

A State of Nature target

The Environment Bill offers a unique opportunity for the Government to lead the world in setting a domestic legal target to halt biodiversity loss by 2030. Setting a “State of Nature” target of this kind would be a world first, it would be measurable, and it would be achievable.

However, the Government’s proposed species abundance target (amendment 22) [falls short](#). It requires a target to be set for species abundance, it requires 2030 to be the target date, but it does not set the level of ambition—to halt decline by 2030.

We support amendment 24, which would replace the duty to “further” the objective of halting the decline of species abundance with a duty to “meet” that objective.

Why is a State of Nature target needed?

The Government has accepted the need to halt the decline of nature. In the [G7 Nature Compact](#), in the [Leaders’ Pledge for Nature](#), and in its [response to the Dasgupta Review](#), the Government stated its intention to “halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030”.

Previous global agreements to halt nature’s decline failed because global goals have not been matched by domestic implementation. The UN [Global Biodiversity Outlook 5](#) showed that the world had failed to meet any of its targets to halt biodiversity loss set under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Environment Bill is largely framework legislation without a definite environmental objective. Adding a State of Nature target could help to upgrade the Bill to landmark legislation, setting a clear direction for environmental improvement.

Why is it needed on the face of the bill?

The Government’s proposal for a species abundance target does not lock in level of ambition to halt species decline by 2030. Instead, it merely requires the target to “further” the objective of halting nature’s decline. This means that there would be no fixed date at all for achieving the ultimate objective of stopping biodiversity loss.

Under [the Government’s proposed approach](#), the level of ambition for the species abundance target would be set by Statutory Instrument along with other targets, in October 2022 at the earliest. Setting half a target of this kind undermines the very purpose of a statutory target. It does not provide a fixed point of accountability, it does not give certainty to investors, and it does not create a clear requirement for all Government Departments to achieve a clear goal.

The Government may argue that it would be appropriate to wait to set the target following consultation. However, there are three problems with this approach:

- (1) **No guarantee of ambition:** The final target could fall far short of an objective to halt species decline by 2030 and there would be no statutory obligation to set that target for a later date.
- (2) **A failure of leadership:** Part of the reason for setting a state of nature target is to inspire action in other countries, but the Government’s approach would mean the target is set *after* COP-15 Convention on Biological Diversity talks, which aim to set a new global goal for nature.
- (3) **A critical delay in implementation:** The State of Nature target is achievable but challenging. There are just nine years for action. Waiting until 2023 for certainty on the target would mean a critical delay in the action and investment needed to halt nature’s decline.

What would a target look like?

A species abundance target would be based on an index of hundreds of species, aggregated together to show an overall trend in biodiversity. The objective would be to “bend the curve” of the index, so that decline is halted by 2030.

The “[State of Nature](#)” index is one example of how this could be done. It measures the fortunes of 696 terrestrial and freshwater species. The index shows a significant decline of 13% in average abundance since 1970, and has fallen by 6% over the past 10 years. Since 1970, 41% of species have decreased and 26% have increased in abundance. 15% are threatened with extinction from Great Britain.

The index should be designed to cover terrestrial, freshwater and marine species, and could include plants and fungi as well as mammals, birds and insects. The precise details of the index could be agreed by Statutory Instrument in 2022; the important thing is to set the overall level of ambition in law now.

Ideally, an ambitious target would also set measures for the extent and condition of wildlife-rich habitats, and for avoiding individual extinctions. However, a well-designed species abundance target could serve as a reasonable proxy for the overall state of the natural environment, with more detailed targets set later.

Is it achievable?

A 2030 species abundance target should be the first step toward the 25 Year Environment Plan promise of passing on the environment in better condition—so further long-term targets should aim for the recovery of species and habitats.

After many decades of decline, halting the loss of biodiversity by 2030 will be challenging. However, well-established conservation science shows that it is achievable. It will require a combination of halting the main pressures on biodiversity (chiefly from intensive agriculture, unsustainable development, pollution and over-abstraction of water), as well as positive action for restoration (such as investment in habitat creation).

Many of the policy options needed to achieve the target are already under development. Together, strong Environmental Land Management programme and farming regulation; biodiversity gain requirements in development; and protection of 30% of the land and sea for nature could deliver much of the effort required to meet the target. Setting the target would help to ensure that those policies are designed and delivered with the necessary consistency and ambition, and that all Departments play their part in meeting the goal.

Conclusion

Without a State of Nature target, the Environment Bill is rudderless. It does not set a direction of travel for environmental improvement. Government amendment 22 falls far short of a “net zero for nature” promised by the Secretary of State because it does not set a level of ambition.

Failure to halt the decline of biodiversity would lead to species extinction, economic losses and compromise the health and welfare of future generations. Without a target in the Bill, this crucial opportunity for the UK to show global leadership ahead of COP-15 will be lost.

Amendment 24, requiring a target to be set that will “meet” the objective of halting the decline of biodiversity, is a simple and achievable way for the Government to inspire the action and investment needed to help avert continuing ecological decline, and begin to restore our natural world.