



SDG 14 and 15: Progress, gaps and recommendations for the UK

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Natural resources and systems are fundamental to human life; they underpin our wellbeing and our economies. But all over the world, nature is in decline. Habitats and species are being lost, land degraded, and the seas overexploited. Extinctions today are happening much faster than nature would predict, and around one-quarter of the world's mammals, 1-in-6 bird species, and 40% of amphibians are at risk.²⁷⁸ Additionally, three-quarters of the land-based environment and about 66% of the marine environment have been significantly altered by human activity. In 2021 alone, 9.3 million acres of primary old-growth forest were lost in tropical regions, resulting in 2.5 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions.²⁷⁹

Covid-19 and its unprecedented effects on human development are a cautionary tale of the type of challenges we are likely to face unless we transform the way we interact with the planet.²⁸⁰ Indeed, tackling deforestation and protecting nature are vitally important to reduce the risk of future pandemics. Land use change is one of the five leading drivers of biodiversity loss, and deforestation and forest degradation account for approximately 15-20% of global emissions. It is now widely understood that we cannot deliver on the SDGs and end poverty, or meet our commitment to 1.5°C, without tackling this. Protecting our remaining primary and intact ecosystems, restoring degraded lands – in particular, forests and wetlands – and

protecting and upholding the rights of indigenous people and customary rights holders, as well as mainstreaming forest governance and sustainable land management practices, are urgent priorities and the basis for the survival of humankind. Multiple studies have shown that indigenous people and other customary rights holders are the best guardians of the forest.²⁸¹

In November 2021, the UK government had huge opportunity as host of the UN Climate Convention in Glasgow (COP26) to drive international political momentum and ambition for nature, and to face the nature and climate crises head on. It has another opportunity to push this agenda forward during the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP15), and at the next UN Climate Convention (COP27) later in 2022.

It was welcome that the UK government made protecting and restoring ecosystems a key priority of COP26. Numerous announcements were made, but it is essential to turn these announcements into concrete action. To truly demonstrate ambition and play its part in this regard, the UK needs to lead by example with regards to its efforts to tackle deforestation and land conversion. It must continue to work with signatories to the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use, and with financial institutions, businesses and funders, to ensure they deliver on these commitments. CBD COP15 offers a crucial opportunity for nations to come together to agree a global plan this decade to save nature. The UK must build on the momentum created by COP26 and champion the development of a strong global framework, which is underpinned by the resources and accountability mechanisms to drive implementation.

278. Our World in Data, '[Extinctions](#)' [web page, accessed June 2022]

279. Fauna and Flora International, '[Nature News Round-up: Climate extremes already with us](#)' [online article, accessed June 2022]

280. UNDP (2020), '[Human Development Report 2020](#)'

281. The Guardian (25 March, 2021), '[Indigenous peoples by far the best guardians of forests – UN report](#)' [online article, accessed June 2022]



SDG 14: Life below water



Target 14.1:

By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution.

The UK remains significantly vocal on efforts to tackle plastic pollution. At the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly in March 2022, the government worked with international partners to secure a breakthrough on negotiations to kickstart a new, legally binding treaty on plastic pollution.²⁸² Although the UK seeks to use its domestic experience to be a global voice for change, offsetting the problem of marine pollution remains an issue with a large amount of UK plastic waste still ending up in nations with unsatisfactory records on marine pollution.²⁸³ The UK should ensure it is not just offsetting the problem of marine pollution but tackling it at its source.

Additionally, while action on plastic is important as it accounts for half of all ocean litter, the remaining half consists of other types of pollution that is damaging our marine ecosystem. It was welcome to see the UK be a key proponent of plans for a new science-policy panel that will contribute to policymaking on the sound management of chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution²⁸⁴.

Goal 15: Life on land



Target 15.2:

Target 15.2: By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally.

Significant progress has been made globally towards sustainable forest management, but still forest loss remains high. In 2020, the earth's land surface was covered by 31% percent of forest; 100 million hectares less of forest cover

than 2 decades ago.²⁸⁵ Forests play an important role for livelihoods and the wellbeing of people in rural and urban locations and contribute to regulating water cycle and mitigating climate change. Loss of forests contributes to global warming and has negative effects, in particular, on the livelihoods of people with the least resources²⁸⁶.

The Covid-19 crisis is expected to have negative impacts on forest resources and increase the risk of deforestation and associated biodiversity loss²⁸⁷. The 2022 State of the World's Forests found that trees, forests and sustainable forestry can help the world recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and combat looming environmental crises, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, but this will require societies to better recognise the considerable value of forests and their crucial roles in building inclusive, resilient and sustainable economies²⁸⁸. Tackling deforestation can also help to prevent the emergence of future pandemics by reducing the contact between humans and wild animals.²⁸⁹

Deforestation and biodiversity loss are areas where the UK government has made strong policy and financial commitments to protect endangered species and habitats²⁹⁰. For example, the forest governance, markets and climate programme has helped bring about governance and market reforms that reduce the illegal use of forest resources and benefit people with low incomes who depend on forests for their livelihoods.²⁹¹ It is critical that the UK government continues to support this vital work on forest governance.

It is essential that funding is provided directly to indigenous peoples and local forest communities, who are the best stewards of the forests. It was welcome to see the pledge at COP26 to advance support and funding for these communities²⁹². All funding, and any policy commitments and legislation, needs to respect indigenous peoples' right to free, prior and informed consent for anything affecting their lands. Any new funding and actions to protect forests and biodiversity must not come at the expense of the rights of indigenous people and forest communities.

The independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) found that UK programmes have successfully targeted the most relevant drivers of deforestation and biodiversity loss, and the UK has played a significant role in promoting global cooperation on the drivers of deforestation and biodiversity loss.²⁹³ However, ICAI also concluded that cross-government coordination is not always good, and the UK's efforts to halt deforestation and prevent irreversible biodiversity loss

285. FAO, ['Sustainable Development Goals: Indicator 15.1.1 - Forest area as a percentage of total land area'](#) [web page, accessed June 2022]

286. Ibid

287. Ibid

288. FAO (2022), [In Brief: The State of the World's Forests 2022](#)

289. Science (24 July, 2020), ['Ecology and economics for pandemic prevention'](#) [online article, accessed June 2022]

290. ICAI (2021), [International Climate Finance: UK aid for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss: A review](#)

291. Ibid

292. UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021, COP26 (4 November, 2021), ['Statement On International Public Support For The Clean Energy Transition'](#) [online, accessed June 2022]

293. ICAI (2021), [International Climate Finance: UK aid for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss: A review](#)

282. DEFRA, UK Government (2 March, 2022), ['UK backs ambitious global action to tackle plastic pollution'](#) [online media release, accessed June 2022]

283. BBC News (20 January, 2020), ['Malaysia returns 42 containers of 'illegal' plastic waste to UK'](#) [online article, accessed June 2022]

284. DEFRA, UK Government (2 March, 2022), ['UK backs ambitious global action to tackle plastic pollution'](#) [online media release, accessed June 2022]



lack a coherent, overarching strategy.²⁹⁴ While there are strong examples of ‘joined-up’ working across government departments within the portfolio, ICAI also found examples of avoidable duplication and fragmentation, most notably around cross-cutting issues, such as private sector engagement and sustainable financing.²⁹⁵ A more coherent approach is critical to enable greater combined impact.²⁹⁶

ICAI found that there has been mixed progress in influencing private sector regulation and practice. Progress on implementing voluntary commitments has been limited, so the focus has shifted towards regulatory measures, both within the UK and internationally²⁹⁷. It was welcome to see the government commit to introduce an amendment to the Environment Bill to place new responsibilities on larger businesses using forest risk commodities in their supply chains²⁹⁸. The UK government should pursue ambitious legislation for companies and finance – in keeping with the recommendations of the Global Resource Initiative Taskforce²⁹⁹ – and should also introduce an ambitious and legally binding target to end deforestation within UK agriculture and forestry supply chains as soon as practicable, by no later than 2030³⁰⁰.



Target 15.5:

Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species.

Our planet’s wildlife populations have fallen by 68% since 1970.³⁰¹ Despite this, the world failed to meet the target to protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species by 2020. None of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets were fully met in 2020, and this in turn threatens the achievement of the SDGs and undermines efforts to address climate change.³⁰² RSPB analysis also found the UK failed to meet almost all the commitments it made for nature in 2010.³⁰³

Recently the UK government has had greater recognition of the importance of biodiversity, as illustrated by the commissioning of the Dasgupta Review on the economics

294. Ibid

295. ICAI (2021), [International Climate Finance: UK aid for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss: A review](#)

296. Global Resource Initiative (2020), [Final Recommendations Report](#)

297. ICAI (2021), [International Climate Finance: UK aid for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss: A review](#)

298. DEFRA, UK Government (November 2020), [Consultation on the introduction of due diligence on forest risk commodities, Summary of responses and the Government’s response](#)

299. Global Resource Initiative (2020), [Final Recommendations Report](#)

300. Ibid

301. WWF (2020), [The Living Planet Report 2020](#)

302. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2020), [Global Biodiversity Outlook 5: Summary for policymakers](#)

303. RSPB (2020), [A Lost Decade for Nature](#)

of biodiversity³⁰⁴. Projects like the Darwin Initiative offer small grants for local initiatives working on biodiversity and wildlife protection to support poverty reduction. The UK portfolio also includes a range of support to NGOs to help build their capacity for effective advocacy to hold government and the private sector to account on reducing the drivers of deforestation and biodiversity loss.³⁰⁵ The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, which began in 2021, brings opportunities and impetus for healing nature and acknowledges that, without reviving ecosystems, we cannot achieve the SDGs or the Paris Agreement.³⁰⁶

With the global biodiversity financing gap estimated at \$711 billion³⁰⁷, there is a compelling need for the UK government to play its part in catalysing and mobilising complementary private and philanthropic investments, in addition to funding that has already been committed through mechanisms outside of official development assistance (ODA). The global footprint of the UK and its investments are having major impacts on nature, which are especially driven by infrastructure development and increasing land conversion. Given the shift towards prioritising infrastructure investment through mechanisms like British International Investment, it is critical that more is done to address transparency and ensure that development projects do not undermine environmental objectives.

The 2020 Leaders’ Pledge for Nature, and the Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use signed at COP26 provide clear directions for actions to meet and exceed this SDG target. The UK must build on the momentum created at COP26, and champion the development of a strong global biodiversity framework at COP15, making sure these are underpinned by the resources and accountability mechanisms to drive delivery.



Target 15.7 and 15.c:

Target 15.7: Take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna and address both demand and supply of illegal wildlife products; and Target 15.c: Enhance global support for efforts to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species, including by increasing the capacity of local communities to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities.

The illegal wildlife trade is estimated to be worth up to \$23 billion a year and is a significant driver of many species’ global decline.³⁰⁸ The UK continues to be a strong

304. OGL (2021), [The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review](#)

305. ICAI (2021), [International Climate Finance: UK aid for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss: A review](#)

306. UN (2021), [Ecosystem Restoration Playbook](#)

307. ICAI (2021), [International Climate Finance: UK aid for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss: A review](#)

308. ZSL, [‘Illegal wildlife trade crisis’](#) [web page, accessed June 2022]



global advocate for tackling this trade. In October 2021, it announced an additional £7.2 million to tackle the illegal wildlife trade through the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, providing essential support to projects around the world for the benefit of wildlife, nature, local communities and economies – and global security.³⁰⁹ In total, the UK is investing over £46m between 2014 and 2022 to combat the illegal wildlife trade by reducing demand, strengthening enforcement, ensuring effective legal frameworks and developing sustainable livelihoods.³¹⁰

To achieve SDGs 14 and 15, the UK government should:

1. Measure the UK's global footprint, especially for key goods and commodities. Ensure better transparency and accountability mechanisms for the private sector on the sourcing and sustainability of these commodities, including strong and ambitious requirements under, and enforcement of, Schedule 17 of the Environment Act³¹¹, and delivering on the package of recommendations from the Global Resource Initiative taskforce³¹².
2. Collaborate across government and with the private sector to develop programming on the UK's global footprint. Ensure domestic policies are consistent in recognising this problem. Lead global initiatives for other high-consuming countries to do the same.
3. Revisit DFID's economic development strategy to build in a greater focus on environmental sustainability. Ensure financial flows, trade policies and taxation policies are also coherent with the goals of environmental sustainability.
4. Lead on catalysing and mobilising private and philanthropic investments to complement ODA. Ensure funds are available to recover species and properly manage protected areas, marine sanctuaries and the high seas as well as supporting indigenous people and local communities directly.
5. Promote an ambitious post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework under the CBD that drives real action to reverse biodiversity declines. Ensure this is underpinned by the necessary financial resources, and a robust accountability mechanism that recognises the urgency of the climate and biodiversity crisis. Integrate this across all conventions, including the UNFCCC, the UN Convention on Combating Desertification and the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA).
6. In the remaining months of the UK's COP Presidency, ensure that all parties take urgent action to deliver on their commitments made at COP26, including the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use.

311. Legislation.gov.uk, '[Environment Act 2021](#)' [web page, accessed June 2022]

312. Global Resource Initiative (2020), '[Final Recommendations Report](#)'

309. DEFRA UK Government (1 October, 2021), '[UK commits additional £7.2 million to tackling illegal wildlife trade](#)' [online media release, accessed June 2022]

310. Ibid