

HRLN 36 - Evidence from: Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (ARC)

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).

The Biodiversity deep dive recommendations published in October 2022 recognised the immense scale of the challenge that halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030 constitutes. Consequently its focus was on ways to expand upon and scale up all aspects of existing conservation efforts, including through improving the condition, connectivity and resilience of protected sites, increasing delivery capacity through partnership working and providing more participation opportunities for volunteers, and facilitating a society wide approach which is inclusive of the public, third and private sectors. Implicit within these aspirations, and indeed stated explicitly and repeatedly within the biodiversity deep dive recommendations are the twin needs to prioritise action for biodiversity and to adequately resource its implementation.

ARC strongly supports these aspirations. So it is with great concern that we have observed, in bleak contrast to the published plans, such poor resourcing of biodiversity recovery within Wales in general and the dire state of financing for Natural Resources Wales (NRW) in particular. As the statutory nature conservation agency in Wales, NRW should be setting a lead in many aspects of biodiversity recovery, inspiring action across different sectors, demonstrating best practice and where necessary, prosecuting infringements of protected sites. NRW has traditionally been a highly capable organisation that employs staff who are respected experts in their fields, working at the heart of conservation in Wales. We are alarmed to witness the symptoms of severe financial under-resourcing on such a valued mainstay of conservation in Wales e.g. cancellation of proposed projects; a freeze on staff recruitment; staff redundancies or use of short-term

employment contracts; no longer grant-funding partnership activities such as routine habitat management; expert staff no longer travelling to external meetings and conferences where previously they would have had a visible presence etc. Without a well-resourced SNCO, the aim of halting and reversing biodiversity decline by 2030 will be near-impossible. Far from expanding on and scaling up conservation efforts what we see is a failure to fund basic annual works to maintain existing habitats.

Furthermore there appear to be similar issues with poor resourcing and low prioritisation of biodiversity action within local government planning authorities, potentially increasing the vulnerability of local sites at risk of loss or degradation from inappropriate development. Again, without well-resourced and capable LPAs, meeting the target will be difficult.

This under-funding has more wide-reaching negative impacts on the conservation sector because as well as limiting the delivery of the SNCO and local government for biodiversity, organisations like ourselves who would have previously received partnership funding must seek alternative funds in an increasingly competitive arena and actions on behalf of nature taken by different organisations are more likely to lack coherence.

We would like to see urgent review of funding arrangements for biodiversity and the environment in Wales with a view to stimulating the coherent expansion of collaborative effort described in the recommendations.

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).

3. Your views on current arrangements for monitoring biodiversity.

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

Current arrangements for monitoring biodiversity have focused strongly on the role of local environmental records centres to curate species and habitat data, stimulate public participation in biodiversity recording and underpin the role of the local planning process in protecting sites that are important in biodiversity from inappropriate development. Point 7 of the biodiversity deep dive recommendations is a steer to “develop and adapt monitoring and evidence frameworks to measure progress towards the 30 x 30 target”, acknowledging that “these frameworks need to be informed by an appraisal of data needs, building on existing good practice and data sets, and identifying what is needed in the future”. There is also a commitment “to establish a monitoring and evidence task group to continue the work needed to establish robust and appropriate monitoring and evidence frameworks for 30 by 30 and wider recovery networks, building on those that are already in place”. It is important that this focus on monitoring gives attention not only to traditional casual species recording, but also seeks to align with existing structured standardised recording surveys e.g. national monitoring programmes run by specialist species organisations so that it is possible to report consistently on how nature is faring at a variety of scales e.g. site, landscape, Wales, GB. Biological recording efforts are often duplicated, fragmented and short-term and we urge the review to take proper account of the role of national recording programmes such as ARC’s National Amphibian and Reptile Monitoring Programme in generating data to inform conservation at a range of scales. Long-term monitoring programmes are hard to fund and while relying heavily on the efforts of citizen scientists is cost-effective, resources are required to engage and train surveyors, put in place feed-back and quality assurance processes and ensure high-levels of participant satisfaction and retention. The review should consider not only what data are currently available and what further data are needed, but also how sustainability of data generation could be better sustained.

ARC has an effective data exchange arrangement in place with the Welsh LERCs that enables two-way flow of data. We have been consulted by COFNOD on the development of surveyor support infrastructure in order to ensure that the structure and content of data supplied meets our needs. There is scope however for closer cooperation in Wales. An example would be greater transparency about the membership, role and operation of the monitoring and evidence task group referred to in the biodiversity deep dive recommendations – what opportunities exist to engage with this body and to input to/comment on its conclusions?

We would like to see greater focus and coherence of collection of spatially referenced data on habitat type and condition, noting that what constitutes good condition varies across different taxa. In the short-term, supply of these data may rely on coordinated data collection in the field, possibly by volunteer surveyors, such as is currently being explored by JNCC and the TePoP partnership. Longer-term we see an obvious role for wider collection of such data from e.g. remote sensing and it is important that the outputs are made available widely free or at affordable cost, as they would enable more insightful interpretation of data from multiple taxa.

We would stress the need for any data collection framework to be constructed with a view to generating data that suitable for assessing progress towards Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) at a range of scales i.e. range, distribution, population, habitat, future prospects etc.

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).

The Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) needs to be central to halting the loss and restoration of biodiversity to former levels. There should be a direct link to 30 by 30. To deliver the relevant opportunities in SFS, appropriate options (habitat management and creation for all relevant habitats) should be available for priority species in Wales, with delivery targeted to appropriate areas (regionally, locally and at the site level) and also in a way to improve connectivity across the landscape. The detail of how the options are undertaken needs to take different species needs into account. Delivery of the SFS should build in an appropriate level of advice and support (i.e. case officers in addition to information available to applicants online) in order to optimise the scheme's potential benefits to biodiversity recovery. The overall SFS budget is currently unclear, as is the likely distribution of funds to the different scheme tiers.

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).

