Climate action – our collective approach

The Wildlife Trusts' Position

Public Statement

We are amid two escalating and inextricably linked crises in nature and climate. We cannot solve one without addressing the other. The world's response to the climate crisis, both on mitigation and adaptation, will define our ability to restore nature and maintain its resilience, which is the core objective of The Wildlife Trusts. We are therefore taking transformative action to address climate change; in reducing our own emissions, maximising and increasing our carbon sequestration and adapting to the impacts of climate change, in a way that supports nature recovery. We are calling on others to do the same and are also promoting our work to educate and inspire change.

This document sets out our collective position on climate action. It is intended to reflect our latest view and will be updated every three years. The statement sets out why The Wildlife Trusts need to act on climate change, the action we are taking and focuses on the role of nature-based solutions. Our action for nature and climate includes managing our own land, advising on land management for others, advocacy with key decision makers, campaigning and community action.

Background & Context

The livelihoods, economies and well-being of people all depend on nature (Dasgupta, 2021). However, nature is undergoing a dangerous and unprecedented decline globally. This decline is caused by human activities, with climate change becoming an increasingly important component (IPBES 2019, IPCC 2022). It is indisputable that human activity is causing climate change, with profound and unprecedented effects for the biosphere. Current carbon dioxide (CO_2) concentrations in the atmosphere are the highest in the last 2 million years; global average temperatures are approaching 1.5°C higher than pre-industrial levels; sea level rise is the fastest for 3,000 years; sea ice lowest for 1,000 years; and glacier retreat is unparalleled for the last 2,000 years (IPCC, 2021; IPCC 2023).

Based on the current level of action worldwide and policies in place, the world is likely to be heading for 2.6°C warming by 2100, with a 50% chance of being higher or lower (Climate Action Tracker 2025). This level of warming will be catastrophic for life on earth. Every additional bit of warming will lead to increasingly severe impacts; irreversible damage and breakdown of entire ecosystems, extinctions and increasing loss of human life. The risk of extinction of species will increase an estimated 10-fold if the world moves from 1.5°C to 3°C of warming in the future (IPCC, 2022). On the flip side, every bit of avoided warming matters in preventing these effects.

Key Issues

Climate change is already impacting biodiversity and will increasingly be one of the greatest threats to nature in the years ahead, both in the UK (Burns et al. 2023; Climate Change Committee, 2021) and globally (IPCC, 2022). In turn, the degradation of nature alongside climate change will threaten national security and economic stability (Green Finance Institute et al. 2024). In the UK, we are seeing changes in the timing of seasonal events such as trees coming into leaf and the emergence of insects; species moving northwards and to higher elevations; an increase in pests, diseases and invasive non-native species; and loss of wildlife from more extreme weather events such as heatwaves and wildfire. There is an increasing risk of extinctions, loss of important habitats and loss of natural capital on which the UK economy and population relies. Habitats that are in poor condition and more fragmented will be more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (IUCN, 2019, Lawton et al. 2010). How the world responds to the climate crisis will also define our ability to restore nature.

The UK has a responsibility alongside other countries to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions and has legislated for UK net zero emissions* by 2050 as its assessed fair contribution (taking into account its historic responsibility as a major emitter, see CCC 2019), as well as setting intermediate targets including a 81% reduction by 2035 as part of its Nationally Determined Contribution. The devolved administrations in addition have their own specific targets; net zero by 2050 in Northern Ireland, net zero by 2045 in Scotland, and a 95% reduction in emissions by 2050 from 1990 levels in Wales. Each devolved government has its own plan for reaching the targets. At the UK level, greenhouse gas emissions need to fall to less than 100 MtCO2e by 2050, with the remainder balanced by removals (including carbon sequestration) to achieve net zero emissions (CCC, 2019).

At the same time, the UK needs to adapt both to the climate change that has already occurred, and to plan for the potential range of risk beyond this. The UK Government has a responsibility to prepare five-yearly national climate change risk assessments, and with the devolved administrations, to produce national adaptation plans that address these risks, for all sectors including the natural environment. National efforts to adapt to climate change are falling behind, and the increase in risk is so far outpacing efforts to adapt (CCC, 2025a).

Our collective position†

1. **Climate change is one of the greatest threats to nature in the UK and globally. The Wildlife Trusts are including action on climate change in our evidence-led approach to nature's recovery.**

We cannot fulfil our charitable objectives to protect and restore wildlife if we ignore the fact that the future of nature is inextricably linked to addressing climate change. Therefore, taking action on climate change and advocating for more ambition on reducing emissions and preparing for climate change in the UK and globally is part of our core mission.

All of our actions and plans should be based on the best available science, and the accepted best practice guidance on issues such as carbon accounting, offsetting, risk assessment and preparing of adaptation strategies.

2. **As a federation, we are striving to be front and centre of the climate change and nature debate to encourage the UK Government, devolved administrations and others to act faster, be more ambitious, and take a fair role in mitigating and adapting to climate change at the same time as supporting nature's recovery.**

In line with the best available science, we recognise that the greatest and most reliable solutions that society can take to reduce climate change are through the end of fossil fuel burning, mass decarbonisation, more sustainable consumption through people's behaviour, and land use change. We also recognise that alongside reducing climate change, we need to adapt to climate change, both impacts that are happening now and future impacts. We recognise that the UK should both be taking action to protect nature from the effects of climate change and promoting the role that natural solutions have in protecting people from weather hazards

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* 'Net zero' is defined in the Government's Net Zero Strategy as 'reducing greenhouse gas emissions as close to zero as possible, with the small amount of remaining emissions absorbed through natural carbon sinks like forests, and new technologies like carbon capture' (HMG, 2021).

† This position statement represents a joint view across The Wildlife Trusts in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Scottish Wildlife Trust is exploring opportunities to prepare its own statement in due course.

including flooding, drought, extreme heat, and wildfire. Restoring our natural environment will help to achieve both aims.

We will have a strong voice on climate change and its root causes, as we have on other drivers of nature's decline (Burns et al., 2023). Indeed, The Wildlife Trusts are in a position to show leadership and best practice on how to mitigate and adapt to climate change to protect nature, and in using nature-based solutions to do so.

3. **To have a credible voice on climate change, our own house must be in order. The Wildlife Trusts are working together towards a goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and are putting in place robust adaptation measures across all of our work.**

Although our own greenhouse gas emissions are small on a national scale[‡], we will still reduce them as close to zero as possible and balance any remaining emissions through natural carbon removals on land that we own, with an aim to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Every Wildlife Trust has calculated its baseline carbon emissions and is producing an annual carbon account and a carbon emissions reduction strategy. We are exploring the best ways to minimise our emissions while still maintaining our primary purpose in managing land to protect, create and restore native habitats and natural processes.

We are also embedding climate change impacts and risks into short-term plans for dealing with extreme weather for our reserves, staff and assets, as well as including adaptation in our long-term strategic planning, using the best available science and guidance. One of the key adaptation questions for The Wildlife Trusts is whether and how we need to change our management of our nature reserves and other sites as the climate changes. We published our first five-year climate change risk assessment and adaptation plan, Changing Nature, in 2022 and have reported annually on adaptation progress since then.

We are working to ensure that all of our major work areas have mitigation and adaptation integrated, from our goal that 30% of our land and sea is connected and protected for nature's recovery by 2030, to nature recovery networks, to all of our advocacy work, to corporate functions like procurement and finance.

Collectively, we manage just over 100,000 hectares of land as nature reserves, which collectively puts us in the top ten largest landholders across the UK[§]. We also give advice to land managers covering around another 240,000 hectares. As such, we are aiming to show best practice in reducing emissions, increasing sequestration and increasing resilience to climate change at landscape scale, across a wide range of habitats, and share our learning with others.

4. **The Wildlife Trusts are producing research and taking part in wider studies to improve our understanding of the role of nature in mitigating and adapting to climate change.**

We are developing and implementing our mitigation and adaptation strategies over time, ensuring that we use updated evidence to help us improve them. This includes work to estimate our land-based emissions and removals and using the most up to date hazard projections to inform our adaptation work.

[‡] our current estimate is around 26,000 tCO2e/yr for our operational emissions, just 0.005% of national emissions

[§] Estimates vary slightly depending on source but The Wildlife Trusts come out either sixth or seventh in all available lists; one example of a detailed list of top 50 landholders can be found here The UK's Largest Landowners Revealed

On adaptation, we are contributing to national discussions on how to ensure our conservation objectives take into account the changing climate and embedding this thinking in our own future planning. We also want to see more development of markets for adaptation services including, for example, nature-based solutions for flood mitigation and reduction in extreme heat effects. These markets are still largely missing.

5. **The Wildlife Trusts' particular strength is around the role that nature-based solutions can play in both mitigating and adapting to climate change alongside delivering multiple and fair benefits for nature and people. We are striving to lead the right messaging and demonstrate the robust use of nature-based solutions at scale.**

The Wildlife Trusts have been restoring natural processes and recovering wild places for decades. But we must ensure that any investments we make in nature-based solutions (see box below) are resilient to the changing climate, and the change that is already locked in.

We are highlighting and championing the role of coastal ecosystems, oceans and highly-protected marine areas (HPMAs) in protecting and enhancing existing carbon stores alongside terrestrial and freshwater carbon stores.

We also highlight that nature-based solutions should be implemented in a way that benefits biodiversity, not harms it. For example, mass planting of conifer plantations will sequester carbon but have very little biodiversity value and should be avoided.

We aim to be clear on how much of a role nature-based solutions can play in additional carbon removal (above and beyond what it already provides) and over what time period. Nature-based solutions are an important part of the suite of necessary actions required to address climate change at the pace and on the scale needed (see box). Investment in nature-based solutions in their own right is increasing, but investment specifically for offset credits should not be used as an excuse by other organisations to fail to cut emissions at source. Net zero cannot be achieved nationally with more than a small amount of offsetting of residual emissions by 2050 because there is not enough capacity in the natural environment, or through engineered removals, to offset more than around 70 million tonnes of CO_2e in 2050 (CCC, 2019, 2025b).

Nature-based solutions for climate change mitigation

"***Nature-based solutions are actions to protect, sustainably manage and restore natural and modified ecosystems in ways that address societal challenges, effectively and adaptively, to provide both human well-being and biodiversity benefits***" (IUCN, 2016)

Nature can provide solutions to a wide number of challenges we face, including helping us to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Nature-based solutions have a vital and co-effective role to play in reducing climate change, by increasing carbon sequestration and reducing emissions of carbon and other greenhouse gases of land and seascape (through their protection (e.g. preventing deforestation), restoration (e.g. restoring peatlands), and improved management practices (e.g. regenerative practices) (IPCC, 2019)). They also have a vital role in protecting people from the impacts of climate change, through for example reducing the damages from flooding or exposure to extreme heat.

Global studies suggest that nature-based solutions can contribute up to a third of global climate mitigation required to limit global temperature rise to below 2°C (Griscom et al. 2017; Schlesinger & Armundson, 2019; Anderson et al. 2019, Seddon et al.2020, 2021, Girardin et al. 2021), though similar such analyses are more limited at a UK scale (Climate Change Committee, 2019, 2020; British Ecological Society, 2021).

The evidence is clear that ambitious scaling-up of nature-based solutions needs to be implemented fast and thoroughly, but that this must not substitute rapid and sustained emissions cuts across all sectors of the economy (Griscom et al. 2017, Anderson, et al. 2019; Seddon et al. 2020, 2021; Climate Change Committee, 2019; Girardin et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the permanence and effectiveness of nature-based solutions for climate change mitigation relies on rapidly cutting emissions at source, particularly in this decade. Failing to do so increases climate-related risks to ecosystems, such as from wildfire, drought and flooding, which will undermine their ability to store and capture carbon. This is a visible manifestation of the interdependency of tackling the climate and nature crises together (Girardin et al., 2021; IPCC, 2019, 2021).

The Wildlife Trusts are open and honest on this. We are and will continue to be strong proponents of nature-based solutions for climate change (both mitigation and adaptation), and the additional co-benefits they deliver. However, we will not overplay or over-promote a reliance on nature-based solutions.

We will strongly promote and demonstrate the multiple benefits that robust, strategically designed and high-quality nature-based solutions can provide for people, nature and our climate, including their role in avoiding emissions, capturing carbon, improving resilience to climate change hazards, restoring nature, and supporting resilient food systems.

6. The Wildlife Trusts are aiming to play a leading role in driving the necessary shift in the public, political and business narrative on addressing climate change beyond just technological solutions, to understand the need for a mass scale-up in nature-based solutions today in order to manage climate change long-term.

Beyond 2050, we know that nature-based solutions will become increasingly important globally for balancing out residual greenhouse gas emissions which cannot be eliminated, and also in

bringing down global temperature should this become necessary, alongside their role in reducing the risks from climate hazards like flooding and extreme heat. We want to see a carbon negative, nature positive future.

The latest IPCC global assessment report shows that reaching net zero CO_2 should be sufficient to stop any further warming from CO_2 itself (IPCC, 2021). However, the world will need at least a small amount of net negative** carbon to offset the effects of other greenhouse gases that cannot be eliminated entirely (primarily N_2O). Furthermore, it may become increasingly apparent that the world will need to lower global temperature to reverse some of the damage being caused by climate change (noting that not all change will be reversible), and natural carbon removals are the only proven means of doing this at scale at present.

Because it takes time for nature-based solutions to kick in and draw down carbon at scale, we need to start investing in nature-based solutions today to enable a significant amount of natural carbon removal in the second half of this century. This is true globally, but also here in the UK. We are making the case for this investment both through our UK networks and those with a global reach, such as the IUCN.

7. **While advocating for a mass scale-up in nature-based solutions for climate change mitigation, the Wildlife Trusts will ensure they are not being used as an excuse to not reduce emissions at scale.**

We need to ensure that we are not supporting or offering anything that enables mitigation avoidance by ourselves or others. And indeed, necessity is the mother of invention – we do not want to take pressure off high emitting sectors to develop the necessary inventions that enable reductions in 'hard to treat' emissions.

Offsets should not be held up as an alternative to decarbonisation except for a small percentage of emissions that we currently know are extremely hard to reduce.

The Wildlife Trusts are encouraging every organisation to do everything it can to cut emissions at source as fast as possible and to ensure residual emissions are as small as possible. We will ensure that nothing we do encourages mitigation avoidance.

8. **The Wildlife Trusts work within an agreed and supportive framework on our offering of nature-based solutions that promotes confidence and trust that both we as the seller and the purchaser act with integrity. We show consistency in our actions, our offers and our language, so that these deliver genuinely additional benefits for climate and nature.**

If we offer nature-based solutions as carbon offsets to organisations, we will be transparent about the calculated carbon savings and methods used to measure the level of additional sequestration or avoided emissions for each project. We only offer offsets that can be shown to be additional in that they would not have occurred otherwise, have a good likelihood of durability over at least 100 years, and do not lead to increased emissions elsewhere.

We only work with buyers on offsetting that are at least committed to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (and ideally earlier), are reducing their emissions actively already, and will retire the carbon credits and not sell them on. Any companies we work with also have to meet our own internal due diligence criteria. We retain full control over the extent and type of nature-based solutions implemented on our land, ensuring that they also meet our conservation objectives.

** 'Net negative' is where more carbon is removed from the atmosphere than is being emitted into it, leading to a net reduction in atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations.

We also want to work with companies to invest in nature-based solutions in their own right (beyond standard offsetting agreements). This includes those adopting net negative targets and/or using nature-based solutions to help them to draw down their historic emissions, or investing in nature-based solutions primarily for their resilience and biodiversity benefits.

9. We will demonstrate what is possible; and inspire, empower and enable people to take positive action for nature and climate.

The Wildlife Trusts understand the opportunity everyone has to tackle the impacts we all face from the combination of climate change and nature loss. Some of our most deprived communities are suffering most from climate change and a lack of access to nature, resulting in serious impacts on health and well-being. However, change will only happen when local communities are supported and empowered to act together. Through our federated structure, we work to enable people to establish their own ways to deliver real change on the ground. From facilitating youth action groups, to connecting neighbourhoods via the patches of green space threading through our most densely developed cities, to supporting farmers to achieve better integration of wildlife into their working practice - every action links up to become a national and global solution. With 70% of UK land currently used for agriculture and given the Wildlife Trusts' land management expertise, there is a particular role for Wildlife Trusts to offer advice to farmers.

We work to help people find the information they need to make sustainable choices in their lives and to help them see and experience the collective impact of those changes. The impacts they initiate or influence include local and national policy making for nature, people's health and learning benefits, and how nature's recovery is aided through informed consumerism.

The recovery of nature isn't something that is done to people; it must be done by people - inclusive, welcoming, diverse, growing communities of people - if it is going to happen at the scale and pace required to endure. The Wildlife Trusts come together to harness our collective impact and campaign, advocate and achieve change from within our communities across the UK through a shared ambition to empower people to take meaningful actions that lead to nature's recovery.

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