

HRLN 38 - Evidence from: Afonydd 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).

Evidence in Wales clearly confirms a significant decline in biodiversity (State of Nature Report 2023, State of Natural Resources 2020, SAC Compliance Reports, JNCC Favourable Condition Status report). The evidence also shows gaps in monitoring which means that the current baseline position is poorly understood in some areas of Wales.

Compared to water quality and chemical data (for which we also have considerable concerns), ecology data for Wales is predominately twenty years old and questions whether the true conservation status of designated species and habitat can be reported.

JNCC evidence for favourable condition assessments by designated habitat and species concludes assessments are made on limited amount of data, no specific surveys for some species (suggesting by-catch data was inappropriate, likely under-recording and damaging). No trend analysis could be undertaken due to shortfalls and inadequacy of data.

There is significant reliance on voluntary measures to deliver Favourable Condition Status which we do not consider meets the requirements of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) (referred to as Habitat

Regulations), and undermines the principles of 'fairshare' and Polluter Pays Principle.

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).

The evidence presented under (1) underlines the current poor state of protected riverine sites in Wales.

We are not delivering at the necessary scale or pace to protect our rivers. Some designated species are on a trajectory of extinction. Water quality impacts have only increased. Pollution incidents are on the rise in all sectors.

We do not have confidence that the multitude of existing fora, programmes of work and actions plans are focused, targeted or will deliver the changes required to deliver nature recovery, certainly not to meet WG's commitments by 2030.

As direct examples, whilst compliance assessments were completed for rivers (resulting in proposed changes to wastewater treatment work discharges and sewer overflows) they have not been completed for marine SACs. The consequence of this is that a large number of water company wastewater discharges are below the tidal limit into estuarine waters, and it is evident those sites are experiencing some of the highest discharges in Wales. We have no understanding of the consequence that these discharges may be having on migratory salmonids attempting to return to their freshwater habitats nor to the estuarine and marine species and habitats.

Current funding mechanisms prevent the eNGO community supporting large-scale, dedicated resource to river restoration. Our funding is one-year funding, when projects of any scale are generally multi-year delivery. Funding is currently disjointed, multi-benefits of schemes are overlooked and is siloed meaning some rivers or some species are rarely recognised.

There has been no unlocking of further public or private finance initiative to support delivery. Afonydd Cymru lost opportunities for private funding to support rivers trusts in Wales because current permitting policy in Wales has prevented successful adoption of schemes and approaches trialled in England to be adopted in Wales. There remains no clear and accepted route to assess benefit in Wales, which lowers our opportunity to attract private finance as we are unable to demonstrate benefit to the agreement of the regulator.

Nutrient trading is another option for private funding in Wales, particularly by supporting farmers to deliver improvements on their land. Afonydd Cymru were part of the Task and Finish group for this, established as a River Summit action. These actions were presented to the Ministers but we are unaware that any of the recommendations have so far been taken forward. We would require National Minimum Standards to be endorsed as part of this arrangement.

Finally, Wales has a unique biodiversity record system over the rest of the UK through the Local Biodiversity Centre partnership. The Centres provide an invaluable service of recording data across Wales and we think offer a fantastic opportunity to provide additional services, which could include tracking of commitments. We have no doubt that biodiversity enhancements are being delivered in Wales but there is no central platform to record that data. Furthermore, the current biodiversity net benefit policy is not recorded, measured or funded as it is in England.

3. Your views on current arrangements for monitoring biodiversity.

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

Afonydd Cymru is concerned as to whether current monitoring, data and evidence is accurately quantifying the real impact to biodiversity, and the direct interlinkage between river water quality, pollution and biodiversity restoration.

Current monitoring efforts for two SAC features are more readily available than for other species - salmonids and otters. Better understanding of the current population status and factors limiting all SAC feature species and habitats should be sought. This may include collation of data from current monitoring schemes

e.g. Four Rivers for Life are monitoring Shad, bullhead, salmon, water crowfoot, and lamprey.

The Natural Resources Wales 2020 Baseline Evaluation of protected sites assessed the condition of the freshwater and terrestrial features of Wales' SSSIs. The results show that evidence was insufficient to determine the condition of over half of the features on these sites.

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).

Recommendations:

- We welcome the introduction of the new Cabinet Secretary role which brings together climate change and rural affairs, which we are pleased will be maintained under the new First Minister cabinet. WG needs to recognise that nature recovery is explicitly linked to water quality and pollution for inland waters and integrate the work of the water and biodiversity teams. This is evidenced by the JNCC by species.
 - Nature recovery for our rivers requires immediate resolution of the impacts of pollution. We have outlined these in a separate Call of Evidence to the IEPAW.
 - Tight enforcement of existing legislation is imperative to achieve the outcomes needed from those laws.
 - All designated species and habitats should have been reviewed against an action plan to ensure that all measures are being undertaken to protect them. Whilst we recognise that actions under the Salmon and Seatrout Action Plan support other fisheries, we should be ensuring that we are not missing opportunity to contribute other actions to the survival of lamprey, shad, eel and bullhead.
-

- Whilst the Salmon and Seatrout Action Plan has made more progress than other actions from the Natural Resource Action Plan, the level of decline in both species warrants enhanced measures and further scaling up if we are to deliver the required changes to deliver survival of both species. This was raised by the Cabinet Secretary himself in his role as Species Champion for Salmon.
- We are heavily reliant on voluntary measures under the Habitats Regulations for SAC rivers which have evidently not delivered since the Review of Consents in 2008. Current policy decisions on Polluter Pays Principle and the fairshare principles applied to water companies cannot deliver the required SAC outcomes when other sectors are allowed voluntary delivery. We call for an independent review of whether existing legislative powers have been used for the protection of the rivers and whether compulsory measures now need to be implemented.
- We have responded separately to the Call of Evidence by the IEPAW which identifies a number of concerns across other areas of water quality pollution and impact. We would ask the CCEI to consider the implications of those concerns, which we consider have a direct impact on nature recovery in rivers.

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 delivery of biodiversity commitments in Wales is intrinsically linked with the urgent resolution of river water quality. Agricultural and water industry pollution are clearly evidenced as two of the most significant impacts to river water quality, but whilst actions are in place for the water industry Afonydd Cymru remains very concerned on the lack of progress on agricultural pollution.

Improved land-use is critical to reducing agricultural pollution and in halting and reversing the decline of biodiversity both on land and in river. Many agricultural actions are linked to the delivery of the Sustainable Farming Scheme. However, the proposed actions are inadequate to protect our rivers. The Scheme is voluntary and some of the worst offenders are likely not to join the scheme.

Wales' ability to meet global biodiversity commitments and halt the nature crisis is dependent upon the link between river water quality pollution and biodiversity being understood, and action being implemented across all sectors.