase 2' recommendations from the 2016 UK Special Protected Areas (SPA) Review<sup>19</sup> and follow the recommendations from the previous review in 2001,<sup>20</sup> to help plug the critical gaps in England's protected sites network for vulnerable species. The protected sites network should not be seen as a wholly 'representative' network (protecting only examples of natural habitats), but instead look to designate all that remains of rare habitats, habitats already identified as important for species such as Important Plant Areas and Important Invertebrate Areas, all the habitats threatened species rely on, as well as a representative sample of widespread and common habitat types. The Government should also publish and enact the 'England implementation plan in liaison with Natural England' for the SPA Review promised by the Government in 2021.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, by improving the condition of SSSIs so they are delivering good outcomes for biodiversity, the protected sites network could fulfil its potential to contribute 8.5% towards the 30% target on land in England, rather than currently just 2.93%. By significantly expanding the protected sites network on land, a significant portion of the 30% target in England could be effectively protected for nature using protected area designations.

## Recognising and supporting OECMs

Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) will make up the rest of the 30% target on land in England. Land identified as OECMs may be primarily managed for different objectives, but those objectives must be wholly compatible with, and must secure effective protection from harm and good management for nature and deliver effective conservation and biodiversity outcomes equivalent to those delivered by effectively managed protected areas.<sup>22</sup>

OECMs can recognise where areas might already meet the 30x30 standard, for example NGO reserves and Local Wildlife Sites, where long-term protection and management is in place and regular monitoring demonstrates good biodiversity outcomes.

Importantly, the OECM concept could help to identify areas with 30x30 potential to target action towards these areas. With support and investment to promote protection, management and delivery for biodiversity

in these areas identified as potential OECMs, they can be supported to meet the 30x30 criteria, be officially recognised and reported as OECMs, and contribute to the 30% target.

To date, there are no OECMs recognised in England, but the Government has begun to develop a process to identify and assess potential OECMs in England. OECMs must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, in line with the international guidance on OECMs published by the IUCN.<sup>23</sup> In our 2023 report, we suggested a number of areas in England that could be assessed as potential OECMs and set out a checklist that land would need to meet to achieve 30x30 standard, be classed as an OECM and be included in 30x30 for England.<sup>24</sup>

**In addition to finalised 30x30 criteria at least as robust as the draft criteria, the Government should publish as soon as possible the guidance on OECMs in England and a process to help identify and support**



Photo: Martin Sepion, Unsplash

**potential OECMs** towards having the protection, management, and biodiversity delivery in place to be officially recognised as an OECM and contribute to the 30x30 target.

Once the framework is in place, individual sites could be put forward by the landowner or land manager for OECM consideration. If assessed as a potential OECM by meeting requirements for long-term protection and good management for nature, sites could enter a 30x30 'pipeline'. When regular monitoring of a potential OECM demonstrates good or genuinely recovering ecological condition, and the delivery of biodiversity outcomes equivalent to those of a protected area, the OECM could then be officially recognised and reported so that it is counted towards the 30x30 target.

Further support will be needed by Government to boost protection, management, monitoring and delivery for biodiversity in different areas in England to help it enter into a pipeline for 30x30, and eventually, if delivering for nature, meet the 30x30 criteria and be reported as an OECM.



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## **Driving action for 30x30 with protected landscapes**

Protected landscapes such as National Parks and National Landscapes (previously known as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or AONBs) have significant potential for biodiversity and could contribute large areas to 30x30. In order to do so, particular areas will need to be effectively protected and well-managed for nature, with good biodiversity outcomes, and either designated as protected sites or reported as OECMs.

National mapping shows that National Parks and National Landscapes offer enormous potential for nature and climate.<sup>25</sup> While many National Park and National Landscapes teams are beginning their own processes of mapping nature recovery potential, one study by the National Landscapes Association has suggested that Protected Landscapes could overall contribute 12.5% towards the 30% target in England, but the specific contribution will depend on the individual protected landscape.<sup>26</sup> The contribution of each individual protected landscape towards 30x30 should be apportioned by Natural England in partnership with individual protected landscape teams and then set out as an objective in each National Park and National Landscapes Management Plan.

While the potential for nature in these areas is enormous, currently, unfortunately, nature within protected landscapes is typically in no better condition than nature outside these areas.<sup>27</sup> As recognised by the Government,<sup>28</sup> National Park and National Landscape designations do not provide protection or requirements for management for nature sufficient to meet the 30x30 criteria in themselves. OECMs assessment and reporting processes could be applied to land for 30x30 that is outside of protected sites within National Parks and National Landscapes.

Legislative and policy change and additional resources are needed to strengthen these designations for nature and to give the bodies responsible for National Parks and National Landscapes the tools to support and assess large portions of these areas to contribute to 30x30.

There is now a strengthened duty for all relevant authorities to 'seek to further' the statutory purposes of National Parks and National Landscapes, which could help drive a step change in delivery for nature in protected landscapes. The Government should as a priority publish guidance to clarify how the strengthened duty should be applied in order to ensure that its interpretation is consistent and robust.

**The Government must quickly publish regulations, promised under the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, to require Protected Landscape Management Plans to contribute to meeting 30x30 and other environmental targets, and require that relevant public bodies collaborate on delivery of those targets.<sup>29</sup>**

These regulations should require each individual protected landscape to contribute proportionally based on nature recovery potential towards 30x30 by setting an objective in each Management Plan. The total contributions across all protected landscapes in England should make up a significant portion towards the national 30% target. Protected landscape bodies working with Natural England and partners should then identify which areas are already designated and need investment to reach or maintain favourable condition; which are suitable for designation as new protected sites; and which have potential for recognition as OECMs. Sites designated as protected sites or identified as potential OECMs could enter a pipeline towards 30x30. When regular monitoring demonstrates good or recovering ecological condition, these areas within National Parks and National Landscapes could be counted towards the 30% target.

Alongside strengthened powers for protected landscape bodies and duties for public bodies to help deliver in protected landscapes, there is a need for more resources in these areas. Significantly increasing the funding for protected landscapes and ensuring funding sources are long-term is essential to enable these bodies to drive nature recovery on the ground in these areas.



Photo: Jack Plant, Unsplash

## Other OECM opportunity areas

Land managed by NGOs which is not already designated as SSSI has potential to count towards the 30% target through OECM recognition, for example Langford Lowfields reserve or Wild Woodbury.<sup>30</sup> Ownership or long-term tenancy on the land and an intention to manage the land for biodiversity can demonstrate long-term protection from harm. A management plan, with actions in place, and a programme of regular monitoring, can provide evidence of good management for nature, allowing a potential OECM to enter a 30x30 pipeline. When regular monitoring demonstrates good or recovering ecological condition and the delivery of biodiversity outcomes equivalent to those of a protected area, that land could then contribute to 30x30 by being recognised as an OECM.

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), despite being non-statutory designations, with no legal requirements for protection or management, can cover sites of high biodiversity value. LWS are identified for their 'substantive nature conservation value using robust, scientifically determined criteria which consider the most important, distinctive and threatened species and habitats within the local, regional and national context.' Unlike SSSIs, which represent a small sample of the most important habitats and species in England, all sites which are brought forward and meet the LWS criteria are selected, some of which are SSSI quality. For example, in Nottinghamshire, 1.5% of land is SSSI, but 10% is designated as LWS. Across England, Local Wildlife Sites cover 690,000 hectares or 5.3% of land. Thus LWS support much of the remaining high quality space for nature and are vital building blocks in the landscape-scale conservation needed to enable nature's recovery – and offer huge potential to contribute to 30x30.

Local Wildlife Sites should be assessed on a case-by-case basis to identify steps needed to secure their effective long-term protection (for example, through ownership or long-term tenancy, enhancement of the protection afforded to LWS, or designation as SSSIs), which areas need investment and support to reach or maintain favourable condition; and which have

potential for recognition as OECMs. Overall, there are a number of issues that must be addressed in order to help improve the LWS network, including getting updated monitoring in place for all LWS, strengthening protection for these important sites from harm, including from development, and ensuring LWS are recognised into local development policies and plans.

Environment Land Management (ELM) is intended to play a large role in delivering the protected sites targets and wider 30x30 commitment. ELM schemes have the potential to make a significant contribution to getting sites with 30x30 potential into good condition. However, currently ELM is not designed nor sufficiently funded to achieve its ambitions. Research suggests that the design and investment in ELM schemes must be increased to meet the scale of need.<sup>31</sup> The refreshed EIP should set out what contribution ELM schemes will be expected to make to 30x30 and what design, spatial prioritisation, and levels of funding will be required to deliver results on the ground.

As designed, ELM schemes do not meet the 30x30 criteria in and of themselves. However, they could be a delivery mechanism to support areas in the pipeline to meet the management criterion, for example by supporting action in protected sites to get them into good condition or to improve the management of an OECM. The design of ELM could also be boosted to promote 30x30: if Landscape Recovery projects were designed with more long-term and stricter conditions, they could be assessed against the 30x30 and OECM criteria, to potentially qualify for contribution to the target.

Other spatial designations and plans like the Green Belt and Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) could also be tools to help identify areas with potential for nature recovery. Although Green Belt is not designated specifically for nature, areas within the Green Belt already have a higher-than-average percentage of deciduous woodland (at 19%) and contain 34% of England's Community Forests, and 39% of Local Nature Reserves.<sup>32</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACHIEVE 30x30 ON LAND

The Government can achieve 30x30 on land by securing the protection and effective management of more land. We set out our recommendations for the Government to take action by the end of this year, in the medium-term, and by 2030. We urge the Government to:

## By the end of this year

- Publish the final criteria for 30x30 on land that are at least as robust as the draft 30x30 criteria.
- Publish a delivery plan for 30x30 on land to make up the gap identified, including the actions, policies and funding needed in the Environmental Improvement Plan.
- Set out a delivery plan for improving protected sites in the Environmental Improvement Plan, including interim targets on updated monitoring and condition, towards the target to get 75% of protected sites into favourable condition by 2042.
- Publish robust and ambitious guidance on OECMs in England, in line with international standards, and a process to help identify and support potential OECMs towards 30x30.

## Medium term

- Publish and enact the regulations for National Parks and National Landscapes to contribute to environmental targets, including 30x30, and the new duty to seek to further the purposes of protected landscapes.

- Review and update Environmental Land Management (ELM) to ensure the design and investment in schemes is sufficient to help delivery 30x30.
- Plan for 30x30 by putting the achievement of this target at the heart of the land use framework, and strategic planning for infrastructure, new towns, and across local authority boundaries.

## By 2030

- Restore the protected sites network by better implementing existing site protection rules and by increasing investment in monitoring, regulation, and management of protected sites.
- Significantly expand the protected sites network by implementing the recommendations of existing SPA and SSSI reviews.

# ACHIEVING 30x30 AT SEA

Photo: Mohammed Usaid Abbasi, Unsplash

## Summary

*A maximum of 9.92% of English waters are protected from the most damaging form of fishing and are moving towards effective protection in 2024*

Achieving 30x30 at sea means delivering a strong marine protected area network which is resilient against damaging activities and enables marine life to recover and flourish. Although Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) cover approximately 20% of English waters, significantly greater than on land, the protection these designated sites offer marine biodiversity is often little more than theoretical. Infrastructure development, climate change, pollution, and overfishing are all permitted within MPAs and will continue to undermine the coherence of the network unless suitable management measures are put in place. Over the last year, the Government has made some progress in deploying management measures within MPAs which are outlined below.

In June 2023, the Government designated three sites as Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs): Allonby Bay, Dolphin Head, and Northeast of Farnes Deep, which cover 0.42% of English waters. These areas could be the gold standard of marine protection, but despite being designated for over a year, management measures for these sites are still not in place. Fisheries byelaws (which were consulted on between August – September 2023), and other management measures to protect against damaging impacts must be introduced as soon as possible. Otherwise, these sites will not reach their full potential.

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) committed to introducing fisheries management measures for offshore MPAs in England by the end of 2024 which is a welcome step in protecting offshore MPAs from the most damaging form of fishing. The Government introduced bottom towed

fishing gear restrictions across four offshore MPAs (Stage 1) and introduced similar restrictions across protected reef and rocky habitat features, as well as protecting seabed sediments that store carbon, within 13 offshore MPAs in March 2024 (Stage 2). We are waiting for the Government to publish management measures for the remaining offshore MPAs (Stages 3 and 4). To ensure maximum protection against the most damaging forms of fishing, we urge the Government to publish byelaws covering the whole MPA (rather than just its designated feature) for the remaining stages of the programme.

Alongside management measures which directly protect the MPA network, the Government has also introduced policies which positively impact the wider seas and will indirectly improve the coherence of the network. In April 2024, the Government committed to close all industrial sandeel fisheries in the English North Sea. This measure will increase this vital source

of prey for seabirds and other marine life and support the recovery of marine ecosystems. The Government has also committed to issuing no new oil and gas licenses for the exploration of potential sites. This is a positive step towards achieving net zero and ensuring the damaging impacts of climate change on the marine environment are reduced.

Many of the powers and frameworks required to achieve 30x30 at sea are in place.<sup>33</sup> However, existing protected areas must be effectively managed and not undermined by existing oil and gas, the expansion of offshore wind, the fishing industry and lack of ambition to finance nature recovery at a seascape scale. The Government has an opportunity to increase and strengthen management measures across our seas. Coupled with ambitious delivery targets, the Government can reach its targets for both net zero and recovering biodiversity.



## Overall assessment

### Methodology

Currently, the Government has not begun work to design and publish 30x30 criteria at sea which states what counts towards 30x30, including the definition of effective management measures. The methodology used to undertake this assessment considers the areas of MPAs which have management measures in place against the most damaging forms of fishing – bottom towed fishing gear. It does not consider other damaging activities which occur within MPAs, or whether an MPAs designated feature is in good and/or recovering condition. The decision to only include bottom-towed fishing gear byelaws was made to ensure parity with our previous analysis conducted in 2023.

It is important to note that those MPAs which have been identified as having either whole site or feature-based fisheries management measures might be subject to the impacts of other impacts e.g., cabling from offshore wind generation or other power transmission infrastructure, underwater noise impacts from geo-seismic survey and/or aggregate dredging etc. Therefore, for a site to be “effectively protected for nature” and contribute to 30x30, further management measures would need to be implemented, and designated features within MPAs would need to be in recovering or good condition.

It is also important to recognise the role Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) can play in achieving 30x30. Similarly to on land, they could recognise where there are additional forms of protection for the marine environment outside of an effectively protected MPA network. The UK Government has taken tentative steps towards recognising potential OECMs at sea by nominating a small number in their reporting to OSPAR. However, these have not yet been formally reported to the World Database on OECMs and it remains unclear whether they would meet any 30x30 criteria proposed by Defra. We support the Government in developing a clear framework for the identification and assessment of marine OECMs in English waters.



Photo: Ameer Fairbank Brown, Unsplash

### Results

In 2023, Stage One fisheries management measures for offshore MPAs were introduced.

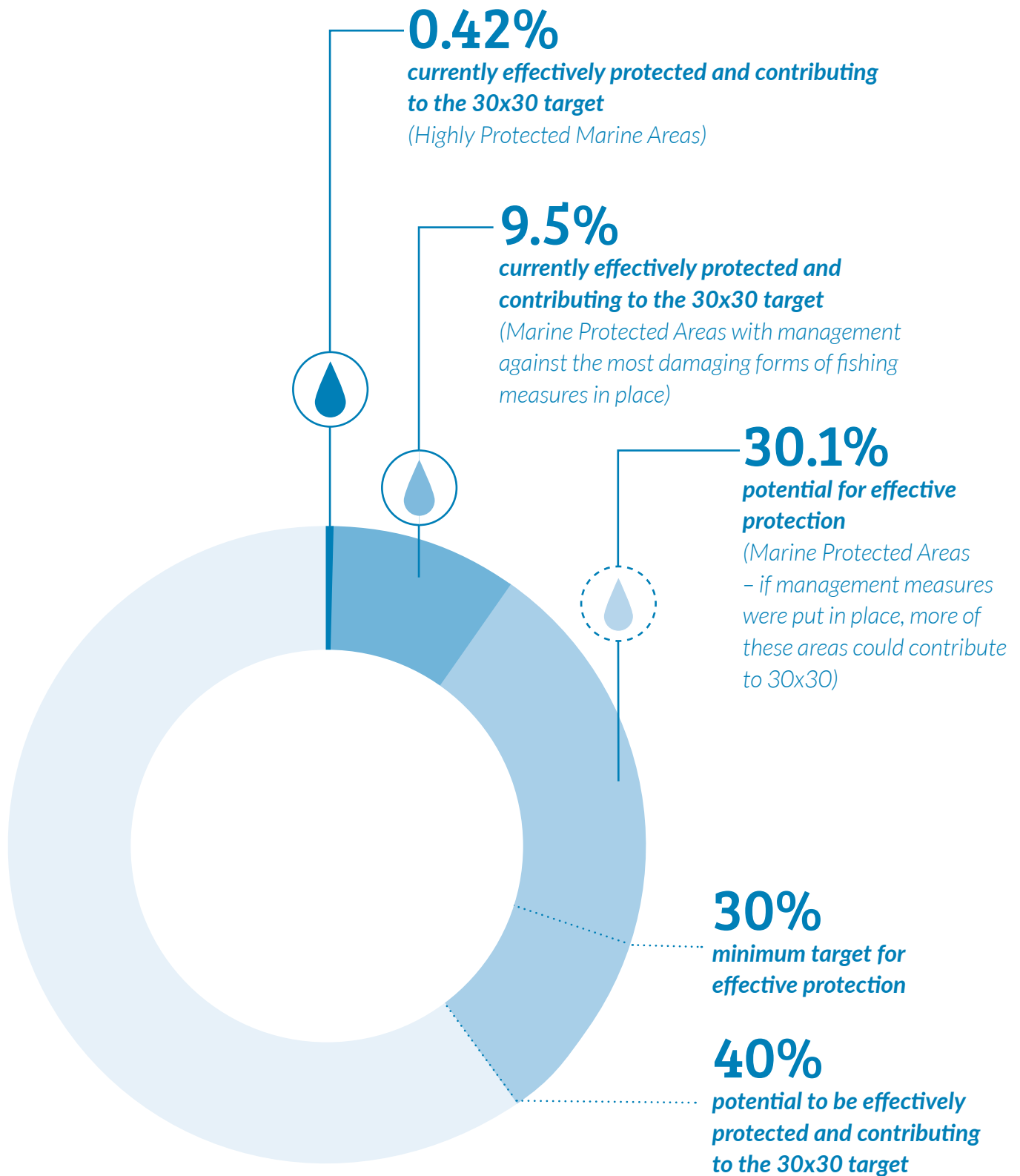
- Dogger Bank Special Area of Conservation & South Dorset Marine Conservation Zone whole site protection, equated to 5.4% of English seas.
- Inner Dowsing, Race Bank and North Ridge Special Area of Conservation & The Canyons Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) features, equated to 0.4% English seas.

With 4,730km<sup>2</sup> of inshore waters both in an MPA and protected by a byelaw restricting bottom towed fishing gear, equating to 2%, and the designation of three pilot HPAs, 0.42%, a maximum of 8% of English seas could be said to be protected from the most damaging forms of fishing.

In March 2024, byelaws prohibiting banned bottom towed fishing gear across protected features in 13 offshore MPAs were introduced. This welcomed decision has led to a further 1.7% of English waters being protected from the most damaging forms of fishing.

**In total, we estimate a maximum of 9.92% of English waters in September 2024 are protected from the most damaging form of fishing and are moving towards effective protection for nature.**

## 30x30 Progress: at Sea



## Protecting the Marine Protected Area network

The Government must introduce measures to ensure the MPA network is ecologically coherent and worth more than its names alone. Designated sites must offer meaningful protection for marine habitats and wildlife which can only be achieved by implementing a variety of management measures across every site. This will protect the marine environment from the impact of offshore energy infrastructure, climate change, pollution and fishing, and ensure all MPAs contribute to the 30x30 target.

### Marine Planning

Marine Planning is essential to protect the ecological coherence of the MPA network and ensure potentially damaging industries are located in the least impactful way. Currently, there is little strategic planning of space at sea and sectors are considered and located on an individual basis. To ensure marine activities are in placed in the most nature friendly way, the Government should establish a cross-departmental Strategic Marine Planning Task Force, with accompanying Delivery Roadmap. This group should set out the Government's policy priorities for the marine environment and how to manage the competing interests of nature, offshore wind development, aggregates extraction, fishing etc. It will utilise the outputs of the Crown Estate's Whole of Seabed Approach, National Energy System Operator's Strategic Spatial Energy Plan and the MMO's Regional Marine Plans to inform decision-making. All decisions must be based on principles which deliver the Government's net zero and environmental targets e.g., 30x30.

### Offshore Wind

Significant increases in renewable deployment offshore are critical for the Government to meet its net zero. However, they cannot be achieved at the expense of the ecological coherence of our MPA network, and wider seas. Therefore, nature recovery targets must be built into the planning system to

ensure it can operate with the speed required to succeed, whilst respecting environmental limits. This requires the robust implementation of existing environmental legislation e.g., Environmental Impact Assessments and the Habitats Regulations Assessments to ensure any development which impacts the MPA network has discharged its legal obligations to avoid, reduce, mitigate and/or compensate for its impacts on the marine environment.

Protecting the MPA network from the impacts of offshore infrastructure development can also be achieved through Defra's Offshore Wind Environmental Improvement Package (OWEIP). The OWEIP offers the Government an opportunity to ensure developments have a lasting positive impact on the habitats and species they interact. The OWEIP will support the accelerated deployment of offshore wind while protecting the marine environment through a more strategic approach to environmental assessments and establishing a Marine Recovery Fund for developer contributions to marine protection.



## Fisheries Management

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In March 2024, the Government announced it would ban bottom towed fishing gear across protected features in 13 offshore MPAs, protecting many of our most vulnerable reef and rocky habitats, as well as protecting seabed sediments that store carbon. This welcomed decision has led to another 1.7% of English waters being protected from the most damaging forms of fishing. The Government has an opportunity to build on this success and publish Stage Three and Stage Four bylaws through the MMO Programme by the end of 2024.

**These additional fisheries management measures would mean that all offshore MPAs would have some form of protection from the most damaging forms of fishing.**

However, to meaningfully contribute to 30x30, the UK Government must introduce whole site fisheries management measures across offshore MPAs to ensure bottom towed fishing gear does not damage entire marine habitats within MPAs. To take into account the impact of fisheries activities outside the MPA network, the Government must work to adjust catch limits downward. These limits must be set in line with ICES scientific advice to restore fish populations and the fishing industry to a sustainable level. Moreover, the Government must ensure time-bounded and meaningful targets and objectives are set in the incoming FMPs and ensure all FMPs are delivering towards the same goals in the Fisheries Act (2020), and wherever possible work with the fishing industry to consider sustainable alternatives. Together, these actions will ensure MPAs, and wider seas, are effectively protected against the impact of the fishing industry.



Photo: Michael Hutton, Unsplash

## Improving the network

**Alongside introducing measures to protect the ecological coherence of the MPA network, the Government must bring forward policies which will contribute to the active restoration of the marine environment. This will ensure all designated features within MPAs are not only recovering from historic impacts but are placed in good condition.**

### HPMAs

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By 2030, at least 30% of English waters should be managed as genuinely protected areas for nature's recovery, not simply protected from the most damaging form of one activity. This should be achieved by designating at least 10% of English waters as HPMAs, prohibiting all extractive, destructive and depositional activities to enable nature to fully recover. This must begin with the immediate publication of fisheries byelaws, and other management measures for the three Highly Protected Marine Area sites in Allonby Bay (27.6 km<sup>2</sup>), Dolphin Head (462 km<sup>2</sup>), and Northeast of Farnes Deep (491.8 km<sup>2</sup>). Combined these HPMAs could account for the protection of 0.42% of English waters, and the Government must commit to increase this number to 10% of English waters.

### Extending the MPA Network

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In its current form, the MPA network does not protect all the species and habitats essential to marine ecosystems. The last UK SPA Review published by JNCC suggested that 'provisions in the marine environment are needed for at least 49 species.' The Government must complete an SPA Sufficiency Review at sea to assess where the gaps remain in the MPA network so they can be addressed and ensure the network of MPAs across English waters is ecologically coherent and truly supports species recovery. This is particularly urgent given the continued failure to achieve GES for seabird populations and the catastrophic impacts of avian flu. In November 2022, Natural England published the English Seabird Conservation Recovery Pathway

which marked a significant opportunity for the Government to create material change for seabirds. With over seventy recommendations, it is essential Defra allocate their delivery across its Arm's Length Bodies to ensure timely, well monitored results.

Little work is being undertaken to ensure the network is improved for other mobile species e.g., cetaceans and seals, and marine habitats across the MPA network. Increased infrastructure development will cause underwater noise to increase across the network which is damaging for cetaceans and seals. However, the Government has a opportunity to become a world leader in marine mammal protection. We welcome Defra's intention to consult on a noise decibel limit for noise creating activities in MPAs which will ensure cetaceans and seals are fully protected in English Waters. To improve the MPA network for marine habitats the Government must expand the MPA network to include important blue carbon habitats. This will remove pressure on existing carbon stores and ensure the network can contribute to meeting biodiversity and climate needs. Moreover, a whole-site management approach to MPAs will minimise the impact of activities at sea on the seabed and help protect blue carbon habitats within our seas.

### Marine Net Gain

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Improving the MPA network cannot be achieved without the introduction of Marine Net Gain. This is where infrastructure developers are obligated to pay to leave the marine environment in a better state than when they found it. In February 2023, the Government published its consultation response to the principles of marine net gain. The document outlined that most respondents (81%) agreed to the use of marine net gain to enhance designated features within MPAs, and many emphasised the benefit it could provide in terms of funding measures which go above and beyond basic protection. Some respondents indicated the opportunity marine net gain could provide for strategic sea scape scale restoration projects and supporting the delivery of regional priorities.

However, in the past year there has been little progress on delivery of the policies. Building on

the lessons learnt from Biodiversity Net Gain, the Government must seize this opportunity to significantly increase investment in marine protection and restoration and encourage developers to go above and beyond statutory obligations. The Government must work with The Crown Estate to ensure suitable areas for marine restoration projects are not leased for development. The Government will also need to greatly streamline the licensing regime for non-commercial restoration projects which currently is extremely burdensome and costly and represents a significant barrier to projects.

### Inland Waterways

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Improving the MPA network to achieve 30x30 must include ecosystem protection of rivers (and their estuaries). This must involve introducing measures to tackle water pollution, from both sewage and agricultural run off, habitat degradation and poor species abundance. Data from the Marine Conservation Society revealed that in 2021, 1,651 storm overflows within 1km of an MPA in England spilt untreated sewage for a total of 263,654 hours, equivalent to over 30 years. This is causing irreversible damage to the marine environment and putting 30x30 targets at stake. The Government must urgently put monitoring in place to tackle harmful chemicals in run-off and overflows and accelerate the delivery of the Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan. Moreover, to support a joined-up approach across land and sea, Defra must reverse its decision to prevent local authorities from extending their Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) into the marine environment, as it perpetuates single system-level thinking.



## Monitoring and enforcing the network

Monitoring and enforcement of management measures across the MPA network is essential to understanding whether the Government has achieved 30x30 in English waters. Without increasing our understanding of the effectiveness of the policies put in place, the Government will not be able to adapt or change them for success.

### Resourcing

Due to a lack of resources, monitoring of MPAs in England is currently inadequate. Delivering 30x30 at sea effectively will require significant increase in MPA monitoring and the enforcement of management measures. Without adequate monitoring, it will be difficult for the Government to determine the condition of the MPA network and introduce the appropriate management measures to achieve each site's conservation objectives and the Environment Act targets. In 2023, the JNCC found only 37 out of the 374 UK MPAs have enough monitoring in place to assess if their management measures are working, and only 83 out of the 374 UK MPAs are moving towards their conservation objectives. Understanding the MPA network's condition and the activities influencing MPAs is essential to determining the path to recovery and all data collected must form the basis of 30x30 criteria at sea. This cannot be achieved without funding increases for the Government's Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies, e.g., Natural England and the JNCC. Similarly, non-compliance with existing management measures will continue to put the integrity of the 30x30 target at risk.

### Remote Electronic Monitoring

In May 2024, the Government published its response to a consultation on introducing Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) for fishing vessels in English waters. The document outlined a phased, mandatory introduction of the technology across priority catches

on vessels over 12 metres. A mandatory approach is essential, and we urge the Government to put in place time bound commitments to deliver the policy and extend the measure across all fishing vessels operating in English waters, working in collaboration with the devolved administrations in relation to fleet segments operating cross-border. Swift implementation of REM will help inform efforts needed to tackle the persistent problem of bycatch within the MPA network, saving the lives of thousands of animals that continue to be caught by English fishers. These measures must be accompanied by the establishment of clear SMART targets for the continued reduction in the bycatch of sensitive species in order to minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch within a set timeframe.



Photo: Seiyon Borisov, Unsplash

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACHIEVE 30x30 AT SEA

The Government has the legislation and frameworks in place to achieve 30x30 at sea. However, it now requires the ambition and political will to deliver the measures that will not only protect, but restore, MPAs and the wider marine environment. The Government, working with the devolved administrations where necessary, must:

## By the end of this year

1. Publish 30x30 criteria for sea which states what counts towards 30x30, including the definition of 'effective management measures.'
2. Publish fisheries byelaws and management measures for the three designated Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs).
3. Publish Stage Three and Stage Four Byelaws through the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) programme to halt damaging fishing activity across the whole of the offshore Marine Protected Areas (MPA) network by the end 2024.
4. Conduct a Special Protection Areas (SPAs) Sufficiency Review at sea to assess where the gaps remain in the MPA network and ensures English waters truly supports species recovery.

## Medium term

5. Establish a Strategic Marine Planning Task Force and Delivery Roadmap for England by the end of 2025. This will inform decisions on the policy priorities required to optimise management of the sea space and must prioritise sea space for a connected network of nature protection, recovery and enhancement in accordance with offshore energy production.

6. Place a time-bound commitment on the delivery of mandatory REM, including expanding measures to all vessels of all sizes and measures to eliminate all unwanted bycatch.
7. Provide the resources required to effectively monitor and manage the MPA network by properly funded and appropriately experienced staff within statutory nature conservation bodies, the MMO, IFCA and other enforcement agencies.
8. Protect at least 10% of English seas as HPMAs.

## By 2030

9. Place time-bound and meaningful targets in the incoming Fisheries Management Plans to ensure they deliver Fisheries Act (2020) objectives. Work to adjust catch limits downward to tackle consider fisheries activities outside the MPA network.
10. Design a mechanism for Marine Net Gain which requires all developments to contribute to the restoration of our seas.
11. Expand the existing MPA network to include important blue carbon habitats. This will remove pressure on existing carbon stores and ensure the network can contribute to meeting biodiversity and climate needs.



## CONCLUSION

**The Government has an opportunity to make the most of its majority and high level of ambition to act to kickstart nature recovery in England and meet the target to protect at least 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030.**

The challenge is daunting. There are only a few years remaining before 2030.

But securing the protection and effective management of more land and sea to help reach the 30x30 target is possible and vital.

Ahead of COP16 this year, we urge the Government to seize the moment to demonstrate its commitment and ambition by getting started on 30x30 delivery.

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6. The Link 30x30 criteria are:
  1. Protected in the long-term for nature. The entirety of the 30% should be afforded long-term protection for nature and long-term protection against damage such as pollution, overexploitation, invasive nonnative species, habitat destruction and harmful development.
  2. Effectively managed for nature. As well as protection from harm, all areas counted towards the 30% target should be well-managed for nature's recovery and regularly monitored at appropriate intervals as part of a programme of investment, species and habitat monitoring and enforcement to ensure these areas are in good or genuinely recovering condition.
7. This figure was calculated by the total area of SSSIs in England (1,102,503.83 hectares) divided by total England land area (to mean high water mark) (13,046,154 hectares) = 8.45%. This figure is accurate as of 30 August 2024. Data from: <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/WholeEnglandReports.aspx>.
8. Data from: <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/WholeEnglandReports.aspx>, accurate to 30 August 2024.
9. As of 30 August 2024, 382,258.36 ha of SSSIs are in 'Favourable' condition, divided by total England land area (to mean high water mark) of 13,046,154 ha, means that 2.93% of England's land is in SSSIs in good condition, meeting the 30x30 criteria and contributing to the 30% target.
10. As of 14 August 2023, 406,032.61 ha of SSSIs are in 'Favourable' condition, divided by total England land area (to mean high water mark) of 13,046,154 ha, means that 3.11% of England's land is in SSSIs in good condition, meeting the 30x30 criteria and contributing to the 30% target.
11. <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5681050328760320>
12. As of 30 August 2024, 526,561.14 ha of SSSIs are in 'Unfavourable – recovering' condition, representing 47.76% of all SSSIs. Divided by total England land area (to mean high water mark) of 13,046,154 ha, SSSIs in 'Unfavourable – recovering' condition represents 4.03% of England's total land area.
13. As of 30 August 2024, 382,258.36 ha of SSSIs are in 'Favourable' condition, divided by total England land area (to mean high water mark) of 13,046,154 ha, means that 2.93% of England's land is in SSSIs in good condition, meeting the 30x30 criteria and contributing to the 30% target.
14. As of 14 August 2023, 406,032.61 ha of SSSIs are in 'Favourable' condition, divided by total England land area (to mean high water mark) of 13,046,154 ha, means that 3.11% of England's land is in SSSIs in good condition, meeting the 30x30 criteria and contributing to the 30% target.
15. As of 30 August 2024, 526,561.14 ha of SSSIs are in 'Unfavourable – recovering' condition, representing 47.76% of all SSSIs. Divided by total England land area (to mean high water mark) of 13,046,154 ha, SSSIs in 'Unfavourable – recovering' condition represents 4.03% of England's total land area.
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# SUPPORTERS



Wildlife and Countryside Link is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature. Our members campaign to conserve and enhance landscapes, animals, plants, habitats, rivers and seas and to improve access to nature for communities across the country. Together we have the support of over eight million people in the UK and directly protect over 750,000 hectares of land and 800 miles of coastline.

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