

HRLN 27 - Evidence from: GWCT Cymru

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith | Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee

Atal a gwrthdroi colli natur erbyn 2030 | Halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030

1. Your views on the effectiveness of current policies / funds / statutory duties in halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030.

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

In the UK protection is synonymous with legal status yet the IUCN protected area definition refers to “other effective means to achieve long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values”. We therefore welcome the Welsh Government’s plan to explore the role of OECMs.

The current policy approach of increasing the extent of legally protected areas to combat continuing wildlife decline is not encouraging as the record of our protected areas in supporting nature recovery is not good. It is not the intention to ‘protect’ wildlife that is failing; it is the concept of protection as an effective delivery measure. Just applying legally binding protection to an area or species does not work e.g. giving legal protection to water voles did not help their conservation and neither does habitat restoration alone; whereas habitat restoration combined with the removal of American mink does. Aside from this most of the existing SSSI designated sites are not achieving “Favourable Status”; so presumably these would not be eligible to be included. The cost of management of designated sites which require nature to be held in aspic to halt natural processes is expensive as proved through the many sites owned or at least Manged by Natural Resources Wales which are not in Favourable Condition. It is also unpopular with farmers and landowners as it not only reduces potential revenue income from a piece of land but also becoming a designated site can halve its capital asset value.

GWCT research and demonstrations show that nature can thrive alongside the production of food. We believe that farmers have the interest and the will along with the means to delivering more nature if the right levers are in place to

encourage this. We are happy to take members of the committee out to farms in Wales who are already delivering nature alongside food production.

We would like to include GWCT Increased bird numbers and yields graph here but unable to do so.

The tools available for the minimisation of predation pressure as part of the conservation of key species where breeding success is constraining recovery are being reduced e.g Humane Cable Restraints used in recovery of ground nesting birds such as the curlew. Another example is the removal of magpies (whose numbers have doubled from what they were in the 1960) from General Licence 004 will affect hedgerow birds as demonstrated in trials (see more details in 3 below). We also believe that an open and honest conversation around the level of protection for species is needed to allow for protection to be variable according to the conservation success of the species given that some species at risk of local extinctions are predated by protected species.

The IUCN Green List regards good governance, sound design and planning and effective management as the baseline components supporting successful conservation outcomes. These need to be incorporated into Welsh policy design.

Future policy needs to engage with farmers/landowners see Q4 and Q5.

2. Your views on the progress towards implementing the Biodiversity Deep Dive recommendations.

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

1. Protected sites – as we outlined in answer to Q1 we do not believe this should be the main driver of policy as it is the bottom-up actions of land managers/farmers that need support not top down designations that can restrict management actions and thereby limit the conservation toolbox which is very site, species and season specific. That said a spatial map outlining areas of focus (without designation) would aid the need for connectivity in recovery actions.
2. Nature recovery exemplar areas/OECMs – we support this initiative and so would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the working group to deliver it.
3. Designated landscapes – we support the desire for designated landscapes to provide spatial and strategic guidance for nature restoration actions but don't believe that reforming the statutory duties will necessarily deliver. As said before farmer/land owner engagement is vital and so it is important that national park authorities support their motivations through guidance rather than designation.
4. Marine/seascapes -There is a gap that exists between freshwater protection and

marine protection. Our Head of Fisheries Dylan Roberts can provide further information if required.

5. Strong foundation – we support the government's ambitions to improve education and awareness and to support the private sector in nature recovery delivery. We would like to engage further with WG on this.

6. Unlock finance – discrepancies between funding cycles and the long term needs of nature recovery projects is a hurdle that needs to be overcome, particularly if 30by30 ambitions are to be realised. Funding cycles are a barrier to long term conservation projects as funding is often shorter term and funding cycles based on the financial calendar year make planning and carrying out work within a nesting season for example almost impossible. Funding needs to be guaranteed for longer than 3 years, a 5 years minimum period and actionable conservation should be sought. Furthermore, repeat or continued funding should be based on outcomes delivered on the ground from any previous funding received to ensure that money goes to projects which are achieving best results.

7. Monitoring – this needs to involve 'trusted partners' which should be involved in the task group. The GWCT would welcome an opportunity to be involved.

Technology should be sought as part of delivering value for money to ensure that most of the money is being spent on active conservation. Among a suite of technology-based solutions that we are working on are drones to find curlew chicks and working with Liverpool University to build AI recognition with camera traps and sound recorders to identify and count species.

8. Public bodies – we support this but feel that WG should be the leader in nature recovery and therefore support the deployment of an effective conservation toolbox – not one constrained by political motivations such as the banning of use of HCRs in curlew conservation when curlews are declining at a faster rate than elsewhere in the UK (Welsh Breeding Bird Survey 2024). If WG is to embed nature recovery targets into legislation, then the process of achieving them needs to be led by robust scientific evidence.

3. Your views on current arrangements for monitoring biodiversity.

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

Monitoring is predominantly required for two purposes: verification and policy evolution. We are concerned that data is not being used to evolve policy measures. That said the data used for decision making should be long term to avoid the influence of individual weather events for example and to give a trend over time. The removal of magpies from the General Licence is an example of a short term trend being used to justify policy. The long-term trend for magpies shows that they are still 200% above their population level in 1965 (source BTO)

and in fact increased between 2022-23 (Welsh Breeding Bird Survey 2023).

We would like to include Magpie population abundance long term trend graph but unable to do so.

We would also suggest that farmers/landowners should be encouraged to share their data and become 'trusted partners' in nature recovery. Many contribute to national monitoring schemes such as the GWCT's Big Farmland Bird Count or they undertake their own monitoring using one of the apps now available so they can demonstrate the value of their work. Such information is also useful to them as it enables them to alter their management if needed. Such data would also help provide a wider picture of nature abundance and extent. Focussing on data from protected sites does not represent the wider landscape.

As we said above technology should be sought as part of delivering value for money to ensure that any funds available is mainly spent on active conservation. Among a suit of technology-based solutions that we are working on are drones to find curlew chicks and working with Liverpool University to build AI recognition with camera traps and sound recorders to identify and count species.

4. Your views on new approaches needed to halt and reverse the loss of nature by 2030.

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

GWCT experience tells us that working with landowners, land managers and farmers in support of their ambitions for nature recovery is important in achieving success.

Effective conservation equates to effective management which is based on responsible guardianship and stewardship. Working with individual farmers/land managers ensures that the necessary measures to achieve nature recovery are site specific and work with that farm/land management system. These measures revolve around 3 principles, namely: habitat provision, food (including supplementary feeding) and reduced predation pressure. Farmers understand this and work well with these principles especially when they see the results with the increase in nature on their farm. The measures are adaptable as for each site or each species the relative proportions of these will change - as they will by season too. It is not simply a matter of having hedgerows, grass margins/buffers and wild bird seed mixes around the farm. It requires a desire to understand the finer details such as height, location, time of year needs, species mix etc. The Big Farmland Bird Count demonstrates this; 62% of respondents in 2023 were in agri-

environment schemes. At our Allerton Project research and demonstration farm employing these principles has resulted in a doubling of farmland birds including the return of Tree sparrows and Yellowhammer populations conserved against a national decline (both red-listed species) and also increases in other wildlife such as 36% more macro moths and 27 new species. This trend in moths is in direct contrast to the national picture and that of a nearby local nature reserve that is not 'managed' in the same way.

We would like to include the Overall songbird breeding abundance graph here but unable to do so.

Whilst habitat provision has been the core approach to nature loss, our research has demonstrated the importance of getting the spatial coverage, design and structure of habitat right for winter food and cover as well as summer feeding particularly to ensure adequate chick food through insect-rich brood rearing cover. The need for species specific interventions is vital in achieving success e.g. depending on the mix of species, winter cover for farmland birds can support up to twice as many pollinators as a wildflower margin and be favoured habitat for butterflies. For example please see The Welsh Farmland Bird Initiative: Overwinter feeding of farmland birds to reverse biodiversity decline on productive pasture-based farms | Farming Connect (gov.wales)

Where conservation agencies can add value is to work with land managers through providing ecological knowledge and spatial planning (i.e. improving connectivity etc).

Working with groups of farmers at species level eg. Curlew and at landscape level (such as farmer clusters and now their evolution into a broader policy delivery platform – the Environmental Farmers Groups) is important to provide the spatial element.

It is important therefore that future policy in support of 30by30 includes "other effective means" as identified in the IUCN definition and works with farmers rather than seeking to protect landscapes.

5. Do you have any other points you wish to raise within the scope of this inquiry?

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

The focus on habitat as the basis for publicly-funded conservation strategies began with the first agri-environment scheme in 1987 yet wildlife continues to decline. We believe that a change in approach is needed and that policymakers

should be questioning the fact that if the same approach is employed to deliver the ambition of the halting and reversal of nature loss by 2030 why should the outcomes be any different? The solutions we highlight in Q4 are proven to reverse declines not only of farmland birds but also of other wildlife such as invertebrates and brown hares.

Farmed land is the key to nature recovery. As we've said GWCT research and demonstrations show that nature can thrive alongside the production of food. We believe that farmers have the interest and the will along with the means to delivering more nature as long as the right levers are in place to encourage this. We are happy to take members of the committee out to farms in Wales who already delivering nature alongside food production. You'll see more details about our Farming Community and some of our projects and work on this link [GWCT Wales – Follow The Science](#)

A fit for purpose agri-env scheme, long term grant aid for clusters, and help developing and accessing private markets is necessary to deliver this.

There is now evidence demonstrating that appropriate, proportionate habitat is often no longer enough to recover nature and therefore WG need to consider the bigger picture and methods which are proven to work if they are to avoid further crisis.

We would very much welcome the opportunity to present further information.