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How Britain became one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world

Can a country truly claim to be a global climate leader while its own nature crumbles? Paul de Zylva, Friends of the Earth's Senior Nature Analyst, investigates the gap between the UK's green rhetoric and the grim reality of its biodiversity collapse. Britain's natural wealth is in ruins, and as the 2030 deadline approaches, here's what we need to do to reverse the damage.

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The United Kingdom prides itself on being a green and pleasant land, a nation synonymous with rolling countryside, abundant wildlife, and environmental stewardship. Yet beneath this postcard-perfect image lies a startling reality: the UK is now one of the world's most nature-depleted countries.

According to the Natural History Museum's Biodiversity Intactness Index, **the UK ranks 189th out of 240 countries** and territories for how intact its nature and biodiversity remain. Just 53% of the UK's original nature is left intact - far below the Index's safe limit of 90% and the global average of 79%. Each of the four UK nations sits near the bottom of this ranking, with England at 47%, Northern Ireland at 50%, Wales at 51%, and Scotland at 56%.

This is a crisis.

As the 2030 deadline approaches (the UK government's legally binding statutory targets under the Environment Act 2021), the question is no longer whether the UK is failing nature: it's whether there's still time to turn the tide.

The evidence shows decades of decline

The data tells a story that no amount of green rhetoric can obscure. Across nearly two decades of monitoring, the UK's biodiversity has shown stubborn stagnation at best and outright decline at worst.

The UK government tracks approximately 50 different biodiversity indicators. The 2025 results paint a troubling picture.

Indicators still heading in the wrong direction include:

- Condition of important habitats
- Abundance and distribution of wild species
- Size of fish in the North Sea
- Status of pollinating insects (bees, hoverflies, moths)
- Bird numbers on farmland and in woodlands

Critically, the December 2025 indicators confirmed what conservationists feared: *"...more indicators are deteriorating or showing no change than improving, over both the long and short term."* Even more alarming: *"No indicators which are deteriorating in the long term, are showing improvement in the short term."*

The State of Nature Reports: The timeline of decline

Four major State of Nature reports have documented the accelerating crisis:



The Biodiversity Intactness Index: Where the UK stands globally

The Natural History Museum's Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII) tracks the percentage of original species remaining in habitats and nations. The UK's position is stark:



For comparison, our French neighbours are doing considerably better than us in the top 2% of countries in the lofty 5th position, New Zealand – another small island nation, are also near the top at 27th globally. Even Japan who have a higher population density to us, rank 55th with 78% of their biodiversity still intact.

Professor Andy Purkis of the Natural History Museum noted: *"The UK is where the industrial revolution was born, and it changed the landscape forever. We have led the world in degrading the natural environment... Britain has lost more of its natural biodiversity than almost anywhere else in western Europe, most of all the G7 nations."*

Positive signs (few, but notable)

The 2025 indicators did show some improvements:

- Record improvements in bat species abundance
- Percentage of fish stocks being harvested sustainably
- Amount of land being managed in environment-friendly ways

While these gains are overshadowed by the broader trend of deterioration across sea, farmland, and woodland ecosystems, perhaps there are lessons to be learned from these positive signs – but more on that later.

What we don't know

Perhaps most worryingly, **over 30% of the UK's biodiversity indicators weren't even assessed in the 2025 report**. This means no measure exists for:

- Status of bees and other pollinating insects
- Condition of protected Areas/Sites of Special Scientific Interest (A/SSSI)
- Pressure from invasive species
- Extent of green and blue spaces in urban areas
- How public subsidies might be undermining environmental aims

This data gap makes it impossible to know the full extent of the crisis or to measure whether interventions are working.

The bottom line

From 2008 to 2025, the message has remained consistent: England's natural environment has suffered serious losses. Wildlife-rich sites form a "*small isolated and fragmented resource*." Protected areas are "*generally too small and too isolated*." And despite the 25 Year Environment Plan's bold promise to "*leave the environment in a better state than we found it*," the indicators show stubborn or stalling progress at best.

The UK's biodiversity is in decline, the rate is accelerating, and the policy response has been insufficient.

One cause: Policy failure

The UK government has a long history of setting ambitious nature targets, only to miss them. This pattern of failure has created a cycle of "dither and delay" that has pushed nature to the brink.

Missed deadlines

The UK's failure to protect nature is not a recent phenomenon; it is a decades-long trend of unmet commitments:

- **2010 Targets:** The UK helped negotiate the **2010 Nagoya Protocol**, aiming to stop and reverse harm to nature by 2010. The government admitted it would only meet 5 of the 20 targets. The RSPB described this failure as "**a lost decade for nature.**"
- **2020 Targets:** History repeated itself. The UK missed its 2020 targets for reversing nature's decline. In the most crucial areas: controlling pollution, restoring ecosystems, and the status of wild species, the UK was "**nowhere near where it should have been,**" despite its aspiration to lead the world.
- **2030 Targets:** Now, with the statutory deadline to halt nature's decline looming, the UK looks set to miss these targets as well. As I stated above the 2025 Biodiversity Indicators confirm that "*no indicators which are deteriorating in the long term, are showing improvement in the short term,*" suggesting the negative trend has not been reversed.

The 25-Year Environment Plan: Bold words, little action

In 2018, recognising the dire situation, the UK government launched its 25 Year Environment Plan with the bold aim of "*improving the environment within a generation and leaving it in a better state than we found it.*"

These were bold words indeed, but of little use until the government takes proper action. Given the decades of failure by successive governments in meeting previous promises, the need for immediate action has never been greater. The plan's promise remains unfulfilled, with the 2025 indicators showing that "*more indicators are deteriorating or showing no change than improving.*"

The pattern is clear: **governments set targets, fail to meet them, and then attempt to weaken the laws designed to ensure those targets are met.** As the 2030 deadline approaches, the UK risks another "lost decade" for nature, unless the cycle of broken promises is itself finally broken.

Second cause: Legal backpedalling

As an EU member, the UK had signed up to EU standards and laws that have been instrumental in protecting many wild species and habitats, as well as raising standards for drinking water, clean beaches and bathing water, and air quality.

Signs were positive when the government pledged that when we left the EU, it would retain and abide by the standards the UK had helped design. During and since the 2016 Brexit referendum, government ministers and MPs have made countless pledges to retain existing EU standards - and even to exceed them - in a new post-Brexit global leadership role for the UK on nature, climate and other aims.

The promise: Environment Act 2021

On leaving the EU, the UK government enshrined existing EU standards and the UK's future ambitions in a new "landmark" Environment Act. It became law on 10 November 2021, with the government's press release proclaiming: *"World-leading Environment Act becomes law."*

The then Environment Secretary George Eustice repeated this claim:

"The Environment Act will deliver the most ambitious environmental programme of any country on earth. It will halt the decline of species by 2030, clean up our air and protect the health of our rivers, reform the way in which we deal with waste and tackle deforestation overseas. We are setting an example for the rest of the world to follow."

Prime Minister Boris Johnson also pledged to **protect 30% of our land and seas by 2030**, as part of the global Leader's Pledge for Nature. Johnson said: *"We cannot afford dither and delay because biodiversity loss is happening today, and it is happening at a frightening rate."*

The Environment Act 2021's legally binding commitment is to **reverse the decline in the abundance of wild species by the end of 2030**, and to start increasing species populations into the 2040s and 2050s.

The contradiction: Three attempts to weaken nature laws

Yet even with the ink still drying, senior ministers were trying to weaken or scrap two vital nature laws: the **1979 Birds Directive** and the **1992 Habitats Directive**. These are the legal backstops that protect the most precious wildlife species, natural habitats and landscapes across the UK and Europe.

How do UK governments expect to meet their own commitments if at the same time they're trying to gut the most important laws? Again, the UK has form on this. Since 2010 ministers have tried to disable or scrap all-important nature laws – not once, nor twice, but three times:

- **2011:** Chancellor George Osborne claimed nature laws were blocking progress and should be weakened. A formal government review concluded his claims were "not correct."
- **2016:** A "fitness check" review found that **nature laws were not blocking economic development**, contradicting government claims.

- **2023:** Ministers are once again looking to meddle with the very laws needed to meet their own pledges.

The public pushback

Friends of the Earth, WWF, Birdlife and over 100 other UK conservation organisations publicised the threat to fundamental laws protecting vulnerable habitats and endangered species. Our Nature Alert campaign saw **100,000 people from the UK** join with people across EU member states to give a resounding "no" to any attempts to dilute or scrap the nature laws.

Half a million people told the official consultation that they simply wanted their governments to get on with properly observing and implementing the nature laws - not trying to get round them.

So, it's baffling that UK ministers are once again looking to meddle with laws they simply need to start observing. They don't seem to understand that to meet their own pledges to protect and restore nature across the UK in the timescale needed (including to meet international obligations such as on migratory species and internationally important habitats) they don't have time to scrap EU standards and dabble with new ones, which could take years to become enacted.

Instead, ministers must step up and start observing existing nature laws, and their own pledges, instead of peddling falsehoods that such laws are either a restraint on the UK or that they can be bettered.

Our economy and overseas territories

The UK government cannot claim ignorance of the true cost of putting nature out of business. The Treasury, in particular, knows this well, having commissioned the first-ever independent review on the subject.

The economics of biodiversity

In the 2021 Economics of Biodiversity review, leading economist Partha Dasgupta advised ministers:

*"Continuing down our current path – where **our demands on Nature far exceed its capacity to supply – presents extreme risks and uncertainty for our economies**. Sustainable economic growth and development requires us to take a different path, where our engagements with Nature are not only sustainable, but also enhance our collective wealth and well-being and that of our descendants."*

Attempts by any UK government to scrap our nature laws are deeply misguided, short-sighted, and even reckless when there is no evidence that such laws block or thwart the UK's economic aims. The cost of inaction is not just ecological; it is financial.

The UK's nature hotspots: Overseas Territories

And what about nature outside Britain? The UK's responsibility extends far beyond its shores. **Over 90% of the UK's biodiversity is found in its Overseas Territories** (UKOTs), located in some of the world's biodiversity hotspots, such as the Caribbean, Malta, and Cyprus.

These territories are home to:

- Many **endemic species** and undisturbed habitats of international significance.
- **33 Red List bird species** - more than the whole of continental Europe.
- A combined **32,000 species**, of which **at least 517 are globally threatened**.
- Even excluding the 60,000 species yet to be properly recorded, this dwarfs the 194 globally threatened species found in mainland UK itself.

The UKOTs also span large stretches of the South Atlantic, Indian, and South Pacific oceans. Consequently, the UK effectively manages the **fifth largest area of ocean in the world** and potentially the most biodiverse. An important step has been the creation of vast marine protection areas based around Pitcairn in the Pacific and Ascension in the Atlantic.

Threats and failures

However, biodiversity in the UKOTs faces immediate and significant threats, particularly from:

- Invasive species
- Under-regulated development

- Over-exploitation of natural resources
- Climate change

A 2014 inquiry by UK MPs found that the UK government was **failing to adequately protect the globally significant nature** in its Overseas Territories.

UK failing home and away

The UK likes to say it is leading the world in halting nature's decline, but its own official assessment is clear: the UK is failing nature both at home and away.

In February 2026, the UK's own assessment of its nature and biodiversity targets (domestically and overseas) shows the UK mostly going backward as the 2030 deadline looms. The UK 7th National Report states:

- *"Biodiversity decline persists"*
- *"The overall trend in status for many wild species in the UK is declining or not improving"*
- *"Most (UK) ecosystems remain threatened, and only 24% of land is covered by natural ecosystems"*
- The 'Red List of Ecosystems' shows that, of those assessed, most are classified as *"critically endangered"*, *"endangered"* or *"vulnerable"*.

The high point of the assessment was, at best, neutral: *"Numerous restoration actions are currently underway and progress is being made, the effectiveness of these efforts and their contribution to restoring the integrity, connectivity and resilience of all ecosystems and increasing the area of natural ecosystems remains uncertain."*

Overall, the report concludes: *"...work is required to address key gaps in halting species decline, improving ecosystem resilience, and safeguarding genetic diversity in the UK."*

Turning the tide before 2030 is possible

The evidence is overwhelming, the failures are documented, and the risks are clear. But despair is not an option. The UK stands at a crossroads: continue down the path of "dither and delay" and face irreversible loss or seize the remaining window of opportunity to restore nature at pace and scale.

The path forward is not a mystery; it's a matter of political will and decisive action. Here is what must happen to turn the tide before the 2030 deadline:

1. Stop meddling, start enforcing

The most immediate step is to stop trying to weaken the laws that already exist. The 1979 Birds Directive and the 1992 Habitats Directive are not obstacles; they are the bedrock of nature protection.

- **Action:** Halt all attempts to scrap or dilute these vital laws.
- **Action:** Fully implement the Environment Act 2021 as written, ensuring the legally binding 2030 targets are met, not just aspirational goals.
- **Why:** As the 2011 and 2016 reviews proved, these laws do not block economic progress, they enable sustainable growth.

2. Fill the data gaps

We cannot manage what we do not measure. The fact that over 30% of biodiversity indicators remain unassessed is a big blind spot.

- **Action:** Immediately fund and launch assessments for the missing indicators: pollinator status, protected site conditions, invasive species pressure, and urban green/blue spaces.
- **Action:** Ensure public subsidies are audited to confirm they are not undermining environmental aims.
- **Why:** Without this data, we are flying blind. Accurate monitoring is the only way to know if restoration efforts are working and to hold government accountable.

3. Fund restoration at scale

The Dasgupta Review made it clear: sustainable economic growth depends on a healthy natural world.

- **Action:** Redirect public subsidies toward nature-positive outcomes, rewarding farmers and landowners who restore habitats rather than degrade them.
- **Action:** Invest in large-scale habitat connectivity to fix the "fragmented resource" problem identified in 2008. Protected areas must be linked to allow species to move and thrive.
- **Action:** Protect the Overseas Territories with the same vigour as the mainland, addressing invasive species and over-exploitation to safeguard 90% of the UK's biodiversity.

A new narrative: Hope in action

There is reason to be hopeful. Nature is resilient. Where we have given it space, it has bounced back.

- Remember the **record improvements in bat species** and the **sustainable fishing stocks** highlighted in the 2025 indicators. These prove that recovery is possible when we act.
- The **power of public opinion shouldn't be underestimated** - the 100,000+ people who signed the Nature Alert campaign and the half a million who demanded proper implementation show that the public will back politicians who will finally implement change.
- The UK has the chance to lead the world not by talking, but by doing. By fixing its own backyard and protecting its Overseas Territories, it can **set a global example**.

The choice is ours

The 2030 deadline is a finish line we are currently running away from. But it isn't too late.

- We can choose to listen to the scientists and the data.
- We can choose to enforce the laws we have already passed.
- We can choose to invest in our natural wealth rather than deplete it.
- We can choose to see nature protection as the basis for sustainable growth rather than as a mass of red tape to be jettisoned.

Our leaders must stop pushing nature to the edge and start restoring our degraded environment at pace and at scale.

The UK has the tools, the knowledge, and the public support. What it needs now is the courage to use them. The future of Britain's nature - and the economic and social well-being of its people - depends on the choices made today.