

30 x 30 in England

2023 Progress Report

One more Parliament to achieve 2030 nature goals

Wildlife and
Countryside



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INTRODUCTION

The Government has pledged to protect at least 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 – the ‘30x30’ target. This important commitment has the potential to turn the tide on nature’s decline.

Unfortunately, this year, the Government has made little progress in any of the three fundamental stages of achieving 30x30:

1. strengthening the legal framework needed to deliver 30x30;
2. designating new sites for legal protection; and
3. improving the condition of existing protected sites.

This lack of progress comes despite clear legislative opportunities to make a difference, most notably in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. On the current trajectory, the 30% target will not be achieved by 2030—or any time in the foreseeable future without urgent action¹.

Three years on from the Government’s 30x30 pledge, the area of England effectively protected for nature is still hovering around 3% on land and at maximum 8% at sea. It is clear that progress towards 30x30 and nature recovery is currently occurring at an alarmingly slow rate. With 2030 just 6 years away, action to put nature on the path to recovery must be taken now. The opportunity and responsibility to meet nature recovery targets and ambitions must be a priority for the current Government and the next.

30x30 is an important promise with the potential to secure a better future for nature and people². The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, sitting in the bottom 10% globally for biodiversity remaining³. Establishing an effectively managed, ecologically representative, well-connected and thriving network of the most important areas for

biodiversity and ecosystem services across at least 30% of land and at sea in England is critical to countering the inter-connected climate and ecological crises and allowing nature to begin to recover. It is also integral to meeting the legally-binding target to halt and reverse the decline of species abundance in England.

For 30x30 to succeed it must deliver ‘more, bigger, better and joined up’ spaces where nature can thrive⁴. By designating more of our land and sea for wildlife and ensuring that what is protected is well-managed, 30x30 can help to halt the decline of biodiversity, increase our ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and contribute to a wider healthy environment and sustainable economy.

One area where the Government did show notable leadership last year was on the international stage, promoting 30x30 around the world. The UK played an important role in securing the December 2022 Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15) Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which commits signatory governments to take urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and put nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of people and the planet⁵. Out of the 23 targets that were agreed, target 3 to effectively protect and manage at least 30% of the land, freshwater and sea for nature by 2030 echoes what the Government had already committed to in 2020.

The UK Government must urgently undertake a 30x30 rapid delivery project to protect more ecologically significant areas and secure effective management of these and existing sites for nature, putting them into a pipeline for 30x30, so that in time, they will be delivering good biodiversity outcomes and contributing to the 30% target, which the next Government must continue.

Priorities for action in 2023/2024:

Developing the framework

1. Consult on and publish robust criteria for 30x30 in line with international standards to make clear the conditions under which existing protected areas 'count' and provide the basis for case-by-case assessment of potential other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs), and publish an assessment process to evaluate and report on progress towards 30x30 and an action plan to deliver 30x30.
2. Publish and implement the new SSSI approach of feature-based monitoring and of defining 'recovering' status to accurately assess the condition of protected sites and invest in monitoring to get up-to-date assessments in place across the network.

Achieving 30x30 on land

3. Retain, strengthen and improve implementation of the existing site protection framework for protected sites, supported by increased funding and expertise, to deliver stronger protections for sites and enable the attainment of favourable condition.
4. Improve the condition of protected sites by introducing a legally-binding target for protected sites condition through the Environment Act 2021 and increasing resourcing for protected sites management and monitoring by Natural England to ensure regular and up-to-date monitoring of SSSIs and improved management of the protected sites network and to assess progress towards 30x30.
5. Significantly expand the protected sites network on land to effectively protect more of the most important terrestrial and freshwater sites and species in England.

6. Strengthen protected landscapes with updated purposes and Management Plans for nature's recovery, duties on public bodies to further those purposes, and sufficient resources, to support these landscapes to make significant contributions to 30x30.
7. Issue updated guidance for protected landscapes' Management Plans to set a local 30x30 contribution target and guidance for their Nature Recovery Plans to identify candidate sites for future inclusion in and delivery of 30x30.

Achieving 30x30 at sea

8. Set byelaws through the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) programme to halt damaging fishing activity across the Marine Protected Area (MPA) network by 2024. MPAs must be protected across the whole site rather than simply the designated features.
9. Designate at least 10% of English seas in Highly Protected Marine Areas, where all damaging activities are restricted.
10. Deliver a new system of Marine Spatial Planning which assesses the carrying capacity of English Seas and prioritises the achievement of nature and climate targets, including through the protection of MPAs and the delivery of 30x30. Provide the resources required for the effective monitoring and management of the MPA network, prohibiting all damaging activities and properly funding agencies to deliver conservation goals.
11. Address bycatch and a lack of fisheries monitoring in protected areas through mandatory use of innovative technologies including Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras on all vessels in English waters, including smaller vessels.

DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

For 30x30 to be effective, robust and clear criteria based on international guidelines are needed⁶.

For an area to be included in the 30% target, Wildlife and Countryside Link has long made clear that it must be both:

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 non-native 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.



What should count towards 30x30?

These two Link criteria for inclusion in 30x30 are broadly aligned with the Government's proposed criteria in the Nature Recovery Green Paper, which set out that areas need to have a clear purpose for conserving biodiversity, long-term protection, long-term management for nature, and need to be delivering appropriate biodiversity outcomes to count towards 30x30⁷.

At present, many areas with potential to contribute towards 30x30 may meet some, but not all, of the necessary criteria. Addressing the deficiencies will in some cases take time, and so we support the adoption of a pipeline approach towards meeting the target.

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. The kind of management should be adaptable to changing ecological circumstances and may vary from highly species-specific and interventionist approaches to more hands-off approaches like rewilding. When regular monitoring demonstrates an area in the 30x30 pipeline is in good or recovering ecological condition,

it can then be counted towards the 30% target. Areas meeting robust criteria and achieving the 30x30 standard for nature should be accredited by Natural England or appointed trusted partners and counted towards the 30x30 target in England.

The Government should urgently consult on and publish robust criteria for 30x30 and an assessment process to evaluate and report on its progress towards 30x30. The Government should provide Natural England with sufficient resources to conduct the assessment and reporting of 30x30 in England.

A robust approach to 30x30 will ensure that more of the best places for nature are identified, put under protection and management for nature, regularly monitored, and are genuinely supporting nature's recovery.

This 30x30 standard for management for nature should be applied to at least 30% of England's land and sea to create an effective and connected resilient ecological network which supports biodiversity. On land, this should be supported by the creation of the wider national Nature Recovery Network and by the integration of sustainable practices across the rest of the country.



ACHIEVING 30X30 ON LAND

Overall assessment

Only 3.11% of England's land is effectively protected for nature in 2023⁸.

Protected sites in good condition are the only contributor to this figure. Currently, there has been no formal assessment of the potential for areas of land within protected landscapes not already designated as protected sites to contribute to 30x30. No OECMs have been assessed and recognised or reported on land in England.

To achieve 30x30 on land, the Government should increase the protected sites contribution, through bringing more sites into good condition and designating more sites to significantly expand the protected sites network in England. OECMs will also contribute to reaching the 30% target, and with greater action for nature's recovery, large portions of protected landscapes could be supported to potentially meet the 30x30 criteria.

This year the Wildlife and Countryside Link analysis shows that the Government has made little progress on getting protected sites into good condition or designating new sites. There has been some small but welcome progress on monitoring sites. However, that monitoring has revealed that more sites are now in unfavourable condition.

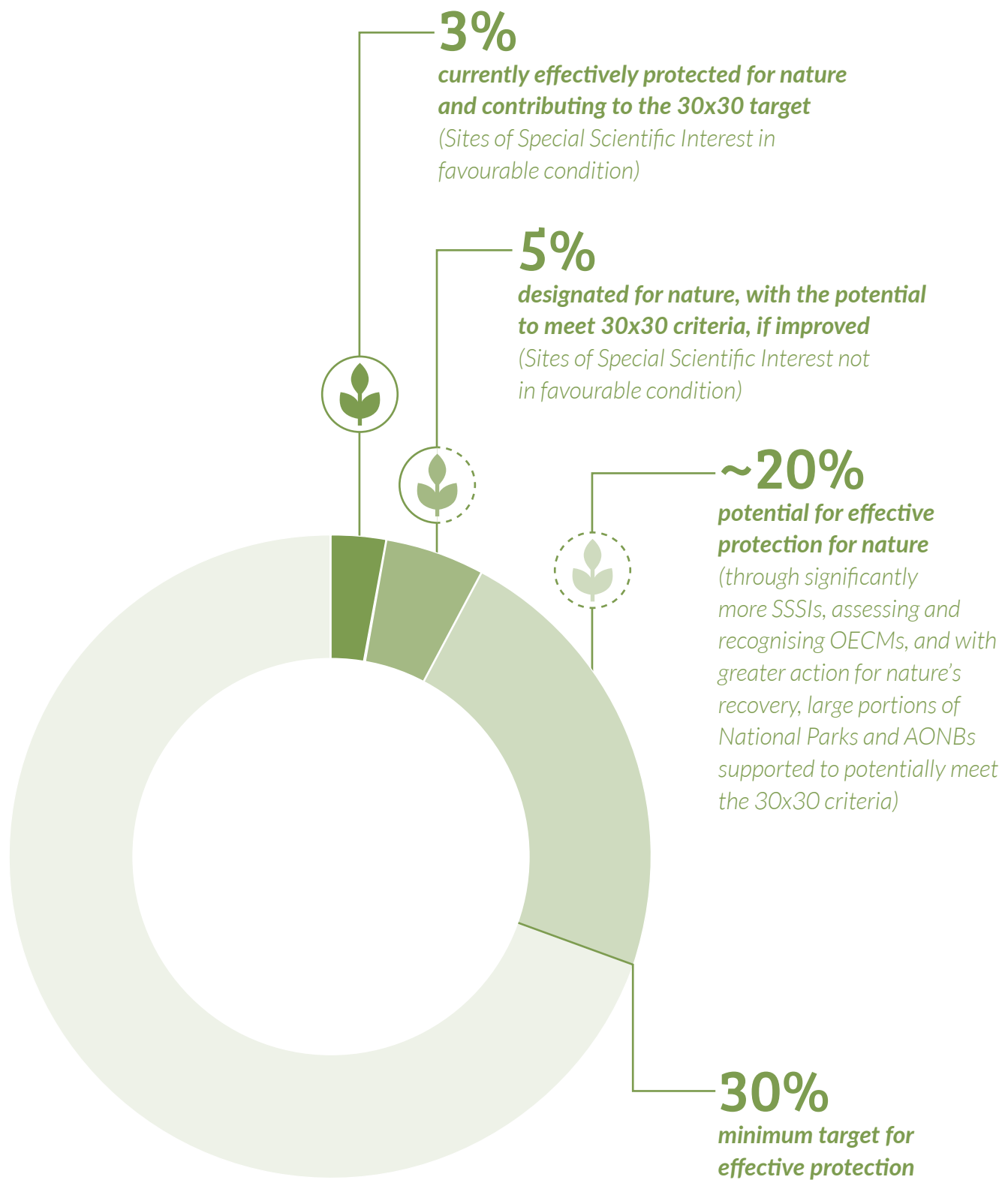
Currently on land in England, the only site designations which provide long-term protection from harm and require positive management for nature,

are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar sites, which cover 8.45% of England's land. JNCC recently stated that 6.5% of land is protected, a figure which was also cited by the Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee's report on 30x30⁹, however, this figure does not include reflections on the condition of these areas¹⁰. When these sites are in good condition or are showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery, they meet the 30x30 international standard and they can be counted towards the 30% target.

We do not consider sites that are in "unfavourable recovering" condition qualify for 30x30. Until recently, sites were considered to be recovering if they simply had a management plan in place. Many sites have, as a result, been recorded as 'recovering' for many years, but may have shown no real improvement in condition and will in some cases have actually declined. Natural England has recently committed to tighten and improve its assessment of recovering condition, requiring that actions are 'on track to deliver favourable condition¹¹.' If this is done in a way that ensures demonstrable evidence of actual improvements on the ground, then sites classified as improving could be counted toward 30x30.

Since 2022, Natural England has designated more SSSIs, including West Penwith Moors and Downs SSSI in Cornwall - very welcome additions to the network and the potential 30x30 pipeline. However, less than half of England's SSSIs are delivering good outcomes for nature, with only 36.82% of sites in good condition¹². This figure is slightly decreased from 2022, primarily due to more up-to-date and accurate condition assessments being in place.

30x30 Progress: On Land



Protected Sites

Overview

Strengthening and expanding the protected sites network of SSSIs, SACs, SPAs and Ramsar Sites, and their connectivity, is a crucial first step towards nature recovery and achieving 30x30¹³. Currently, 8.45% of England is covered by protected sites¹⁴. This land is provided with long-term protection and has management requirements and so could be considered to be in the 30x30 pipeline - on a path towards 30x30. However, less than 40% of SSSIs are in good condition for nature, currently covering only 3.11% of England's land compared to the overall 30% target¹⁵.

The Government should maximize protected sites' contribution to 30x30 by bringing all existing protected sites into good condition (8.45% of England) and significantly expanding the protected sites network in England.



Understanding the network: better monitoring and assessment

Protecting some of the most significant and rare habitats and species in England, SSSIs are a valuable resource, but they require concentrated efforts and funding to support and assess their contribution towards nature recovery and 30x30.

Currently, only 36.82% of SSSIs (by area) are in favourable condition, a decline from 39% in favourable condition from 2022. The area of SSSIs in 'Unfavourable - recovering' condition has also declined, from 51% last year to 49% in 2023, with more SSSIs reported as 'Unfavourable - no change or declining.' For example, the River Wye and Lugg SSSI was recently downgraded from 'Unfavourable - recovering' to 'Unfavourable - declining' in May 2023 following declines in macrophytes, salmon and white-clawed crayfish. Recent research from Unchecked UK found that less than a fifth (19%) of SSSI rivers are in 'favourable' or in 'mostly favourable' (more than 50% favourable) condition.

These changes are primarily due to Natural England rolling out updated condition assessments, which represent welcome progress on implementing regular and meaningful monitoring and determining a more accurate assessment of the state of our protected sites. We know that most SSSIs are not delivering for nature, and so the assessment percentages are now better reflecting that.

Even these figures are likely to overestimate the quality of the protected sites network. Despite some welcome progress on monitoring this year, only 22% of SSSIs were monitored from 2015 - 2021¹⁶, and figures from Natural England reveal that the condition of 0.36% of SSSIs (by area) has not been recorded at all¹⁷. Recent research from Unchecked UK found that 69% of all SSSIs have had no assessments in the last 6 years. A recent report from Wild Justice suggests that if all SSSIs in England were assessed in the next few years then their condition would resemble the most recent

condition assessments made in the last three calendar years, meaning only 54% of sites by area would be in favourable or 'Unfavourable – recovering' condition¹⁸.

We welcome the commitment in the Environmental Improvement Plan to ensure sites have up to date assessments in place by the end of January 2028¹⁹. There is clear evidence that reduced resource for monitoring has been the primary driver behind the paucity of recent monitoring. In 2020, the chair of Natural England, Tony Juniper, provided written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee on the impacts of cuts to Natural England's budget, stating that: "we have reduced investment in the monitoring of our SSSI network meaning we do not have a current robust evidence base around the state of our SSSIs, their management needs etc²⁰."

A significant increase in resources for Natural England is required to ensure regular and up-to-date monitoring of SSSIs to inform management and assess progress towards 30x30.

A statutory duty for monitoring of SSSIs should be placed on Natural England to drive delivery in this area, as recommended by the House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee²¹. A legally-binding target for the condition of protected sites would also help prioritise monitoring and management of protected sites within a resource-depleted agency, as Juniper also identified.

Natural England has committed to bringing in a new approach to assessing the condition of protected sites, which would provide an accurate assessment of whether a site is in 'recovering' condition based on its delivery against biodiversity outcomes, not just whether it has a management plan in place, as well as a new feature-based approach to monitoring.

We welcome this approach and we urge Natural England to publish and implement its updated plans for assessing the condition of protected sites without delay, in order to have a more accurate and up-to-date assessment of the protected sites network.



Improving the network: achieving favourable condition

The Government needs to take urgent action to get the protected sites network into good condition to maximise the contribution of SSSIs to 30x30.

A legally-binding target for at least 75% of the SSSI network to be in favourable condition by 2042 would signal commitment and prioritise action and investment in management and monitoring of the protected sites network.

The Government should strengthen the terrestrial protected sites network so that these sites have the highest levels of legal protection, giving them greater protection from harm, including from off-site and cumulative impacts, ruling out damaging activities and development that will prevent the attainment of favourable condition. Rather than undermining existing site protection rules, including case law and Habitats Regulations Assessment, these essential protections should be retained and more effectively applied to protected sites with increased funding and expertise so that they deliver stronger protections.

Resources and expertise are needed to support landowners, land managers and Natural England to undertake the management needed to ensure protected sites are delivering for nature and to put them on a journey towards good or recovering condition in order to effectively and demonstrably contribute to the 30% target. Sufficiently-resourced long-term agreements should be available to landowners responsible for SSSIs for positive management.

Offsite causes are also significant drivers of the poor quality of the protected sites network. A doubling of the Environmental Land Management budget would support land managers and farmers to deliver ambitious agroecological action and large-scale nature restoration, reducing some of the offsite drivers of ecological decline of protected sites.

When landowners and land managers are not fulfilling their legal duties to effectively manage SSSIs, Natural England should work with stakeholders to rectify any management issues or neglect, being prepared to use other management tools it has access to, and enforcement action when required.

Expanding the network: more protected sites

The protected sites network should be significantly expanded to grant more of our best places for nature the protection and good management that they deserve and require. 2023 has seen the designation of some new sites, including the recent and very welcome addition of West Penwith Moors and Downs SSSI in Cornwall. While much of this site is not currently in favourable condition, its designation is a vital first step, and when regular monitoring demonstrates good biodiversity outcomes, it can count towards 30x30.

To expand the protected sites network further, the Government should urgently publish and implement the detailed 'Phase 2' recommendations from the UK Special Protected Areas (SPA) Review in 2016 and follow the recommendations from the previous review in 2011, to help plug the critical gaps in England's protected sites network for vulnerable species including curlews, hen harrier and puffins²². They should also publish and enact the 'England implementation plan in liaison with Natural England' promised by the Government in November 2021²³.

Connectivity between suitable habitats is important to support species, especially in the context of significant habitat fragmentation and climate change. The current terrestrial protected sites network in England does not add up to a functional or resilient ecological network, often because it is so disjointed²⁴. Connectivity should be considered when designating new protected areas to expand the protected sites network and to deliver 30x30.

The Government's upcoming land use framework, together with Local Nature Recovery Strategies should be used to identify the most important locations for habitats, species and connectivity across the country to help strategically plan the expansion of the protected sites network and to help reconcile other land uses to ensure at least 30% of England's land is effectively protected for nature.

Continuing to expand and protect more of our landscape, including creating buffer zones around protected sites, is key to reaching 30% by 2030 and should continue as a long-term aim.

Protected Landscapes

Great potential for nature

England's protected landscapes, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), are important places for nature, but these designations are not currently delivering enough for nature.

Without significant strengthening of the legislative framework and additional resourcing to enable protected landscapes to better support nature recovery, National Parks and AONBs will not have sufficient tools to support and assess large portions of these landscapes to meet the 30x30 bar of effectively protected for nature.

Mapping shows that National Parks and AONBs offer enormous potential for nature and climate²⁵. These vast landscapes could be havens for wildlife and nature restoration in the wider countryside. Unfortunately, nature within protected landscapes is typically in no better condition, and is often in worse condition than nature outside protected landscapes²⁶. This is because the National Park and AONB designations do not currently offer sufficient protection or compel sufficient management for nature.

While the entirety of National Parks and AONBs will not be able to contribute to 30x30 (also acknowledged by the Government last year), in its response to the Glover Review the Government identified that legislative and policy change and additional resources are needed to strengthen these designations for nature and to give National Parks and AONBs the tools to support and assess large portions of these areas to contribute to 30x30²⁷.

Modernising England's great landscapes

The legislation underpinning National Parks includes a purpose to 'conserve and enhance natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage'. The 'wildlife' purpose does not sufficiently capture the wider concepts of biodiversity and natural capital or ecosystem services,

nor is 'conserve and enhance' sufficiently strong to achieve what we need – nature recovery²⁸. AONBs only have a purpose to 'conserve and enhance natural beauty,' which is not specific or strong enough to support nature recovery in these areas. **The statutory purposes of both National Parks and AONBs must be updated to include a specific purpose for nature recovery.**

While National Park Authorities and AONB teams play a critical role in convening stakeholders within their area, ultimately, there is a need for stronger duties to secure action from stakeholders to contribute to the delivery of their statutory purposes. While the specific reference to National Parks and AONBs in the guidance for public bodies to comply with the biodiversity duty is welcome, this is a gentle suggestion that public bodies 'could comply with the biodiversity duty' by supporting biodiversity within National Parks and AONBs, which will not drive action on the ground²⁹. **A stronger duty for public bodies to 'further' the updated purposes, including nature recovery, of National Parks and AONBs is vital to supporting these landscapes' ambitions for nature.** With legislative reform, National Park Authorities and AONB teams will have the tools to support nature recovery and to work towards ensuring that large portions of their areas contribute to 30x30.



Driving action for 30x30 with protected landscapes

To ensure protected landscapes make a significant and sufficient contribution to the 30x30 target, the Outcomes Indicator Framework for protected landscapes currently being developed by Defra should include qualifying for 30x30 as a target. Based on the amount of semi-natural and natural habitat within protected landscapes in England, we suggest that 40% or more of these areas have 30x30 potential³⁰. This would contribute around 10% towards the overall 30% target on land in England. **The contribution of each individual protected landscape towards 30x30 should be apportioned by Natural England and then set out as an objective in each National Park and AONB Management Plan.**

Nature Recovery Plans, which sit under Management Plans, should then map those areas of land within protected landscapes with 30x30 potential, identify means to secure them for nature in the long-term, delegate management actions, and put in place and ensure the appropriate distribution and use of sufficient resources for a regular monitoring programme.

With these changes in legislation and guidance, National Park Authorities and AONB teams will have strong tools to drive nature recovery within and close to their boundaries, setting them up for success in supporting nature recovery in large portions of these landscapes. As part of the mapping, protected landscape bodies working with Natural England and partners will need to 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. Once these are designated as protected sites or identified as potential OECMs they will enter the pipeline towards



30x30. When regular monitoring demonstrates good biodiversity outcomes, these areas within protected landscapes could make a significant contribution to achieving the 30% target.

If the Government fails to equip National Parks and AONBs with the strengthened legislative framework for nature, business as usual will continue in these landscapes, leaving nature to languish.

In addition to the legislative and policy framework, there is a need for more resources in National Parks and AONBs to drive action for nature on the ground in order to get more areas into long-term protection and good management for nature. National Parks, and in particular, AONBs, are currently massively under-resourced³¹. Significantly increasing the funding for protected landscapes is essential to enable these bodies to drive nature recovery on the ground in these areas.

Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs)

Potential OECMs in England

In addition to protected sites in good condition and areas of protected landscapes identified and delivering for nature to meet the 30x30 standard, OECMs could make an important contribution to 30x30 in England. Land identified as OECMs may be primarily managed for many different objectives but they must deliver effective conservation and biodiversity outcomes equivalent to those delivered by effectively managed protected areas³². OECMs must be assessed on a case-by-case basis and can only be recognised when they are already delivering these outcomes, so any restoration-focused OECMs would require the pipeline approach.

Currently, no areas in England have been reported as OECMs. Various types of land and waterways could be assessed as potential OECMs in England, for example:

- sites identified and designated for nature but where the designation does not provide legal protection or management requirements (such as National Nature Reserves which are not underpinned by SSSI designation, Local Nature Reserves and Local Wildlife Sites),
- land owned and managed for nature by eNGOs,
- privately conserved areas managed with a specific conservation objective, but which are not designated as protected areas,
- land and waters owned and managed for the purpose of defence where long-term conservation of biodiversity and important ecosystems is achieved,
- land primarily managed for other objectives, such as carbon or water-focused objectives, but which is also achieving long-term conservation of biodiversity and important ecosystems, and
- land owned and managed for nature through a sufficiently long-term Landscape Recovery scheme contracts, which, in combination with other designations, could meet the criteria to be assessed as a potential OECM.

OECM assessment process

An OECM is not a blanket designation and so whether a particular area meets the criteria for classification as an OECM and conditions for inclusion in 30x30 must be assessed on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the international guidance on OECMs published by the IUCN³³. While OECMs do not have to be legally protected for nature, they must demonstrate protection and effective management for nature in the long-term through other means and they must deliver good biodiversity outcomes equivalent to those delivered by effectively managed protected areas. The IUCN guidance on OECMs explicitly states that areas that deliver conservation outcomes only over the short term or areas that are intended or offer potential to conserve nature but do not yet deliver conservation outcomes do not qualify as OECMs.

Individual sites should be put forward by the landowner or land manager for OECM consideration by Natural England. If assessed as meeting the criteria to be a potential OECM, this land could then enter the 30x30 pipeline. When regular monitoring of a potential OECM demonstrates good or recovering ecological condition, the OECM could then be reported to the World Database and contribute to the 30x30 target.



To assess an area of land as an OECM and for inclusion in 30x30 in England, we have set out the below checklist.

This checklist was made by nesting the international guidelines for OECMs set out by the IUCN underneath the two Link 30x30 conditions (which also align with the Government's criteria for 30x30 in the Nature Recovery Green Paper):

1. *Protected for nature in the long-term.*

- a. There must be sufficiently long-term governance over the land, whether through legal or other effective means, such as long-term security of tenure³⁴. This could be an agreement with the landowner such as a conservation covenant, a freehold owned by an eNGO, or a sufficiently long-term lease held by an eNGO.

2. *Well-managed for nature to ensure that regular monitoring demonstrates good or recovering condition.*

- a. The area must be managed, including for biodiversity, whether through legal or other effective means, and this must be sufficiently long-term, and set out in a published and transparent management agreement or plan. There should be a clear understanding set out in the management agreement that the area is effectively conserving biodiversity and the ecosystem systems that support biodiversity, and that, when delivering good biodiversity outcomes, the area could contribute to 30x30. While the management plan may also cover other aspects of land management, as OECMs may not be

managed primarily for nature, it should include specific references to how it will also deliver good outcomes for biodiversity, including actions to prevent environmentally-damaging activities, secure good management for nature, and operate a programme of regular monitoring. There should be third-party and expert verification of this management agreement to ensure the desired outcomes and the actions set out to achieve those outcomes will genuinely deliver good biodiversity outcomes. The management agreement, including plans for regular monitoring, should be funded in the long-term.

- b. The governance authority and persons responsible for management must give full and effective consent for participation in the 30x30 assessment programme. For example, the governing body should be clear that they want a particular area of their landholdings to contribute to 30x30 and clear on what is needed to support their land to deliver for 30x30, with the full participation of land managers, including through the management agreement.
- c. The area must be regularly monitored, at least every five years.
- d. Regular monitoring must show that the area is delivering good biodiversity outcomes, so that the area shows demonstrable signs of ecological recovery or is in good ecological condition.

The Government should publish and test criteria that potential OECMs would need to meet to demonstrate long-term protection, management for nature, and good biodiversity outcomes, in order to count towards 30x30.

OECMs may flex in and out of 30x30 based on whether the first governance criteria still stands (e.g., if a contract expires or is renewed) or whether they are in good or recovering ecological condition (condition two).

For example, a nature reserve may be owned and managed by an eNGO or an accredited nature conservation body (in the case of National Nature Reserves not already underpinned by a SSSI). To count toward 30x30, the eNGO should have a freehold or a sufficiently long-term leasehold and a management plan for nature in place, including an ambition to contribute to 30x30 and a programme of regular monitoring. These factors should all be considered for OECM assessment. When the land is also in good or recovering condition, this land should be reported as an OECM and should be considered to count towards the 30% target.



Case Study 1

Langford Lowfields (RSPB reserve)

An example of a site that should be considered in the pipeline as a Protected Area or as a potential Other Effective area-based Conservation Measure (OECM).

Langford Lowfields is a flagship partnership project between the RSPB and Tarmac, showcasing wetland habitat creation on a large scale. A thriving reedbed sits at the heart of this expanding reserve, with wildlife highlights including Bitterns, Brown Hares, Bearded Tits, Marsh Harriers, Avocets, wintering wildfowl, Starling murmurations, wildflowers, dragonflies and butterflies. The former quarry is now owned by the RSPB, and further areas will be transferred to RSPB ownership as quarrying ceases. Once ongoing restoration is complete, this site will feature the largest reedbed in the Midlands sitting at the heart of a wider wetlands complex. As at Hope Farm, some of the RSPB's management here relies on agricultural practices – but here the primary purpose of that management is solely to maximise benefits for nature, this site is not a protected area for nature – but as a site of particular (and increasing) importance for biodiversity, and that is managed for nature this site is a clear candidate for inclusion in the pipeline of sites that could contribute to the 30% target, either through designation as a protected area or recognition as an OECM. Key questions that would need to be considered would include the extent to which the site is secure for nature in the long term, and whether or not there is clear and sufficient evidence of both effective management for nature and that the biodiversity outcomes that are being delivered here are equivalent to those that would be delivered by a protected area, in line with internationally agreed 30x30 criteria.



Case Study 2

Wild Woodbury

An example of a site that should be considered in the pipeline as a potential Other Effective area-based Conservation Measure (OECM).

Wild Woodbury is a 170ha community rewilding project at Bere Regis in Dorset. Managed by Dorset Wildlife Trust and part of the Rewilding Britain network, it is already delivering major results, turning what was historically intensive arable land to a large-scale rewilding project for nature recovery. The land was purchased in 2021 by Dorset Wildlife Trust, thanks to significant support from Julia Davies and through the nutrient neutrality scheme, and interventions have been undertaken to hold back and store water on site through Stage Zero river restoration.

This site is not currently designated as a protected area for nature. It is, as staff and volunteer surveys have shown, a site of significant and growing importance for biodiversity. Over 1,650 species were recorded in summer surveys and eight Red List birds of conservation concern are breeding at the site, with skylarks for example having risen from two singing males in 2021 to 50 in 2023. As it continues its rewilding for nature journey, it is a clear candidate for inclusion in the pipeline of sites that could contribute to government's 30x30 target, likely through recognition as an OECM. Key questions for consideration include how this site will meet internationally agreed 30x30 criteria, including whether on-going monitoring demonstrates that biodiversity outcomes being delivered are equivalent to those being delivered by a protected area.



Case Study 3

Hope Farm (RSPB)

An example of a site that would not meet OECM criteria and should not count towards 30x30.

RSPB Hope Farm is an intensive arable farm in Cambridgeshire. It was purchased by the RSPB over 20 years ago to demonstrate, research and encourage wildlife-friendly farming. Here they are showing that it is possible to run a successful farming business that produces food, makes a profit, and is helping to combat the nature and climate crisis too. The evidence shows that Hope Farm is well-managed for nature (in part supported by a Countryside Stewardship Scheme) – soil health is improved and nature that can be beneficial to food production is promoted. There has been a steady rise in arable farmland birds breeding at the farm, and birds like Linnet, Yellowhammer, Skylark and Reed Bunting have at least tripled in number. However, Hope Farm is all about showing how much nature can be encouraged and supported in the wider landscape beyond protected areas, both for its intrinsic value and to maintain a healthy ecosystem needed to grow our food. This also supports nature in protected areas by reducing the polluting effects of agricultural inputs and making the landscape more supportive for wildlife that might move out of or between protected areas. Hope Farm is not a legally protected area for nature and it would not meet the internationally accepted criteria as an OECM, as its primary objective (as a productive and profitable arable farming operation) is not compatible with delivering biodiversity outcomes equivalent to those of a protected area. It would therefore not count towards the 30% – what it provides is a fabulous and increasingly nature-rich example of the changes that are so desperately needed for nature's recovery across the other 70% of England's land, rebalancing food production and other objectives so that the business's resilience is mutually benefitting with the conservation and renewal of nature.

Recommendations to achieve 30x30 on land

The Government can achieve 30x30 on land in England by improving and extending the protected sites network, strengthening protected landscapes to support nature recovery in large portions of these landscapes potentially contributing around 10% to the 30% target, and identifying and using additional protected sites and OECMs to recover nature on the ground.

The Government must:

- *Retain, strengthen and improve implementation of existing site protection rules for protected sites*, supported by increased funding and expertise, to deliver stronger protections for sites and enable the attainment of favourable condition.
- *Introduce a legally-binding target for protected sites condition* through the Environment Act 2021, to prioritise action and resources for the improvement of the condition of the protected sites network.
- *Significantly increase resourcing for protected sites management and monitoring* by Natural England to ensure regular and up-to-date monitoring of SSSIs to inform management of the protected sites network and to assess progress towards 30x30.
- *Publish and implement a new approach for assessing the condition of protected sites* in order to have a more accurate assessment of protected sites in 'recovering' condition and move to a feature-based approach to assessment.
- *Significantly expand the protected sites network* to effectively protect more of the most important terrestrial and freshwater sites and species in England, including by implementing the SPA and SSSI reviews.
- *Update the legislative framework of protected landscapes for nature* with specific purposes for nature's recovery and duties on public bodies to further those purposes.
- *Support protected landscapes' ability to contribute to 30x30* through strengthened Management Plans and Nature Recovery Plans for nature, including through a requirement for a local target for contributing to the national 30% target and a map and plan to achieve this target, alongside significantly increased funding.
- *Consult on and publish criteria for potential OECMs* based on IUCN international guidance for case-by-case assessment of individual potential OECMs to demonstrate long-term protection, management for nature, and good biodiversity outcomes, in order to count towards 30x30.
- *Publish and implement a land use framework for England* which incentivises change on the ground to support the expansion and improvement of the protected sites network and protected landscapes and the development of potential OECMs.

ACHIEVING 30X30 AT SEA

Overall assessment

A maximum of 8% of English seas could be said to be protected for nature.

Wildlife and Countryside Link analysis found that in 2023, a maximum of 8% of English seas could be said to be protected for nature against the most damaging forms of fishing activity, one of the primary drivers of marine biodiversity loss³⁵.

This figure comprises:

- 0.42% of English seas protected through new HPMA.
- 5.4% of English seas protected through offshore MPAs with bottom-towed fishing gear bans in place.
- 2% of English seas protected through inshore MPAs with bottom-towed fishing gear bans in place.

We recommend measures to increase the HPMA contribution to at least 10% of English seas. The remaining portion of the 30% target could be made by restricting all damaging activities across the Marine Protected Area network. UK seas are facing unprecedented pressures requiring urgent action to safeguard fragile marine life. Recent record UK sea temperatures of 4-5°C above average have placed extreme pressure on sealife, mass die offs of crustaceans in the North East of England reveal a highly degraded ecosystem, and Government assessments continue to show that the majority of our Marine Protected Areas are in an unfavourable condition.



Research has revealed just how poorly our MPA network is performing in safeguarding our marine life. Indeed, a new assessment suggests that just 16.4% of England's MPAs have all their marine features in favourable and recovering condition³⁶. The Government's new legally binding target requires that at least 70% of protected marine features are in a favourable condition by the end of 2042³⁷.

This demonstrates a failure to protect our most iconic wild marine species such as seahorses, seals and dolphins, as well as rare and vulnerable marine habitats such as cold-water coral reefs and seagrass beds. This is a failure of environmental stewardship as well as a threat to economic prosperity and vulnerable coastal communities. The Office for National Statistics estimates that UK marine natural capital assets currently have a value of £211 billion, which includes the value of significant marine carbon sequestration; this value is at risk while the state of the marine environment continues to deteriorate³⁸.

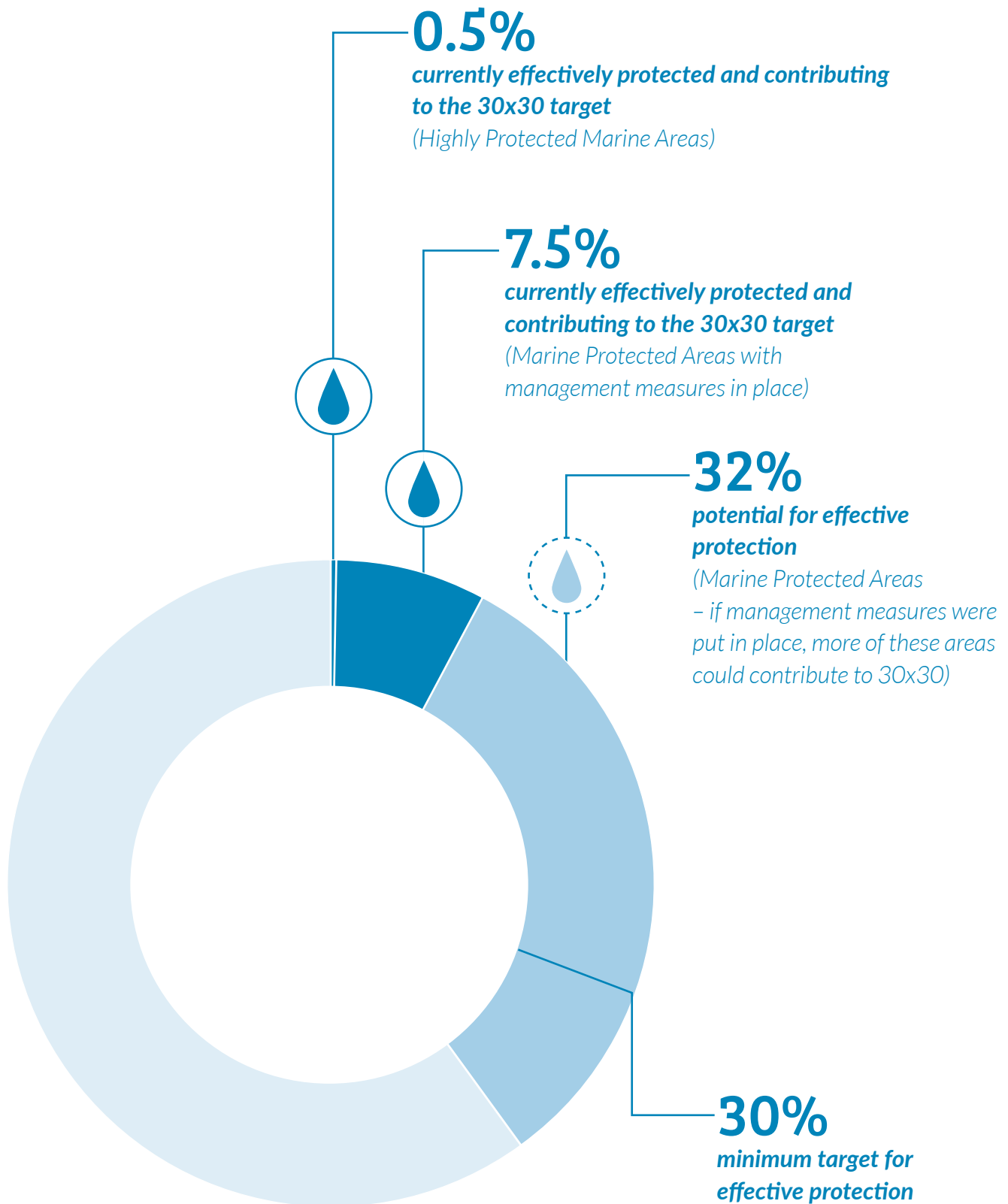
Achieving 30x30 at sea means delivering a strong marine protected area network which defends against all damaging activities, allowing marine life to recover. This must be accompanied by action to tackle the threats of development, pollution and overfishing across our seas.

Marine policy is guided by the UK Marine Strategy which sets out a framework for delivering Good Environmental Status (GES) in UK seas. The forthcoming update to the strategy will be 'part 3', the programme of measures, which outlines the steps the Government will take to recover the marine environment. The consultation on part 3 closed in November 2021, however the Government has yet to respond with an updated strategy. The continued delay, with the consultation website's last update stating that "we now aim to publish by the end of 2022", means that a central pillar of cross-UK marine policy is missing³⁹. This delay is indicative of wider inertia on improving the management of the UK's marine environment.

Ministers have said the Government "recognise that there are growing spatial tensions" at sea. There are numerous ambitious targets for offshore developments and effective planning will be vital to help secure marine protections for nature (ensuring the delivery of 30x30), significant offshore wind power and a sustainable fisheries sector. However, it will be necessary to consider the carrying capacity of our seas and effectively prioritise the available sea space, in order to meet UK targets for both net zero and biodiversity loss.



30x30 Progress: at Sea



Expanding the network

More Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs)

Three new Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) have been designated since our last report. It is positive to see the initial progress of the HPMAs programme which represents an important new 'gold standard' designation. These sites will provide havens where wildlife can recover and thrive, without pressures from human activities. The three sites consist of Allonby Bay (27.6 km²), Dolphin Head (462 km²), and North East of Farnes Deep (491.8 km²). This totals 981km²: **0.42% of English waters**⁴⁰.

The coverage of HPMAs would have been higher if two of the five proposed HPMAs sites had not been dropped by Ministers earlier this year. The two rejected sites covered an additional 191.1km² of ecologically valuable marine habitats. This scaling back was particularly disappointing as the programme will now not deliver the 5 pilot sites deemed the 'bare minimum' in Lord Benyon's initial 2020 review of HPMAs⁴¹.

By 2030, at least 30% of English waters should be managed as genuinely protected areas for nature's recovery. This means at least 10% of English waters being designated as HPMAs, enabling nature's recovery by prohibiting all extractive, destructive and depositional activities⁴². The remainder should be in effectively protected MPAs, managed following a Whole Site Approach and allowing only extremely limited activities which do not hinder the achievement of conservation objectives.

More widely, some key sites and species are still omitted from the MPA network in England. Beyond the existing sites, it is critical to conduct a sufficiency review to assess where the gaps remain so they may be addressed and ensure that the network of MPAs across English waters is ecologically coherent and truly supports species recovery. This is particularly vital with seabirds and SPAs, with critically endangered species such as the Balearic shearwater excluded from the network as well as key breeding

sites and most foraging sites, with some exceptions for terns. The last UK SPA Review published by JNCC highlights that 'review of SPA provision in the marine environment is needed for at least 49 species'⁴³. This is particularly urgent given the continued failure to achieve GES for seabird populations and the catastrophic impacts of avian flu.

Future expansion of the MPA network should also be guided by climate considerations, as current sites were designated without reference to the climate emergency. Addressing this will involve new designations alongside management measures within the existing network of MPAs protecting important blue carbon habitats. The UK will soon be the world's first nation to fully map its marine carbon stores; this map will be a key tool to support improvements to the MPA network when published in the Autumn⁴⁴.



Improving the network

Strengthening Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

Fisheries management has stalled this year and we await additional byelaws to protect offshore MPA sites this Autumn. Meanwhile management remains extremely poor across the majority of the offshore MPA network, with damaging activities such as bottom trawling still taking place within the vast majority of sites. MPAs cannot count toward the 30x30 goal while they do not have appropriate management measures in place to restrict damaging activities across the whole of the site.

Our last report welcomed the Marine Management Organisation's (MMO) programme for assessing sites and implementing byelaws to manage fishing activity in all English offshore MPAs by 2024. While our headline figure for marine protection increased last year as welcome progress was made to deliver fisheries byelaws for some offshore MPAs, there have been no new byelaws delivered in the last 12 months (as of 31 August 2023).

New management measures were consulted on in January this year to restrict damaging fishing activity within 13 additional MPAs. These are yet to be implemented however, with now just over a year left to deliver the vast majority of byelaws; a particular challenge with a General Election due next year.

This means that the four offshore MPA sites which have received protection from bottom-towed fishing gear through the byelaw programme remain:

- Dogger Bank Special Area of Conservation (SAC) where a byelaw will prohibit bottom towed fishing across the whole site, covering 12,331km².
- South Dorset Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) where a byelaw will prohibit the use of bottom towed fishing gear throughout the whole site, covering 193km².

Together these equate to 5.4% of English seas.

In two other sites, more limited byelaws protect designated features from bottom-towed fishing gear:

- Inner Dowsing, Race Bank and North Ridge Special Area of Conservation (SAC) where a byelaw will prohibit bottom towed fishing and the use of pots and anchored nets and lines over known areas of designated habitats within the SAC, with 32% of the 845km² SAC protected.
- The Canyons Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) where a byelaw will prohibit bottom towed fishing and the use of anchored nets and lines over known areas of designated habitats within the MCZ, with 87% of the 661km² MCZ protected. Together, the protected area of these sites equates to 0.4% of English seas.

Within inshore waters, 4,963km² of English seas are both in an MPA and protected by a byelaw restricting bottom towed fishing gear⁴⁵. **This equates to 2% of English seas.**

Taking these figures together, a maximum of 8% of English seas could be said to be protected for nature against the most damaging fishing activity, one of the primary drivers of marine biodiversity loss⁴⁶.

In our last report, we noted our concern that many MPAs are not effectively protected from offshore developments such as cabling and new oil and gas projects, meaning that these ecosystems are threatened. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that development is ramping up across our seas, including in MPAs. Therefore, while the above figure includes MPAs protected from the most damaging form of fishing, the cumulative impacts of other pressures such as development, pollution, other fishing methods and climate change, may continue to damage and degrade these MPAs. 8% is therefore a maximum figure; representing an overestimate of the area of our seas effectively protected for nature from all damaging activities.



Case Study

Inner Dowsing, Race Bank and North Ridge SAC

The Inner Dowsing, Race Bank and North Ridge MPA is located off the south Lincolnshire Coast. It is designated to protect important marine habitats with the tops of the sandbanks characterised by communities of polychaete worms and amphipod crustaceans. Areas between the sandbanks contain a diverse mosaic of ecosystems on mixed and gravelly sands. However, despite recent action by the MMO to restrict damaging fishing activity across parts of the site, it has become increasingly busy with a large range of activities taking place, see MMO map below.

Natural England has found that existing offshore windfarm turbine infrastructure, including hard substrata in the form of rock protection for cabling protection and scour prevention, has “resulted in a cumulative change/loss of approximately 0.063km² of Annex I Sandbank habitat and its sub-features over the 25-year lifespan of the project.”^{47, 48} This demonstrates the risk to valuable marine ecosystems if development is undertaken within MPAs.





Case Study

Developments in Dogger Bank SAC

Dogger Bank Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is a rich, productive, and unique sandbank feature in the North Sea that has sustained sand eel and commercially important fish populations for centuries. It is regarded as a particularly important part of the UK MPA network because it is the largest single expanse of a sandbank in UK waters. The marine life associated with the sandbank habitat includes worms, amphipods, bivalves, crabs, flatfish, and dense aggregations of brittlestars. It is therefore welcome that the MMO has acted to restrict bottom-towed gears across the entire site.

However, current and future oil and gas activity undermine existing and future protection and drastically reduce the benefits which could be delivered by the mobile fishing ban. The Dogger Bank SAC is already heavily impacted by the offshore fossil fuel industry. Within the boundary of the SAC, analysis by Oceana & Uplift has shown there are 176 wells, 13 platforms and a network of 633km of associated pipelines⁴⁹. The estimated physical footprint of the platform and well infrastructure is 0.188km². The estimated area impacted by the associated drill cuttings for these wells and platforms is 71km².

This is in addition to other existing and planned developments including windfarms, telecoms cables, and carbon dioxide storage licence areas.

As increasing development occurs in English seas, determining whether there is adequate sea space to deliver the ambitions of each sector will be vital. Nature's recovery should be integrated into every aspect of Marine Spatial Planning. Both the protection of nature, including through strong MPAs which enable nature's recovery, and policies for achieving net zero targets, should be prioritised in a Marine Spatial Prioritisation process which effectively plans how we use our seas. The Government must deliver a clear plan outlining what activities can take place at sea and where are most appropriate places for these, accompanied by a just transition plan for any industries affected by the process. Government work to prioritise activities through Marine Spatial Planning is still at an early stage and must recognise the importance of healthy ecosystems for sustaining fisheries, promoting carbon sequestration and providing other ecosystem services.



The Government should complete the MMO fisheries byelaw programme by bringing forward protection from damaging fishing for the remaining 36 offshore MPAs without delay, with protections being fully implemented by the end of 2024 at the latest. Protections for the initial four sites were delayed, which raises fears that the 2024 deadline for protecting the whole offshore network will be missed. To complete the required strengthening of the network and associated protection of marine blue carbon, the Government needs to speedily implement full-site closure protections for the remaining offshore English MPAs protected for the seabed and explore all other options to secure urgent protections. In addition, across Government fisheries policy, measures must be implemented to address displacement, where protection measures simply push fishing activity elsewhere. This requires new assessments of overall fleet capacity and addressing fisheries and MPA policy as a whole.

An alternative and complementary approach to fisheries byelaws would be to use licensing powers and the ability to place conditions on them. The 2020 Fisheries Act gives the Government additional post-Brexit powers to impose limits on fishing vessel licences under all flags in UK seas. Without going through lengthy consultation processes, placing conditions on licences could be swiftly implemented, revoking permissions to fish in offshore MPAs and offering speedy protection. Recognising that delivering 30x30 at sea will require significant funding, the Government must provide the resources required for effective management and monitoring and also properly fund enforcement agencies to deliver conservation goals.



Stronger monitoring and enforcement within the marine environment

Non-compliance with existing management measures puts the integrity of 30x30 and the Marine Protected Area network at risk. Currently, monitoring is completely inadequate in the offshore environment and management measures must be effectively enforced.

The use of innovative technologies, such as Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) on fishing vessels, should be used to effectively monitor activities within MPAs. The Government is consulting on increasing the use of REM, however current proposals lack ambition both in terms of timelines for implementation and the proportion of the fishing fleet which will be covered⁵⁰.

Lack of resources for monitoring and management

Current levels of inadequate monitoring make it difficult to assess the condition of protected sites and identify threats to achieving conservation objectives at sea.

Without adequate monitoring it is impossible to accurately determine the condition of MPAs and to introduce adaptive management measures when needed to protect MPAs, following the precautionary approach. Furthermore, to determine the benefit of the MPA network for nature, appropriate regular scientific and ecological monitoring is vital.

Regular monitoring should show clear evidence of both good management for nature and that the site is either in good condition or showing demonstrable signs of ecological recovery. This cannot be achieved without adequate funding for the relevant SNCBs. Recognising that delivering 30x30 will require significant funding, the Government must provide the resources required for effective monitoring, management and enforcement to deliver conservation goals.

Bycatch

Thousands of animals continue to be bycaught, injured and killed in UK fisheries, including within MPAs. The Government has failed to take urgent and effective action to address fishing related deaths of marine life including seals and dolphins. We have yet to see the establishment of clear SMART targets for continual reductions in sensitive species bycatch in order to minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch within a set timeframe.



Recommendations to achieve 30x30 at sea

The powers and structures required to achieve 30x30 at sea are largely in place, however the speed and ambition of new designations and management measures needs to be significantly ramped up over the coming years.

The Government must:

- *Set byelaws through the MMO programme to restrict damaging fishing activity across the Marine Protected Area network by the end of 2024.* MPAs must be protected across the whole site rather than simply the designated features.
- *Designate as an absolute minimum at least 10% of English seas in Highly Protected Marine Areas.*
- *Deliver a new system of Marine Spatial Planning* which assesses the carrying capacity of English Seas and prioritises the achievement of nature and climate targets, including through the protection of MPAs and the delivery of 30x30.
- *Address displacement, where protection measures simply push fishing activity elsewhere.* This requires new assessments of overall fleet capacity and addressing these issues holistically.
- *Complete the SPA sufficiency review required for 49 species,* crucial to determining which protected sites are delivering for seabirds and how MPAs could better protect our important seabirds.
- *Address bycatch and a lack of fisheries monitoring through mandatory use of innovative technologies*

including Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras on all vessels in English waters, including smaller vessels.

- *Provide the resources required for the effective monitoring and management of the MPA network,* prohibiting all damaging activities and properly funding enforcement agencies to deliver conservation goals.

CONCLUSION

The Government has made limited progress on 30x30 in the last year. There are clear opportunities to expand and improve area effectively protected for nature to at least 30% of land and sea by 2030 – action is needed now.

The Government must deliver the 30x30 target in England if we are to achieve nature's recovery, as well as meet international targets and domestic ambitions.

The Government must improve the existing areas protected for nature across land and sea and designate new areas to effectively conserve and recover more areas for nature.

With urgent and significant action now, meaningful delivery of 30x30 is achievable, creating a thriving and resilient network of wildlife and habitats across England.



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