

Nature is in trouble. We need new laws to protect it

The UK can be a world leader in conserving the natural world, as it has been in the fight against carbon emissions

STANLEY JOHNSON, Daily Telegraph, London, 1 March 2021 • 6:00am



Despite the PM calling on world leaders to turn around wildlife's decline by 2030, there is no commitment within the Government's 'landmark' Environment Bill to do the same

It's hard to forget the feeling of hope, euphoria, and shared purpose when a big global environmental agreement is struck.

We've all seen the pictures of diplomats weeping, hugging, punching the air.

One such moment for me was back in April 2002, when global leaders met in the Hague to agree a target to turn around the decline of biodiversity.

I think we all went home feeling that a corner had been turned. After decades of seemingly unstoppable desecration of our natural world, our leaders had finally agreed to "halt biodiversity loss by 2010."

Fast forward from 2002 to that deadline of 2010. Had we achieved our goal by then? Far from it. But the bitter disappointment was tempered by a new hope. A fresh set of global targets was agreed to halt biodiversity loss by 2020. More euphoria!

Fast forward again to the 2020. Have we achieved our target? No, we haven't. We have continued to destroy our natural world as if there were no tomorrow. As WWF's Living Planet Index makes clear, population sizes of mammals, birds, fish,

amphibians, and reptiles have seen an alarming average drop of 68 per cent since 1970.

These successive failures have engendered a certain cynicism. Brilliant young activists like Greta Thunberg have summed the big meetings up as “blah, blah, blah”. Certainly, the record is not a good one.

Later this year, global leaders aiming to talk about biodiversity will meet again: in Kunming, China, at the 15th conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity or COP15. My sincerest hope is that - under China’s persuasive Chairmanship - they will agree to “halt and begin to reverse the loss of nature by 2030” as well as longer-term goals aiming to ensure that by “2050 the world is able to live in harmony with nature”.

In addition, I would like to see Kunming do everything possible to endorse national programmes for achieving those objectives as well as reporting and enforcement mechanisms, including ratcheting up goals and programmes as required.

Given the fairly dismal record of past meetings in terms of delivering actual improvements on the ground, why am I optimistic this time?

First, I sense the growing awareness on all sides that nature and natural capital provides the vital underpinning of most, if not all, economic activity. This awareness will be all the more important as we try to recover from the economic and other effects of the pandemic.

Second, I believe there is increasing recognition that nature-based solutions are going to play a crucial part (perhaps more than 30 per cent) in the fight against global warming. Without the contribution of nature-based solutions there is no prospect of meeting the Paris Agreement goals of keeping temperature rise to below 2C.

Third, I see significant signs of change at the national level in several countries. The UK Prime Minister, for example, and the President of the United States are among the many world leaders who have pledged to reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 and protect at least 30 per cent of their nation’s land and seas, also by 2030, an ambition which I hope will be endorsed, on a global basis, by COP 15 . There is one measure now which, more than any other, would make a difference to our own – and even other countries’ - prospects of halting the destruction of nature.

The Environment Bill now making its way through Parliament provides us with a unique opportunity to do for nature and biodiversity what the Climate Change Act did for climate. The bill already includes an obligation to set nature targets, but it doesn’t specify what those targets should be, and it doesn’t allow deadlines to be set before nearly 2038. It doesn’t include the critical deadline of stopping the destruction of nature by 2030.

Including the 2030 'halt and reverse' target on the face of the Bill, and having that target passed into law, could set the UK's own nature and natural resources, including biodiversity, on the path to recovery.

By taking this step, the UK would at the same time have a unique chance to inspire – by example - others on the international stage.

Nothing could give our negotiators more credibility than to be able to proclaim that the UK has legally enforceable commitments, not only to meet climate change targets (e.g., Net Zero Carbon by 2050), but for nature and biodiversity as well.

Putting the 2030 nature recovery target directly on the statute book is exactly the kind of national action we need to ensure that Kunming leads to real change. It could inspire legislation around the world, just like the climate change act did, especially in this year when the UK is host of the G7 meetings as well as the COP26 climate change talks.

When Minister Huang Rungui, currently China's Minister for Ecology and the Environment, brings down the gavel at the end of the COP 15, we must hope that the Kunming Agreement – or whatever it may be called – does indeed give rise to a feeling, yes, of hope, euphoria, and shared purpose.

But let us try to make sure that, this time at least, such emotions can be justified by actual results in terms of species and populations saved, and habitats restored or saved from destruction and - of course - in terms of other real benefits that accrue thereby to planet and people.

Stanley Johnson is the international ambassador for the Conservative Environment Network

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