

The Environmental Land Management scheme and 30x30: Managing land for nature's recovery

Summary

In this briefing, we consider the contribution that a well-designed Environmental Land Management (ELM) programme can make to ensuring that 30% of the land is well-managed for nature by 2030. We conclude:

1. Environmental Land Management (ELM) has a significant role to play in contributing to the positive management of land for nature. A targeted, robust, and well-funded ELM programme must drive the recovery of nature at scale and ensure more sustainable management of land across the entire landscape. ELM could also contribute to achieving 30x30 by supporting parcels of land to meet the conditions we think land must satisfy to genuinely contribute to the 30% target.
2. In our view, only land that is afforded long-term protection from harm **and** effective, appropriate management for nature should be counted toward 30x30.
3. This means that, in itself, participation in an ELM scheme is unlikely to satisfy the conditions needed for inclusion in 30x30. For example, land managed under the Sustainable Farming Incentive is unlikely to be afforded long-term protection against harm, or contribute enough to nature's recovery to be counted toward 30x30.
4. However, in some circumstances, land under an ELM scheme could contribute to 30x30 if it is designed to ensure that long-term protection from harm and positive management for nature can be achieved, in combination with other long-term protection for nature or potentially through participation alone.
5. Landscape Recovery schemes may be able to contribute to positive management for nature in a way that works alongside other designations to make areas suitable for inclusion in 30x30. For example, long-term Landscape Recovery contracts for the creation and restoration of habitats at scale may complement improved landscape designations (such as AONBs and National Parks) or conservation covenants to make portions of those designations suitable for inclusion in 30x30. If the Landscape Recovery scheme is designed with multi-decade contracts that specify strict conditions preventing harm and requiring environmental management and monitoring to deliver gold standard outcomes for nature, it may then be able to meet the criteria of long-term protection and positive management in order to contribute to 30x30.
6. The Local Nature Recovery component will likely not meet the grade in itself, or even if paired with other designations, because it lacks the longevity of contracts to ensure long-term protection from harm and to ensure positive management measures secure lasting good environmental outcomes required to count towards 30x30.

Introduction

The Government's commitment to manage at least 30% of land for nature by 2030 is a significant opportunity to protect important wildlife-rich places and restore degraded ecosystems.

The effectiveness of the 30x30 pledge will depend on the rules that apply in protected areas, not just the extent of designations. To meaningfully realise the 30x30 target, two simple conditions must be met: land must be afforded long-term protection for nature with protection from harm and be effectively managed for nature and monitored to ensure that nature is in a good or recovering condition.¹

While the Government has suggested that 26% of land in England is already protected,² the majority of this area is not specifically designated for nature's protection.³ At present just 8% of England's land is designated specifically for nature's protection and a large percentage of these sites are not in good condition for nature – only 38.4% of SSSIs are in favourable condition and monitoring is inadequate.⁴ This means only 3% of land could reliably be said to be specifically protected and well managed for nature towards the 30% ambition, rather than the 26% suggested by Government.

Increasing the extent of land that is genuinely managed for nature and in good or recovering condition should be a priority for government, both as part of its plan to halt nature's decline by 2030, and in order to set an example on the global stage of how the 30x30 commitment can be met with environmental integrity.

Condition 1: Long-term protection 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.

Many of the additional areas that are among England's best sites for nature and that should attract secure, long-term protection through conservation designations and other mechanisms are well-known. Government has undertaken several reviews which highlight obvious gaps, for example in the designations of SSSIs, which were only ever designed as a representative sample of the best sites, but to date has failed to implement these reviews.⁵ Many of the places which have the greatest potential for nature's recovery fall within National Parks and AONBs, large parts of which could, if reformed, also become part of the 30%.

Condition 2: Good management for nature and in good and recovering condition

Where land is protected, it must be managed for nature, regularly monitored and in good or recovering condition to meaningfully contribute towards the 30% target. While there is a dearth of data (as of 2019 only 58% of SSSIs in England had been assessed in the last six years), a large

¹ https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Link_30x30_paper_18%20November.pdf

² The Government has claimed that the proposed designation of two new AONBs and two extended AONBs would bring the land protected in England to 28%. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ambitious-proposals-to-create-and-improve-protected-landscapes-across-england>).

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S235198942100295X?via%3Dihub>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925414/1_Extent_and_condition_of_protected_areas_2020_accessible.pdf

⁵ For example, the 2nd and 3rd UK SPA Reviews, Glover Review

percentage of existing important sites for nature are in poor condition (only 38.4% of SSSIs are in favourable condition).⁶ The data points to land management as being among the reasons for unfavourable condition. Overgrazing, undergrazing, water pollution (including agricultural run-off) and drainage are all among the top 10 reasons for unfavourable condition.⁷

Making the case for nature-focussed farming and Environmental Land Management

Driving good management for nature and monitoring is necessary to achieving the 30x30 target. Land managers, farmers, and Environmental Land Management schemes have a vital role to play by both bringing existing protected areas into recovery and driving the recovery of additional areas that will need to be protected and managed for nature. Land managers must be supported to deliver good management for nature with guidance and advice. Alongside driving good management for nature, land managers should be supported through ELM in providing greater public access to the countryside and greenspaces. The public support generated by giving people greater understanding of, and connection with, nature will be of considerable benefit to managing land for nature's recovery.

Participation in an ELM scheme in itself is unlikely to satisfy the conditions needed for inclusion in 30x30, as in our view, only land that is afforded long-term protection for nature and effective, appropriate management for nature should be included in the 30% target.

However, in some circumstances, ELM could contribute to 30x30 if it is designed to ensure that long-term protection from harm and positive management for nature can be achieved, either through participation alone or in combination with other long-term protection for nature.

Landscape Recovery component

In existing protected areas, and in new areas that would then need to be protected in order to meet the 30x30 target, the Landscape Recovery scheme should drive an ambitious nature-first approach to land management to deliver and monitor gold standard outcomes.

The Landscape Recovery scheme may be able to drive positive management for nature alongside designations to make areas suitable for inclusion in 30x30. For example, long-term Landscape Recovery contracts for the creation and restoration of habitats at scale may complement improved landscape designations (such as AONBs and National Parks) to make portions of those designations suitable for inclusion in 30x30. Land under conservation covenants could also offer long-term protection for nature that, paired with the positive management measures from a Landscape Recovery scheme, could contribute to the 30% target.

Whether or not this scheme could in itself secure a sufficient level of long-term protection for nature to contribute to the 30% will depend on its design and its duration. If the Landscape Recovery component is designed with long-term contracts that specify strict conditions that prevent harm, as

⁶https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925414/1_Extent_and_condition_of_protected_areas_2020_accessible.pdf

⁷ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/documents/positions/safeguarding-sites/pressures-affecting-conservation-status-of-designated-natural-features-in-scotland.pdf>

well as require monitoring to deliver gold standard outcomes for nature, it may then be able to contribute to the 30% target. The design features that are needed are:

- Longevity (including permanent land use changes)
- Scale and quality of restoration/creation of habitats
- Targeted species-specific interventions
- Criteria for monitoring and evaluation
- Measures to avoid damaging activities

Local Nature Recovery component

The aims and goals for Local Nature Recovery are—so far—ambitious and laudable. Local Nature Recovery could and should be used to support the recovery of existing protected areas. However, this scheme will likely not meet the grade in itself because it lacks the long-term protection for nature and from harm and positive management measures required to secure land for 30x30.

Even if paired with other designations that could, if reformed, provide long-term protection from harm, such as National Parks or AONBs, Local Nature Recovery contracts will not be of a sufficiently long duration to secure positive outcomes for nature in order to be included in the 30% target. Defra has indicated that they may be as short as 5 years in duration and up to 15 years. While we support the shorter-term flexible nature of Local Nature Recovery contracts, this design feature means it will not require management measures in the long-term which are necessary to secure lasting positive outcomes for nature. Of course, being in a Local Nature Recovery contract does not exclude land that already satisfies the conditions of long-term protection and positive management for nature from counting towards the 30% target, such as land within SSSIs, Local Wildlife Sites, or eNGO nature reserves that is in good or recovering condition.

Connecting and buffering sites for nature in designations, the Local Nature Recovery scheme will be fundamental to driving the delivery of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (which should target where the Local Nature Recovery component is used) and the development of the Nature Recovery Network (NRN) more widely, meeting the Government's habitat creation and restoration targets, and contributing to species recovery to meet the species abundance target.

Sustainable Farming Incentive

The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) will need to drive real change towards sustainable land management across the entire English landscape to achieve wider targets such as halting and reversing the decline of biodiversity. Ambition in the SFI will also have to be significantly improved to contribute significantly to halting nature's decline. For example, by encouraging between 40-50% of farmers to manage 10% of their land for nature.

This should be the ambition for the SFI, however we do not envisage the SFI will meet the grade to be included in 30% because land managed under the SFI is unlikely to be afforded long-term protection against harm. The nature of the SFI design means flexibility for the farmer, who can change their contracts possibly as frequently as annually. While we support this design mechanism, this is not a suitable contract type for the 30x30 target. There is also unlikely to be the scale and depth of monitoring on land required under SFI.

However, the SFI could and should, if appropriately designed, support the recovery of existing protected areas for nature by tackling the drivers of poor condition in these sites that are due to management beyond their boundaries (for example, water quality at catchment scale).

Monitoring and enforcement of ELM

The current lack of monitoring of our existing protected areas risks the delivery and measurement of progress towards 30x30 and the effective targeting of public money to where it can deliver the most for nature and climate. There is an urgent need to establish baselines and long-term regular monitoring to ensure the right management in the right places, demonstrate that ecological recovery is delivered and sustained, and identify and protect additional areas that will be needed if targets are to be met.

Conclusion

Land managers have a critical role to play in improving the ecological condition of land and contributing to nature's recovery. A targeted, robust and well-funded Environmental Land Management programme could contribute to achieving 30x30 by bringing existing protected areas into recovery, driving the recovery of nature in additional areas that will need to be protected and managed for nature in order to be included in the 30% target, and tackling some of the drivers of poor condition that originate beyond the boundaries of these sites. Across the landscape, ELM must contribute to the delivery of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Nature Recovery Network to drive nature's recovery at scale and ensure all land is managed more sustainably to address the ecological and climate crises.

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