

Institute for Public Policy Research



OUR HOME

A PROGRESSIVE AGENDA
ON INTERNATIONAL NATURE

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SUMMARY

A healthy natural world is a non-negotiable life-support system for every person on earth. It underpins all of our lives in fundamental ways.

- Thriving nature is essential for a safe climate: protection and restoration of nature¹ provides 30 per cent of the action needed to deliver the Paris Agreement (Griscom et al 2017; Roe et al 2019).
- It is imperative for secure and affordable food supplies: 75 per cent of the world-leading food crops benefit from animal pollination for fruit, vegetable or seed production (FAO and UNEP 2020), yet the numbers of pollinators are in significant decline.
- It is central to long-term economic growth: a full half of the global economy is highly or moderately dependent on nature (WEF 2020).

However, our joint life support system is currently being dismantled at pace. Species populations, for example, have declined rapidly since 1970, with reductions of 40 per cent for terrestrial species, 84 per cent for freshwater species and 35 per cent for marine species (IPBES 2019). Key ecosystems are facing existential threat. Some researchers estimate, for example, that the Amazon rainforest is reaching a tipping point whereby further degradation means it may no longer be able to hold the necessary moisture and generate the rainfall it needs to support itself. This risks setting off a chain reaction, transforming the world's largest tropical forest into a savannah (New Scientist 2022; Flores et al 2024).

The next decade – the duration of just two UK parliaments – will likely be the difference between success and failure. The new government has a huge responsibility – and opportunity – to help secure humanity's future.

The UK has a history of successful global environmental leadership – we were the first country to legislate on domestic climate targets. And thanks in part to UK efforts, there is a real legacy of international commitments on nature. At COP26 in Glasgow, the UK secured an unprecedented set of international nature commitments, including nearly \$20 billion of international finance, and an agreement by over 140 world leaders to halt and reverse forest loss by 2030 (UK 2021). UK diplomacy, as part of a global movement, led to the world adopting the Global Biodiversity Framework, including protection of 30 per cent of land and sea (UN Convention on Biological Diversity 2022).

Achieving these agreements has taken extraordinary effort by all parties, including building trust with nature-rich countries of the global south. These countries' actions will make the difference between success and failure. But they require support² from the UK and that support must be consistent, respectful and trustworthy. Promises made to these countries in the past haven't been met. Repeating this could lead to deepened disenchantment, rather than the collective and urgent problem-solving that the world requires.

1 Nature here is defined as all life on Earth (biodiversity), together with all the features, forces and processes, such as the weather, water, the sea and land, which make up our planet and how it functions.

2 The gains to preserving nature are felt by all of us, while many of the costs are currently met by nature-rich countries, within whose borders (and marine EEZs) some of the most important natural ecosystems exist. This makes international nature a global public good, which requires external support in order to ensure there are sufficient incentives for its protection.

How has the UK performed in recent years? Not that well. Rather than moving forward with delivering on hard-won political commitments, the world is in a dangerous pause, with a gap between agreement and action. The UK's actions have contributed to this, with waning political commitment and challenges generated by Official Development Assistance (ODA) cuts.

It is therefore encouraging that the foreign secretary of the new Labour government made climate and nature the topic of his first major foreign policy speech. A progressive government should – must – seize this agenda and help turn things around. It's time for grown-up leadership of service on the international stage. The UK can motivate and mobilise for change. It can direct global attention to on-the-ground delivery, rather than seeking grandstanding 'announceables'. It can respectfully partner with the nature-rich countries of the global south, who must be the real driver of progress; and the UK should lead by doing, both internationally and domestically.

This paper sets out the situation today – the status of international nature, why it matters, why the UK must invest in the agenda, and the steps which have already been made internationally, which provide a platform for progress. It also assesses what could risk holding the UK back. It then sets out what a progressive agenda for international nature entails. This involves increased leadership, scaling nature finance, delivering systemic reforms, and partnering with the nature-rich countries of the global south to help deliver on-the-ground change. It is an agenda which fits a government of service, with a focus on delivery, respect and partnership. But as well as demonstrating how a progressive government wants to work, it is an opportunity to make a difference to an agenda of fundamental importance which simply will not wait.

1. INTRODUCTION

Economic stability, and indeed the wider stability of nation states, depends on a healthy natural environment. This dependence manifests itself in innumerable ways. Nature plays a vital role in providing resources and services for human health and wellbeing, the economy, climate regulation, global nutrition and food security, as well as water quality and provision, and many others. Some examples of its centrality to our economic lives include the following.

- Humans derive approximately US\$125 trillion of value from ecosystems each year (OECD 2019).
- More than half of the world's GDP (US\$44 trillion) is highly or moderately dependent on nature (WEF 2020).
- The World Economic Forum has listed biodiversity and ecosystem loss in its top three risks to the global economy over the next decade (WEF 2024).

The climate and nature crises are deeply interlinked. Land-use change is the third largest source of global emissions (Jia et al 2019), and protection and restoration of natural ecosystems can provide 30 per cent of the global action needed to mitigate the climate crisis and deliver on the Paris Agreement (Griscom et al 2017; Roe et al 2019). Healthy functioning ecosystems are also essential to our efforts to adapt to the climate crisis (Carvalho-Santos 2015; Barbier et al 2011) and reduce the risks of future pandemics (IPBES 2018). For example, the loss of the Amazon forest would not only generate global consequences in terms of carbon emissions, it would also undercut communities' abilities to cope with climate change. It has been estimated that without the local cooling effects of the forest, 12 million people could be exposed to lethal extreme heat stress by 2100.

Nature's degradation has serious impacts on every country in the world. In the UK, it has been estimated that up to 12 per cent of our GDP is at risk from deterioration of the natural environment – larger than the hit to GDP from the global financial crisis (4-6 per cent) or Covid-19 (11 per cent). Effects arise through the decline in soil health, water shortages, global food security repercussions, zoonotic diseases, and antimicrobial resistance (Green Finance Institute 2024). In developing countries, around one-third of livelihoods are directly dependent on biodiversity and ecosystem services, with rural and indigenous people and local communities particularly dependent on nature for their livelihoods (IPBES 2019). These livelihoods are at risk when nature is degraded or destroyed.

Nature is also about power, rights and the rule of law. Indigenous people and local communities are the custodians of natural ecosystems, traditionally managing, or using one quarter of the land surface, but their rights and voices are too frequently ignored (Garnett et al 2018). Moreover, environmental crime is the third largest criminal activity in the world, costing US\$110-281 billion per year, undermining national and regional security, good governance, and local development (Nellemann 2016).

If the world does not put nature on a path to recovery by 2030, we will have caused potentially irreparable damage to our life support system. It is already estimated that the Amazon is approaching a tipping point, with deforestation driving increased drought, which in turn means the forest may never recover (Flores et al 2024). The time to act is now.

2. WHERE ARE WE?

2.1 THE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE UK

The UK has a unique opportunity to play an international role on nature.

Firstly, the UK cares about nature. The UK's identity is deeply connected to the environmental movement: from the founding of WWF, to the rise of Sir David Attenborough, to a more environmentally engaged monarchy. Domestic polling regularly emphasises the importance of nature to the UK public, with recent surveys suggesting 47 per cent of people thinking the government is not spending enough on nature protection (versus 57 per cent concerned about the cost of living, and 46 per cent about climate action) (Money Talks Research 2024).

Secondly, the UK matters. The UK government has a history of international thought leadership on climate and nature, including the Stern (climate) and Eliasch Reviews (forests) in the 2000s, the Illegal Wildlife Trade conferences in the 2010s, the Dasgupta Review on the Economics of Biodiversity (2021), the deforestation commitments in Glasgow at COP26,³ and most importantly the negotiation of the Global Biodiversity Framework. The UK's soft convening and diplomatic power, combined with the capacity of UK research and civil society institutions, can continue to play a pivotal role driving global progress. In the context of broader political uncertainty on environmental issues by many of the other G7 countries, the role of the UK is even more important.

Thirdly, while the UK is a small nation, we have the fifth largest exclusive economic zone in the world, and have a particular responsibility towards the ocean, working with the overseas territories.

Finally, international leadership brings tangible benefits in terms of influence and partnership around the world, which is important in the context of post-Brexit foreign policy. UK engagement, together with other nature champions from the global north and south, including Colombia and Brazil, will make a consequential difference.

2.2 THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Over the past few years, countries have invested huge amounts of time and resources negotiating and adopting new global targets for nature. These include the following.

1. **The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)** under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The GBF has 23 action-oriented global targets for urgent action over this decade. These include bringing the loss of areas of high biodiversity importance, including ecosystems of high ecological integrity, close to zero by 2030; effective conservation and management of 30 per cent of land and sea by 2030; integrating biodiversity into decision-making at every level, including by the financial sector; harmful subsidy reform; and mobilising US\$200 billion per year from all sources including US\$30 billion from international donor finance (with an interim target of US\$20 billion by 2025). Countries are expected to submit detailed National Biodiversity Strategy and

3 See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cop26-world-leaders-summit-on-action-on-forests-and-land-use-2-november-2021/world-leaders-summit-on-action-on-forests-and-land-use>

Action Plans (NBSAPs), setting out how they will deliver on these targets, by COP16 in October 2024. The UK has yet to do this.

- 2. The Paris Agreement** under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change includes a specific article on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and conservation of forest carbon stocks. At COP28 in Dubai in 2023, countries recognised the importance of ‘halting and reversing deforestation by 2030’ as part of climate efforts, bringing into the formal climate process the target world leaders had announced previously at COP26 in Glasgow. Countries are expected to develop and update their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) every five years, with the next update due by February 2025 ahead of COP30 in Brazil. The UK has yet to publish its revised NDC.
- 3. The High Seas Treaty**, formally known as the United Nations Agreement on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ), agreed in 2023, sets out measures to manage the two-thirds of the ocean, which is beyond national jurisdiction, including the potential to establish marine protected areas. This is an important tool in efforts to protect 30 per cent of the sea by 2030. The treaty will only come into force when ratified by 60 countries (eight have ratified so far; the UK has yet to do so).
- 4. The Global Treaty to End Plastic Pollution.** In 2022, countries agreed to establish an international negotiations process to develop a legally binding agreement on plastic pollution. This is due to be finalised in December 2024.

With this international framework in place, *the priority now is to deliver*, rather than to negotiate new global targets or coalitions. By mid-2025, countries will have submitted their first NBSAPs and revised NDCs. The initial stocktake of these will determine the extent to which countries are on track with global biodiversity and climate commitments. The level of political jeopardy here will be high: the aggregate level of ambition is likely to be dramatically below what’s needed, with the world on track to significantly exceed 1.5 degrees. Leaders will then have six to nine months to take remedial action ahead of the next climate conference (COP30) in Belém, Brazil, which will also have a strong focus on nature.

2.3 WHAT DOES THE UK RISK GETTING WRONG?

The UK has had real success in its work supporting international nature. This creates both a platform for the UK to do more and an expectation to live up to. However, it is not sufficient just to recommit to the agenda politically – as essential as this is. It also means being aware of choices and issues which have made progress harder and learning from experience.

Presenting the UK as a trusted partner: Resetting the UK’s approach

Trust with nature-rich countries in the global south is low, amid wider concern about the effectiveness and future of multilateral working. There is a long history of initiatives led by the global north countries, including significant ODA pledges, which fall short on delivery.⁴ Over the last few years, UK political commitment to action on climate and the environment waned. This has included a deprioritisation of international engagement on these issues (Froggatt 2023). This has severely damaged delivery of initiatives instigated by the UK and where we have a particular responsibility, including the Glasgow forest and nature commitments. It has also contributed to a wider slowing of momentum on international nature.

⁴ Although there are notable exceptions including Norway’s remarkable perseverance, effective and transparent delivery of its *International Climate and Forests Initiative* based on long-term relationships with key nature-rich countries.

The UK needs to reset relationships and position itself as a credible, reliable and thoughtful partner, acting in support of nature-rich countries and those who are responsible for managing nature, particularly indigenous peoples and local communities. This is not a superficial exercise. It requires an honest assessment of both policy issues and ways of working, including the following.

1. **ODA policy.** Ahead of COP26, the UK committed to spend £3 billion of international climate finance on nature, as part of the larger £11.6 billion international climate finance (ICF) envelope over 2021/22 to 2025/26, including £1.5 billion on forests. This represented a step change in UK ambition, with the potential to deliver transformative outcomes. Unfortunately, operationalisation hasn't delivered as hoped.

The move from 0.7 per cent to 0.5 per cent of GNI for ODA, combined with the re-purposing of a significant proportion of ODA for domestic asylum accommodation costs (28 per cent in 2023, for example), has *de facto* led to a halving of UK ODA. This has manifested itself in substantial real-term cuts to UK ODA programmes in developing countries. International Climate Finance (ICF) spending has averaged an estimated £1.5 billion per year in the first three years of the period (against a required average spend of £2.3 billion per year), necessitating a significant uplift in the last two years (FCDO 2024a). Within this, nature spend averaged £382 million in the first two years, requiring an increase to £746 million in the last three years to deliver on the commitment (FCDO 2024b; Defra 2024).

The pressure on ODA budgets along with a commitment to meet ICF spending targets also saw the previous government expand the definitions of international climate (and nature) finance to enable the UK to say it will be able to deliver on pledges without deploying significant new finance or programmes on the ground (Mitchell 2023). Shifting the goalposts in this way was not perceived as credible by many stakeholders (eg Oxfam 2023). Any new major nature ODA pledges or programmes from the UK will likely be met with scepticism unless accompanied with greater transparency and accountability about how these pledges will be met.

2. **Country ownership.** Country ownership has been a basic principle of ODA programming since the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 (OECD 2005). The UK's nature ODA offer is divided between multiple Whitehall departments and teams and channelled a variety of mechanisms including through several centrally managed programmes and multilateral funds. From a developing country recipient perspective, countries are often presented with a predetermined menu of programmes and priorities, which may not reflect their own priorities. While the aggregate quantum of finance deployed at a country level may be significant, these predetermined ring fences and priorities, and parallel delivery teams, mean there is limited flexibility or responsiveness.

Nature and natural resources are sovereign assets, where governments and rights-holders are the ultimate decisionmakers over how that asset is managed, protected or exploited. ODA can enable change, but not 'buy' results. UK nature ODA programming should be genuinely country-owned and aligned with the priorities, strategies and actions of rights-holders and decision-makers. This requires a fundamental rethink about how nature ODA programming and policy can be restructured to support nature-rich developing countries, in a bottom-up manner.

For example, the flagship £500m Blue Planet Fund was divided up between Defra and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and at least eight large parallel delivery programmes, often operating within the same developing countries on the same issues. Rather than going to a country and saying, "the UK has an envelope of £XX million to support marine outcomes, let's work together to determine how best to use it", each country instead has to engage with eight different teams and institutions, each with predetermined

priorities and budget ringfences. Unsurprisingly, ICAI's recent review of the Blue Planet Fund criticised this approach and the resulting lack of country ownership (ICAI 2023).

3. **Rebuilding alliances.** The UK has championed high ambition alliances on nature to address critical international nature challenges, including the *Leaders Pledge for Nature*,⁵ the *High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People*,⁶ the *10-point plan for biodiversity finance* (Defra 2022) and the *Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership*,⁷ as well as informal alliances with other leading countries. These relationships and the political momentum they created were crucial to delivering major environmental agreements. Many of these alliances have declined in impact and relationships have frayed as UK political leadership has waned. Re-establishing these relationships and rebuilding trusted alliances will be important if the UK wishes to convene countries on international nature priorities in the future.
4. **Addressing power imbalances.** Global environmental processes and decision-making are heavily weighted in favour of the more advanced countries, in particular the G7. These countries have the best capacity and resourcing to engage in any international process, and have historically expected a significant role in any governance mechanism. This provides G7 countries with a natural huge advantage, which is often not understood and can easily lead to dominance, or the impression of dominance, however unintended. For example, the Council of the Global Environment Facility, the governing body of the financial mechanism for the CBD, has full seats for each of the G7 countries, whereas Indonesia, one of the world's largest and most biodiverse states, is represented as part of a constituency with 16 other countries.

Resetting the UK's approach requires acknowledgement of these inherent biases, and a conscious effort to change. Breaking down barriers to the effective participation and leadership by developing countries will include re-organising formal governance structures, tackling capacity asymmetries, and cultivating a different role for the UK. We should seek to respond to nature-rich countries' ideas, priorities, and leadership, working as a mobiliser, motivator and facilitator of change.

Balancing a systems change approach with on-the-ground delivery

Much of the UK's historical effort has been focussed on systems change: launching initiatives and coalitions to consider how to shift how we value and finance nature, re-engineer the financial sector, or change global consumption and production systems. At the same time, we need to make this real for nature-rich developing countries, supporting them with practical steps and to deliver results on the ground, with their constituencies.

Effectively utilising the UK's soft power: joining-up action across HMG

Action on international nature has generally been a 'nice to have' peripheral consideration across Defra, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) and FCDO, with limited separation of authorities between departments and at times up to four junior ministers responsible. It has not been clear which minister speaks for the UK. This is inefficient, with significant redundancies and duplication across Whitehall, and it prevents the UK from maximising its global leadership potential. Often the focus has been on 'feel good' moments around ODA announcements or launch of specific international initiatives, rather than harnessing the power of the UK government in an integrated, effective and consistent manner.

5 <https://www.leaderspledgefornature.org/>

6 <https://www.hacfornatureandpeople.org/>

7 <https://forestclimateleaders.org/>

Current responsibilities on international nature are divided between Whitehall departments as follows.

- FCDO: The diplomatic network, most of the ODA budget, most major international funds (some with DESNZ or Defra), some international policy areas (eg the high seas). Forests is shared with the DESNZ through the joint International Forests Unit (IFU).
- DESNZ: International climate change negotiations, carbon markets (including forest carbon), REDD+ and some of the ODA budget. Forests is shared with the FCDO through the joint International Forests Unit (IFU).
- Defra: International biodiversity negotiations (the CBD) and other multilateral conventions (eg UNEA, CMS, CITES), biodiversity-focussed ODA programmes, and some marine issues and marine ODA (shared with FCDO).

For COP26 in Glasgow in 2021, a single junior minister (Lord Goldsmith) was responsible for international nature, and the cabinet office supported the development and delivery of an International Nature Strategy by the three central Whitehall departments. This approach was instrumental in landing the world-leading Glasgow commitments on forests and nature. Those delivery structures were deconstructed shortly thereafter.

The International Forests Unit (IFU, joint DESNZ/FCDO) was established after COP26, with a specific focus on delivering the main Glasgow forests commitments and £1.5 billion of ODA. The IFU was modelled on the older International Energy Unit (IEU, also joint DESNZ/FCDO) and has generally been an effective model for joined-up government delivery, on one aspect of international nature.

Finally, the balance of staffing and responsibilities is currently heavily weighted towards the UK, with limited devolution or resourcing overseas. To be more responsive and accountable to nature-rich developing countries, capacity and authority should be relocated to those countries. The future of the FCDO climate and nature attaché network, established to deliver Glasgow COP26 but now at risk, is also important.

Domestic delivery is essential to international credibility

Credibility internationally on nature comes from domestic leadership and delivery. The UK is a nature-depleted country, but with huge potential for recovery. Therefore, as part of an overall nature strategy, the government needs to continue to invest in nature restoration across the UK and demonstrate how to navigate competing economic and social objectives (housing, food production etc), while maintaining ambition on nature.

3.

A PROGRESSIVE AGENDA ON INTERNATIONAL NATURE

The new government can play a central role in reversing the decline of international nature. This would be a historic achievement, working in a modern way with the countries of the global south to sustain the common foundations for all our lives.

The government must act in four areas.

1. **Political leadership:** Resetting the UK approach, so that we act as a reliable partner to nature-rich global south countries, delivering on our commitments and continuing to build global ambition.
2. **Scaling nature finance:** Delivering with integrity on international climate finance and nature ODA but going further and establishing new mechanisms to scale finance that aren't dependent on ODA budgets.
3. **Delivering systemic reforms:** Using all the government's policy levers to drive the systemic reforms needed to integrate the value of nature into decision-making by governments, development banks and the private sector, to build nature-positive economies that deliver jobs and livelihoods, and to stamp out the corruption, crime and exploitation that accompany attacks on nature.
4. **Turning global rhetoric into tangible results:** Listening to and responding to the needs of national governments, indigenous peoples and local communities responsible for managing natural ecosystems.

While putting in place two enabling conditions.

5. Building **effective delivery** mechanisms.
6. **Delivering at home** through investment in nature restoration in the UK. Without domestic delivery, the UK isn't credible internationally.

3.1 RESTORING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

To have impact, the UK must visibly recommit to the international climate and nature agenda, and work to restore the UK's credibility. The new government has made important early commitments, including the announcement of international climate and nature envoys. The government can build on these initial steps by doing the following.

- Restoring credibility on ODA through commitments to honesty, transparency and accountability and a realistic plan to deliver on existing nature ODA pledges.
- Reinvigorating crucial international nature coalitions, including the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People and the Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership.
- Setting out a strategy for international nature.

These initial actions are just a start. The UK should reposition itself as a reliable partner to global south nature-rich countries, build strong relationships and sustain those relationships through effective delivery on commitments (financial, technical, diplomatic or policy). Early engagement with Colombia (as host of COP16 in October), the small island developing states (SIDS), and Brazil (host of COP30, late 2025) will be important. Ahead of the UN Ocean Conference in June 2025, the UK should spearhead efforts to ratify the High Seas Treaty.

Recommendation 1: The government should fully reset the UK’s approach to work in partnership with and in support of global south countries and in particular indigenous peoples and local communities who own and manage critical natural ecosystems. This should be an overarching ambition, which frames the government’s approach to international nature.

Recommendation 2: The government should rebuild alliances on nature with likeminded countries, including European partners and nature-rich global south countries; restore UK leadership in the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, and the Forest and Climate Leaders’ Partnership.

Recommendation 3: The government should demonstrate political leadership through key moments and events. This could include offering support to Brazil to deliver a successful COP30 in late 2025; ratifying the High Seas Treaty before the UN Ocean Conference in June 2025 (including committing financial support for implementation); and hosting a major international nature summit.

3.2 SCALING FINANCE FOR NATURE

The annual biodiversity funding gap by 2030 is estimated to be US\$700 billion (Deutz 2020).⁸ It is possible to secure these resources, and the UK has led the way in setting out a vision for global natural finance through the 10-point plan for financing biodiversity (Defra 2022). This includes:

- delivering on the Global Biodiversity Framework commitment of US\$30 billion of collective ODA by 2030, with an interim target of US\$20 billion by 2025
- ensuring nature is prioritised in the reform of development banks and development finance institutions
- scaling public and private finance
- reducing negative incentives, including through reform of harmful subsidies and shifting investment, to limit the size of the funding gap.

Specific areas for new government attention are discussed below.

Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) for international nature

To restore credibility, the UK’s nature ODA offer should learn lessons from the past and be transparent, responsive to the needs and priorities of the global south, and delivered with integrity.

An immediate priority for the new government should be to undertake a review of current nature ODA commitments (including the £3 billion of ICF by 2025/2026 of which half - £1.5 billion - was for forests), and to ensure that these can be delivered.

By COP30 at the end of 2025 the government will be expected to set out its plans for the next five-year ICF commitment (2026-2031). Within this, it will be important to continue to hypothecate a significant portion of ICF to both nature and climate objectives, and to reflect this in the New Collective Quantified Goal on climate finance when it is negotiated at COP29. The evidence base for the climate-nature convergence is scientifically robust, and Canada, France, Germany, Norway and the UK have led the way at allocating a significant portion of ICF (ideally at least 30 per cent) for nature. Indeed, because nature is further from attracting private finance at scale than other areas of climate finance (eg energy) (Climate Policy Initiative 2023), the percentage of ICF for nature might be expected to grow over time. The UK

⁸ To note this is just one aspect of nature, leaving out areas such as soil health, climate services, water quality and provision etc.

should also revisit definitions of ICF and nature ODA and ensure that attribution of funds to objectives is appropriately justified.

Within the nature ODA commitments, the UK could also increase its focus on specific areas such as an increased contribution to the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the principal financial mechanism of the CBD (alongside engagement to strengthen the GEF and make it more inclusive). We also recommend continuing to maintain half of the nature ICF allocation on forests, as well as a focus on the ocean. Rather than making large ODA quantum announcements, and then considering how to design and develop the capacities to deliver, the government should shift to setting out ODA priorities, developing the pipeline, and then announcing quantum.

Alongside an increased nature ODA offer, there is also a need to significantly improve delivery mechanisms. This includes re-evaluating the balance of centrally-managed to locally-managed programmes and shifting to a portfolio that is more country and locally-owned and responsive to the needs of governments and stakeholders in nature-rich countries. The government should actively participate in and support country-owned and country-led platforms, as proposed by the MDBs, to address nature and climate priorities (MDBs 2024). Defra, DESNZ and FCDO should establish 'country delivery units', in priority countries, where responsibility and capacities for nature ODA programming are devolved to teams at post, who are more responsive and accountable to national stakeholders.

To effectively manage a larger nature ODA portfolio, it will be important to consider expanding the pool of experts within Defra/DESNZ/FCDO who have a track record of effectively planning and managing nature programmes and developing professional career tracks to maintain and grow this capacity. This could be done by expanding the technical cadre of climate experts in the FCDO into a climate and nature cadre, with strong and distinct nature capabilities.

Across the broader ODA portfolio, all spending should be aligned with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework ('nature-positive') and the Paris Agreement, as well as contributing to development objectives. The UK should commit to expanding the existing nature-positive aid commitment to all forms of UK overseas financing, including export credit finance.

Finally, in the context of the Global Biodiversity Framework's collective \$30 billion ODA target by 2030, the UK should show political leadership to engage other donor countries to increase the overall volume of donor finance for nature.

Scaling nature finance beyond ODA

There are no silver bullets on nature finance, and no single mechanism will deliver the quantum needed. However, the five following approaches show promise.

- 1. Unlocking demand for high integrity forest and nature carbon credits.** The concept of paying for the protection of forests and carbon-rich ecosystems was first proposed in the mid-2000s and became an integral part of the Paris Agreement on climate change – indeed it is the subject of Article 5 called 'REDD+'.⁹ Guyana has led the world with the single largest forest deal, worth at least US\$750 million through to 2030 using a high-quality standard (Government of Guyana 2023). There has been over 15 years of investment in building capacity and understanding around high-quality methodologies to measure forest carbon, including by private sector coalitions (eg LEAF Coalition, ICVCM), and the legitimacy of corporate claims (eg VCMI).

⁹ "policy approaches and positive incentives for activities relating to reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries" (Paris Agreement, Article 5).

However, demand remains predicated either on payment for performance from ODA budgets (eg Norway, UK) or the voluntary carbon market, which is significant in size but has been subject to widespread criticism (Forest Trends' Ecosystem Marketplace 2024). The principal concerns are around the potential use of forest and nature carbon credits by corporations to 'offset' emissions instead of taking action within their business and supply chains; as well as the definition of high integrity standards. Concerted action by governments is now urgently needed to provide reassurance about the quality of credits being supplied, while simultaneously regulating to establish high integrity demand. This could unlock billions for protection and restoration of natural ecosystems without resort to ODA. Political leadership here has been lacking, and it represents a huge opportunity for the UK to support the City of London as a centre of green finance. Specific ideas and opportunities to help establish a high-integrity market include:

- regulating corporate claims to clarify when and how corporations can use forest and nature carbon credits, definitions of high integrity credits, and the claims corporates can make regarding contributions to climate and nature goals
- requiring certain corporations to purchase forest and nature carbon credits (for example: 'Forest, Land and Agriculture' (FLAG) companies should purchase them to compensate for scope 3 emissions and negative impacts in their supply chains)
- enabling corporations to purchase forest and nature carbon credits instead of paying carbon or pollution taxes; for instance: Singapore has a carbon tax on corporate emissions, but companies can choose instead to buy a forest carbon credit in lieu of 5 per cent of their taxable emissions (NCCS 2024)
- establishing new taxes and hypothecating part of the revenues to purchase forest and nature carbon credits; for example, revenue from Carbon Border Adjustment measures, pollution taxes, frequent flyer levies, shipping taxes, taxation of ETS etc.

- 2. Incorporating nature into IFI reform**, building on the COP26 MDB Joint Statement on Nature (MDBs 2021). The 'Bridgetown Initiative' championed by Mia Mottley, the prime minister of Barbados, has proposed a systemic package of reforms to the international financial architecture to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and spur climate action (Bridgetown Initiative 2024). The latest iteration of the proposals, version 3.0, has a stronger focus on nature than in the past. This increasing integration of nature into this vital IFI reform agenda is very welcome. It will be vital to ensure that IFI reforms also appropriately generate financial support for nature-related investments. More generally, as a major shareholder in several MDBs, the UK should mandate these banks to stress test their balance sheets for nature and climate risks, impacts and dependencies, and to develop plans to fully align their portfolios with international nature commitments, and to report on progress in doing so.
- 3. Exploring the expansion of innovative debt-related financial instruments for nature**, including nature bonds, supported by guarantees and credit enhancement, to increase countries' fiscal space, provide de-risking and deliver increased finance and investment for nature. When well designed, these sustainability-linked debt instruments have the potential to shift significant funds towards the protection of nature.

4. **Supporting Brazil to deliver the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF) at COP30.** The TFFF is an innovative new financial mechanism that would provide performance-based payments for maintenance of forest areas, funded through a newly capitalised large fund, backed by sovereign loans and guarantees. TFFF is conceptually different from high-integrity forest carbon credits because it is a payment for conservation of forest stocks, rather than for emissions reductions. To help apply the concept, the UK would need to provide several billions in guarantees, analogous to the guarantees provided previously for the Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs).
5. **Benefit sharing from digital sequence information (DSI) from the use of genetic resources.** The UK and Malawi are co-chairing the working group on DSI, which aims to establish a new multilateral mechanism under which companies (for example, pharmaceutical firms) that use physical genetic or biological resources, or genetic data, in their research and development and production processes and value chains, would contribute to a new fund to pay for conservation. Key decisions will be taken at the next CBD COP16, in Colombia in October, and the UK should be ready to play a leading role both in these negotiations and in implementing the eventual outcome.

Recommendation 4: The government should commit to ensure that ODA effectively supports international nature. This includes the following.

- Committing at least 30 per cent of international climate finance to nature, both in the current ICF spending period and any future period, including half for forests and a commitment to oceans.
- Ensuring nature is integrated into an ambitious new collective quantified goal on climate finance at COP29.
- Ensuring all ODA is consistent with the Global Biodiversity Framework.
- Ensuring honesty, transparency and accountability on donor pledges.
- Scaling up support to country-owned and country-led platforms for climate and nature.
- Returning to 0.7 per cent of GNI for ODA when financial circumstances allow, which is important for overall credibility.

Recommendation 5: The government should lead efforts to scale nature finance from all sources. This includes the following.

- Incorporating nature priorities into reform of international financial institutions.
- Generating new revenue streams, such as supporting Brazil's proposed Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF).
- Achieving an ambitious outcome on benefit-sharing from the use of digital sequence information on genetic resources (DSI).
- Scaling existing mechanisms including nature and forest carbon credits and markets.
- Using innovative debt-related financial instruments, while ensuring that these mechanisms are well designed to deliver their intended impacts.

3.3 DELIVER SYSTEMIC REFORMS

Nature is being degraded because the economy rewards its destruction. Until our systems of consumption, production and finance value the maintenance of our natural ecosystems, they will continue to be degraded (Dasgupta 2021). This requires shifts in the systems that we inhabit – our systems of consumption, finance etc - which could feel so large as to be out of reach. But there are in fact practical, meaningful steps that the UK can take, which would make a substantial difference in setting the world on a different path.

Shifting the financial system

As one of the world's leading financial centres, the UK plays a unique role in supporting and galvanising efforts to shift the financial system to ensure that it protects, rather than degrades, nature. This includes strengthening financial regulation, including incorporation of the recommendations of the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosure (TNFD). The government should broaden the mandate of the Bank of England, and the Financial Conduct Authority, to require them to ensure that actions by UK-based financial institutions are fully aligned with relevant government and international policy commitments on nature and climate. This would include legislation to require financial institutions to produce integrated nature and climate transition plans.

Rewarding sustainable production of commodities

We need to reform production and consumption systems to reward sustainable commodity production; for example, sustainable fisheries or forestry, or zero-deforestation agricultural goods. Currently, there are a vast array of voluntary systems, which fail to provide genuine price or incentives to producers (farmers, fishers, local people), to change destructive behaviours and production systems across large areas. Major producing countries (Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia) have strongly objected to unilateral action by the EU to define zero-deforestation products (eg Mongabay 2023). A new approach would substantially incentivise the shift towards nature-positive economies in a manner that is respectful to nature-rich countries and their people. Practical ways to increase prices, market share and access to commodities produced in an environmentally sustainable manner include removal of tariffs for processed and unprocessed products; recognition of national sustainability certification and labelling programmes; reform to government public procurement programmes; and removal of non-tariff market barriers. For example, the governments of Iceland, New Zealand and Norway have recently concluded an Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability with Costa Rica that specifically removes tariffs for environmental goods and includes provisions for eco-labelling.¹⁰

Addressing wider global drivers of nature loss

Environmental crime – including illegal wildlife trade, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and illegal mining – is the third largest criminal activity in the world, costing US\$110-281 billion per year, undermining regional security; fuelling corruption, serious organised crime and money laundering; and disrupting local communities (Nellemann 2016). We need to improve governance and security, strengthen the rule of law, and build understanding about the importance of addressing environmental crime by law enforcement, corruption and anti-money laundering agencies, nationally and internationally. As part of this, the UK should recognise environmental crimes as serious crimes and mandate action by the National Crime Agency (NCA).

10 Joint Ministerial Statement on Conclusion of Negotiations for the Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability. See: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/media-and-resources/joint-ministerial-statement-on-conclusion-of-negotiations-for-the-agreement-on-climate-change-trade-and-sustainability>

An underlying prerequisite is to strengthen the governance of land. Land ownership is often very opaque for high-value natural resources, encouraging and enabling rent-seeking. Increased UK focus on land and natural resource governance, rights reform and implementation is important, especially for indigenous peoples and local communities.

The UK's overseas land footprint (that is, the land used internationally to produce the commodities we consume) is approximately equivalent to the UK's own land area (WWF and RSPB 2020). As a major consumer country and financial centre, the UK can play a leading role to reduce the impact of its international footprint. Examples include delivering the UK Forest Risk Commodity regulations (mandated by the Environment Act 2021), strengthening financial regulation (see above), and expanding due diligence obligations to non-forest ecosystems.

Finally, we need to tackle the scourge of plastics in our oceans by negotiating a new UN plastics treaty. The UK should push hard for this to be agreed by the end of 2024.

Recommendation 6: The government should help shape the global financial system so that it protects rather than degrades nature. This includes requiring large businesses and investors to disclose their nature-related risks, impacts and dependencies.

Recommendation 7: The government should seek to reform production and consumption incentives and trade to reward sustainable production of commodities.

Recommendation 8: The government should strongly support international efforts to address global drivers of nature loss, including:

- stamping out environmental crime, including recognising these as serious crimes and mandating action by the NCA
- delivering the UK forest-risk commodities legislation
- pushing hard for a global UN plastics treaty to be agreed at the end of 2024.

3.4 SUPPORTING NATURE-RICH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Nature and natural resources are sovereign assets, where governments and rights-holders are the ultimate decisionmakers over how those assets are managed, protected or exploited. A healthy natural world therefore involves taking practical steps to support nature-rich developing countries, helping them to deliver results on the ground.

Given the breadth of the international nature agenda, it is recommended that the UK support developing countries on three focal areas. All of these are essential components of international nature, have a clear UK role, and are areas where real progress has been made. Now, concerted effort is required to translate commitments into results.

1. **Effective conservation and management of 30 per cent of land and sea by 2030 (30x30).** The UK, along with Costa Rica and France, co-chairs the *High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People*, which comprises 118 countries focussed on achieving this crucial target, now recognised by the Global Biodiversity Framework. This includes recognition of indigenous lands and territories.

2. **Halting and reversing deforestation by 2030.** Forests support two-thirds of biodiversity and are the single largest natural climate solution. They will also be a key focus of COP30 in Brazil. At COP26, the UK convened over 140 world leaders to commit to halt and reverse forest loss by 2030 and established the *Forest and Climate Leaders Partnership* for follow-up. The UK is a key member of three collective donor pledges: the global forest finance pledge, the Congo Basin forest pledge, and the indigenous peoples and local communities forest tenure pledge, all of which originated in Glasgow. These pledges should be delivered and then renewed at COP30.
3. **Building a sustainable ocean economy.** Oceans cover 70 per cent of the planet, contribute US\$1.5 trillion to the world economy and provide food for over 3 billion people. The UK has the world's fifth largest exclusive economic area, including the overseas territories. The UK has committed £500 million to the Blue Planet Fund, and £8 million per year to the Blue Belt Programme, the world's largest marine conservation programme, protecting more than 4.3 million square kilometres of ocean across ten of the 16 UK overseas territories. These funds should be delivered and then expanded in a new phase. The foreign secretary's indication in his recent speech that the government is looking to expand the Blue Belt Programme in the overseas territories to increase marine protection is therefore welcome.

The UK should make these commitments real by delivering highly focussed country partnerships for nature and people, prioritising nature-rich global south countries, which will take the lead and bring together all forms of finance (public and private) and policy levers such as trade and sustainable supply chains to incentivise the rapid transition to net zero nature-positive economies, focussing on 30x30, forests and the ocean. This could include convening other donors, private sector, and philanthropy.

Recommendation 9: The government should support nature-rich developing countries, indigenous peoples and local communities by **delivering highly focussed country partnerships in priority nature-rich countries, focussed on the following.**

- Effective conservation and management of 30 per cent of land and sea by 2030 (30x30). This includes recognition of indigenous lands and territories.
- Halting and reversing deforestation by 2030.
- Building a sustainable ocean economy.

3.5 EFFECTIVE DELIVERY: MAKING WORK ON NATURE MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

The UK should draw its capacities together, so that the government's efforts point in the same direction. The following reforms are recommended:

1. **International nature strategy.** The government should design an international nature strategy that provides a strategic framework for the next few years. An international expert group could be convened to advise on the content and priorities. It will also be essential to draw on the views of nature-rich countries of the global south and other partners (for example, Norway, Germany) with a strong focus on international nature. The strategy should address policy priorities and define what and how the government will deliver them. It should also set out departmental delivery responsibilities and how departments will be held to account.

2. **Joining up departmental delivery.** The government should bring together the main capacities in the international nature policy and ODA teams of Defra, DESNZ and FCDO to address the systemic challenges, through one or more of the following options (which are not mutually exclusive).
 - a. Appointing a joint junior minister across the three departments.
and/or
 - b. Establishing an international nature strategy unit resourced from the three departments to lead on developing and monitoring delivery and accountability for the international nature strategy and supporting the envoy and junior minister(s).
or
 - c. Establishing a joint departmental unit to deliver on the international nature strategy, bringing together the international biodiversity/nature, forests and ocean policy and ODA teams of DESNZ, Defra and FCDO into a single joint unit. The model replicates existing joint units (for example, the international energy unit or international forests unit (both joint DESNZ/FCDO)), with a single structure responsible to multiple departments. The unit would retain a connection through DESNZ and Defra to domestic policymaking on climate and nature respectively.
and/or
 - d. Establishing a unit in cabinet office to co-ordinate the development and delivery of the international nature strategy and hold departments to account (based on the model of COP26 unit).

Of these, a combination of options 'a' and 'c' are probably the most effective.

3. **Devolve responsibilities to teams based in each country.** The UK could establish interdisciplinary units in each priority country, based at FCDO posts, building on the models in Brazil, Colombia and Indonesia. These units would be responsible for designing and delivering ambitious country-led ODA programmes, including focussing on particular jurisdictions or ecosystems (for instance, the Amazon). Country units would have the authority to direct the activities of central Whitehall-managed thematic programmes to ensure coherent strategies and outcomes at the country level, and accountability to host governments.
4. **Alignment across government, including international and domestic.** To ensure coherence and alignment between international and domestic policy positions and delivery, appropriate cabinet office-housed architecture is required. We should establish cabinet committees/sub-committees, one of which should be focussed on climate change and nature (domestic and international). This would periodically review delivery of the international nature strategy, and bring in other government departments (HMT, DBT, etc) as required.

Recommendation 10: The government should develop and implement an ambitious cross-government international nature strategy that integrates the UK's diplomatic influence, policy levers and international climate and development finance. Ensure that nature priorities are reflected in broader cross-governmental strategies as relevant.

Recommendation 11: The government should join up delivery, bringing together policy and ODA programming across Defra, DESNZ and FCDO and ensure there are coherent ways of working to maximise the impact of the international nature envoy.

Recommendation 12: Devolve capacities and authorities to deliver on the strategy to sufficiently resourced teams based in the global south. Ensure the UK diplomatic network is empowered and resourced.

Recommendation 13: Ensure policy coherence across HMG, including through a climate and nature cabinet committee, to keep ministers engaged and facilitate their continued leadership.

3.6 DELIVERING AT HOME

Finally, to be an international leader on nature, the UK needs to demonstrate leadership at home. The UK is a nature-denuded country, but – in part thanks to policy reforms in the 2021 Environment Act and the regulatory freedoms of Brexit – one with huge potential to deliver nature targets. Reform of harmful farming subsidies create huge potential for the UK to lead by doing. These could include development of biodiversity net gain, re-wilding, and innovations in green finance and valuing carbon sequestration. The UK can demonstrate that systemic reforms are politically possible and can deliver for nature, climate and people. The UK should do the following.

- **Commit to deliver all the targets of the Global Biodiversity Framework domestically.**
- **Ambitiously deliver on 30x30 in the UK**, through long-term legal protection measures and demonstrable active and effective management to restore nature.
- **Continue to deliver farming reforms, including the reform to harmful farming subsidies and regulations**, recognising that enhancing the countryside's ability to provide ecosystem services is the best way to protect British food security from floods and drought.
- **Provide secure, long-term public funds for nature, including for the overseas territories** (including through Darwin-plus and the Blue Belt Programme).
- **Generate new financial flows to reward restoration of nature, such as biodiversity net gain and expansion of incentives and mechanisms to reward sequestering carbon in natural ecosystems** (eg the Woodland Carbon Code).
- **Consider how to further strengthen mechanisms to hold the government to account**, through the remit of the office of environmental protection or expansion of the remit for the climate change committee.

4. CONCLUSION

International nature is of fundamental global importance. The world has already agreed much of what needs to happen if we are to preserve it. What is needed now is action. If the UK partners smartly with others to deliver what we've collectively promised, we will have turned the tide by 2030. Specifically, the new government should commit to the following.

- **Put nature and climate at the heart of UK foreign and development policy.** Successfully restoring UK credibility and leadership means – above all – focussing on delivery and being a reliable partner, working with and in support of nature-rich countries in the global south. This includes working with indigenous peoples and local communities who own and manage critical natural ecosystems. The government has got off to a strong start with early speeches and commitments on climate and nature – including the appointment of envoys. This now needs to be consistently pursued, with strong envoy and ministerial engagement aligning behind a clear and ambitious international nature strategy.
- **Ensure that at least 30 per cent of UK international climate finance ODA is spent on nature, delivering the UK's 'fair share' of finance towards the global biodiversity and climate conventions.¹¹ All ODA spending should be aligned with the Global Biodiversity Framework.** Within this, at UNFCCC COP30 in Brazil in 2025, the UK should commit half of the nature ICF for forests over the next five-year ICF period, building on the delivery of the original £1.5 billion committed at COP26 for 2021-2026. This should be mirrored by a significant commitment to the ocean. On thematic areas, the UK should expand existing and new programmes focussed on protecting 30 per cent of land and sea, the ocean and forests, with the full involvement of indigenous people. The UK should also ensure international nature finance is managed effectively, transparently and with integrity to deliver real impact and honour the commitments made.
- Bring all the government's levers to address the most systemic challenges, including the following.
 - **Scaling finance from all sources beyond ODA**, including reform of international financial institutions, generation of new revenue streams, scaling nature and forest carbon credits and markets, and the appropriate deployment of innovative financial debt-related instruments.
 - **Helping to shape the global financial system so that it protects rather than degrades nature.** This will require large businesses and investors to disclose their nature-related risks, impacts and dependencies.¹² The City of London should become a global centre of green financial innovation.
 - Leading international efforts to **stamp out nature crime**, drawing on NCA expertise.

11 The total commitment globally is \$20 billion annually by 2025, \$30 billion annually by 2030. The UK is currently on a trajectory that would take it to, or close to, what is needed to meet the 2025 target. If the UK maintains the current proportion of ICF spending on nature (between 25-30%) into the next ICF round, this would be likely to cover great majority of the spending required to reach the 2030 goal. The UK should also work with Canada, France and other allies to ensure that all eligible countries make their fair contribution to meeting the target.

12 In line with the obligations under Target 15 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

- **Building production, consumption and trade policies and systems that reward sustainability**, reducing the UK's international footprint, including delivering the UK Forest Risk Commodity regulations.
- **Draw together UK capabilities by establishing a joint delivery mechanism.** From the current situation of several junior ministers representing different parts of the agenda, we should bring together the UK's spending and policy levers, so that the UK can maximise its impact. At the country-level this should manifest itself as joint delivery units, which are locally responsive to national stakeholders and responsible for in-country ODA programming.
- **Leading by example at home through restoration of nature in the UK**, including delivery of credible national plans and actions, demonstrating how reform of agricultural and fisheries subsidies and biodiversity net gain can support a just transition to a net zero world and a nature-positive economy; and incentivising domestic forest and ecosystem restoration.

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