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Episode 6: Episode 6: Biodiversity Net Gain with Dr Julia Baker, NAP3 & A Voice for Nature

Transcript

Sophie

Hi everyone and welcome back to another episode of Nature in a Nutshell, the podcast which breaks down the latest ecology and environmental news. My name is Sophie and I'm the marketing officer at CIEEM, the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management. And as always, I'm joined by my 2 colleagues and co-hosts, Jason and Douglas.

Jason

Hi, I'm Jason and I'm CIEEM's Head of Policy.

Speaker 3

And I'm Douglas, CIEEM's Policy Officer.

Sophie

But in today's episode, we're also joined by Dr Julia Baker, who is going to talk with us about Biodiversity Net Gain, also known as BNG. Julia is the Nature Services Lead with Mott MacDonald and has had a huge input into BNG, being one of the authors of the UK's first Good Practise Principles on BNG, which then became BNG: A Practical Guide in 2019.

She then co-chaired the committee working on the first British Standard on the process to design and implement BNG. Julia has co-led the development and delivery of CIEEM training on all aspects of BNG. And was awarded the British Standard Institute's 2021 Leadership Award, named on the ENDS Power list of the UK's 100 most influential environmental professionals in 2022 and most recently was awarded CIEEM's 2023 Member of the Year award.

It's a commonly held view amongst practitioners in the sector that without her, the BNG approach now becoming a major tool to protect and enhance biodiversity through the planning system would not be where it is today. So all in all, we're in really good hands today for this episode focused on BNG. Thanks so much for coming on the podcast Julia!

Julia

Oh, absolutely delighted. And thank you very much for having me.

Sophie

So before we start talking all things BNG, then, Jason, what else are we covering in today's episode?

Jason



So today, Doug's going to talk about the UK Government's Third National Adaptation Plans climate change, and then our good news story today I'm going to talk a little bit about the Nature Champions initiative in Scotland.

Sophie

So, Julia, I think we just scraped the surface of your involvement in BNG in the intro. Could you tell us a little bit more about your involvement with the development of BNG?

Julia

It's been such an incredible journey, actually. You know, from starting from a place where we had Defra pilot offsetting at the time, at that moment Defra released the biodiversity metric and that was the first government issued metric we had. And for those of us who were interested in already understanding where can we go with the Biodiversity Metric, knowing the limitations of that, but can we set targets? So we talked about net loss and that quickly became net gain and from there we've had a real community and I just want to shout out to everyone who's been involved with Biodiversity Net Gain. You know since back in those early days, really champion by Biodiversity Net Gain, getting it on the radar, getting it in corporate policies, voluntary commitments to now that we're going to a stage when it's actually becoming mandatory and that's the hard work of many, you know, across the sector, local government, Natural England, NGO's, industry and it's been an absolutely pleasure working with everyone.

Jason

Thanks, Julia. So we'll crack on with some questions for you. The first question really I suppose is for Nature in a Nutshell, we're trying to keep everything really accessible and understandable for those who are either, you know, early in their careers or those who are looking to come into their career. So in simple terms, could you give us an explanation of what BNG is?

Julia

So by Biodiversity Net Gain is development that leaves the natural environment in a measurably better state than before. So for anyone looking at this thinking, what is the net gain if that development has happened? Nature is better off. Biodiversity is in a better state because of that development, and it might be a housing project, or road or railway, or energy project. Because that development has happened, biodiversity is in a better state

Now, how we get there? Well, we get there by following the mitigation hierarchy, so that's avoiding and minimising the losses of particular habitats as much as possible. Then there are two options to achieve net gain. A development will create wildlife rich habitats or then make existing habitats better for wildlife. Well, I mean, you might do a mixture of both, but essentially it's about habitats - creating, enhancing wildlife rich habitats and the developments that I see that are really ahead of the game with Biodiversity Net Gain, really understand it's about habitats and it's interesting for those listening who might have heard about BNG they might have heard about that short hand. And you know, the 10% BNG.



Biodiversity Net Gain is measured by the Natural England metric. And it collects all this information about habitats and the minimum requirement is a 10% increase and that's where the short hand has come from you know like the 10% BNG but your question is great because what does it mean in practise? What is this 10% BNG creating wildlife rich habitats, and habitats need space and development who are already ahead of the game know that and they plan for habitats.

Douglas

So we've had the Environment Act in 2021 that sort of enabled BNG to be introduced, and since then there's been a steady, further guidance from government and other information on how it will work. So what is the sort of I guess the actual reality on the ground when it happened in November when it becomes mandatory?

Julia

We don't know the date of day one yet. We're expecting it to be late November and day one when mandatory net gain comes into force, my understanding and you know I'm obviously a Consultant just kind of reading about this, but my understanding is that that will be the date when this statutory instruments for Biodiversity Net Gain are published.

So we have a biodiversity metric, the version four at the moment, day one of mandatory net gain, all of this statutory instruments will be published, so we'll get the statutory metric and that's really important because for new planning applications, they will have to switch over to the statutory metric. So it's using those statutory instruments just a little handy hint.

So day one we get the statutory metric published, every single ecologist is going to go on the website and download it. So if anyone's up for an early call, I can get that early because I am thinking that website is going to crash. So if anyone's up for an early start, I will be there. But it's about truly understanding the changes between the metric that we have now in the statutory metric. We're not anticipating a lot of change. But it's swapping over to this statutory metric.

We'll also get the publication of the Natural England off Site Register, which is going to be really important. So for offset suppliers, they have to upload their information, pay a fee to be on the off site register. There's a verification process and then they'll be able to show the land and the number of habitat units that they have available for a local market. That's important because there will be a bit of a time gap, you know, to get all these planning applications come through us in industry have to swap over to statutory metric and use that. And then the offset providers need a bit of time to get on the register and get that allow.

Jason

You mentioned a little bit of uncertainty with the date there about when it comes into force and then talking about the register and when we get the statutory instruments, do you think we're ready as a sector as government as developers?

Julia



It's such a tough question because we don't have all the answers, but what I would say is we don't also have the luxury of time. You know, we can always be more prepared. We can always have a better metric. We can always have more people trained. But we have to recognise that we are in a climate and biodiversity crisis and this is going to be a leap. So what I would say is for those who are, you know, maybe concerned or waiting for secondary legislation, there's so much we can do now to prepare for Biodiversity Net Gain. Biodiversity Net Gain is going through planning. So we have a ready stock list or pre-app advice questions. It's going through planning, you know, Preapp advice is new to me as a BNG practitioner about our planning Team. But like, oh do this every single day.

So one of the best things that you can do is start to engage in preapp advice from BNG. You know, engage with local planning authority, say well, what information on BNG would you like us to submit with planning application? Is it a biodiversity metric? Is it more than that? Now there might be a pre commencement condition to discharge. So talk about that. Is there going to be one, can we prepare for it? And really, really importantly, ask the question Biodiversity Net Gain will be a planning condition. So as a local planning authority, how do you think you will enforce it, monitor it and discharge it. And that's the big question. You know, who's gonna monitor BNG? But it's going to be a planning condition. Now we ask those questions with the hopes you collaborate and engage with our local planning authorities, the ones that I speak to are just the best. They're really open to these discussions and hoping to work through it together. So I think, and what I really love about BNG is it's a team sport, it really is and the pre app advice that we've been engaged with have opened up a really collaborative discussion about how can we make this work? Yes, there's uncertainty about the secondary legislation, but going through programme advise.

The other thing to prepare for it, again, early sight for those of us working in development, we can run the metric really early. There's some great desktop study information out there. You will need site information at some point, but the earlier you use the metric, the metric comes with rules, has a big influence on the type of habitat and just the sheer amount of habitat you need for Biodiversity Net Gain. And then you can have that question as well. Actually, where is Biodiversity Net Gain going to go? Where is this woodland? Where is this grass going to go? So preparation is going through planning, let's get really prepared for that, but run the metric as early as possible to understand those Biodiversity Net Gain requirements.

Douglas

And will it be applying to, sort of, all development building on that sort of aspects?

Julia

My understanding is that the small scale development and there's a small development definition in the town and Country Planning Act, Biodiversity Net Gain will come into force in April 2024. And mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain will apply to nationally significant infrastructure projects in late 2025. What's really interesting, though, is that a lot of those nationally significant infrastructure projects are already committing to Biodiversity Net Gain. Now, whether it's mandatory or whether it's voluntary are good practise principles. Stand up. You know, so if you ever commit to Biodiversity Net Gain, whether it's mandatory versus voluntary, follow good practise you know. So that doesn't change. But I think from a manager perspective November is new planning applications.



Jason

And it's really great to hear that NSPIs are already doing it prior to it becoming mandatory for them. Going back to your comments earlier around space for habitat, there's been a fairly rapid development in a new market for BNG credits. Could you tell us a bit more about? How that's going to work?

Julia

Yeah. So my understanding is if local offset suppliers as mentioned you know will need to be registered on the Natural England off site register and they'll be able to show the allocation of the metric networks and habitat units. So if you're delivering Biodiversity Net Gain on site or off site, you deliver in habitat unit. So you got to get a minimum of that 10% increase, so local offsite suppliers will need to be on the offsite register. What's really, really important is that we encourage suppliers to come forward and for us in development we can do that because we can start articulating our Biodiversity Net Gain demand. Yes, Biodiversity Net Gain should be delivered on site where appropriate to do so. But sometimes nature doesn't work in a really busy public space. Yes, there needs to be an amenity green space, but we're talking about wildlife, rich habitats. And sometimes you can't squeeze it into a corner or expect those wildlife rich habitats to truly exist when there's a lot of public pressure.

So I think for Biodiversity Net Gain to be truly successful, it's about a thriving offset market where net gain is invested into some fantastic grassroots conservation projects. And Jason, to ask your question about, are we ready? Are suppliers ready? Are those beings your set providers ready? We know that there's a lot of supply hesitancy out there. So in development, our job is to run the Biodiversity Net Gain assessments as early as possible and start talking about demand, because then it becomes a demand-supply discussion. We're hoping that we can start talking about demand, we start to encourage those offset suppliers to come forward. That's what we need. We really need that great offset market.

Just a final point, if developers cannot achieve by Biodiversity Net Gain on or off site as a very last resort, they'll be able to purchase statutory credits from the government. Now the government has recently published the price of those statutory credits, and I don't know about you, but that was quite an eye faltering moment. When you see the price of that, goodness and bear in mind, for every one habitat unit, you need to buy two statutory credits. So if you think they're expensive times that by two, gosh, that's an earner for someone. Anyway, so it's so critical to make Biodiversity Net Gain work for development. We run the Biodiversity Net Gain early, but we've really encouraged local Biodiversity Net Gain provides us to come to market.

Jason

I think Government's priced them so high that no one even bothers, it's not feasible. So make them do the work on the ground.

Douglas



We've been told now sort of BNG is, you know, England only and we understand that it's also being applied to some other countries. Could you tell us a bit more about this of what's the approach in other places?

Julia

I'm really, really excited to see the rise of these biodiversity policies across the UK. England is mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain. In Scotland, this February, published the policy on net positive effects for biodiversity. And Wales, the emerging policy is net benefits for biodiversity, so a slight change there, and that's really important. Now just reading the published policy in Scotland and the emerging policy in Wales, they both look to focus on restoring wildlife rich habitats. So there's a similarity there, you know, it's the building and they will come. And let's restore our wildlife rich habitats and that's really powerful. And I really believe in that because that's the core conservation principle.

But the great thing about Scotland and Wales is that they are firstly linking net positive and net benefits of biodiversity with climate change, and they're also especially for Wales, linking it with people's wellbeing. So you get a much more holistic approach. There's great line in one of the policies saying development needs to tackle the joint nature and climate crisis. OK, yes, I'll take that on my To Do List. Thank you. Because when you quickly think about it, if you want to conserve biodiversity, just thinking about biodiversity is not enough. We have to think about biodiversity in the context of climate change, which means that we need to design Biodiversity Net Gain, or net positive or net benefits in ways that increase carbon sequestration. We need to build in climate resilience. So this last the duration of that and to see this holistic thinking in policies in Scotland and Wales, I think they're shining a spotlight on truly what is sustainable development. And I think it's really exciting.

Sophie

Julia, that was such a fantastic discussion to listen to. Thank you for answering all of our questions. Just got another quick one here. Perhaps you'd like to end by telling us a little bit about CIEEM's BNG training?

Julia

Yes, I'd like to shout out to your training team who are the best ever and they, they just take on all my little queries, they post out the Zoom links. And so an absolute shout out to the fantastic training team there.

We are building up the Biodiversity Net Gain training so you can start off with, a shout out to the UK Hab training. There's UK Hab for Biodiversity Net Gain. There's QGIS for Biodiversity Net Gain. We run the biodiversity metric training. There's a habitat design checklist training for Biodiversity Net Gain. There's Biodiversity Net Gain through the design process, and there's a watercourse metric on Biodiversity Net Gain. So a lot of people, when we first started out, it was just about the metric, but now we've got these absolute really core training courses. So if you're interested, please obviously be in touch with CIEEM and just know the variety of Biodiversity Net Gain training that is on the ground now.



Sophie

Thanks Julia. I will put a link to CIEEM's training courses in the show notes so anyone can go and have a look. Thank you for coming on, Julia. That was really great. I think we've had all of our questions answered and you were our first external guest on the podcast as well so it's even more special.

Julia

Oh, thank you very much indeed.

Jason

If you're interested in hearing more, learning a bit more about BNG, we're running a panel webinar on the 13th of September. Julia will be back to join us again, but we'll also have some more experts, so if you want to hear more about BNG, how it's going to run, what we need to do to get prepared, come and listen on the 13th of September. You can book on on the website. We'll put the link in the show notes. Yeah, you'll get an opportunity then to ask some questions as well. So it won't just be you listening. We'd really, really appreciate some questions to put to that panel. So yeah, come along and join us.

Sophie

Now Douglas, it's over to you to discuss NAP3.

Douglas

OK, so I did promise last podcast to sort of move away from climate change news, so I've instead moved adjacent to climate change news into policy around climate change. So a slight deviation from my usual trend.

So last month or middle of July ish, the UK Government released its third national adoption programme, sort of NAP3 and this sort of sets out their five year plan, which is aimed at boosting resilience and protecting people, homes, businesses and the sort of the UK's cultural heritage against risks posed by climate change. So this is primarily focusing on things like flooding, droughts, heat waves, or very physical effects almost. So far we've had two of these previously, and Defra is required by law to produce a plan every five years. So this is a sort of a long running legal project. The first came out in 2013 and then the next was in 2018. And so we've had the next now and the next should then be published in 2028. So they marked quite a good timeline of how adaptation against climate change is being perceived by the government and then also how what's changed.

Unfortunately, so far, the plans haven't really made the impact that they should have done, and the UK's own climate Change Committee said that the UK is strikingly unprepared for the effects of climate change and that we have had, in effect, a lost decade in terms of adaptation for climate change. So this is, I mean, quite disheartening considering these national adoption programmes have essentially running for a decade. But there's been a lot of conflict in terms of, even if they've had legislation introduced or sort of promises, they've not often been kept or maybe actioned in the way that they should have been.



So sort of responding to a lot of this previous criticism of the NAPS, the government repeatedly stressed that this latest programme represents a step change in ambition. So they really sort of emphasised how this is going to be quite different to the others and is the beginning of a programme of work to deliver a fully adapted UK with resilience against the identified climate risks and the programme also, which is I think this is a really important bit that might get missed a little bit. It promises to create a new cross departmental climate resilience board to further drive government action. So this is going to essentially remove some of the responsibilities for creating more resilient UK from Defra, you know, easing a bit of a burden on them, but also making another organisations of really focuses on climate resilience. So I think this is quite helpful and will be quite important. That all sounds quite good and the words they use are good. There is obviously a stated ambition. The plan itself says the government will triple the funding for climate adaptation overseas, from about 500 million in 2019 to 1.5 billion in 2025 to help vulnerable countries. And in their words, this will sort of reduce the likelihood of emerging risks cascading to the UK. So on theory that sounds good on paper, that sounds fantastic, but the funding is set to come from the government's 11.6 billion, which is their international climate finance pledge, which they did in early July. But we found out that that was planned to be dropped by the government. So there's a couple of sort of queries throughout the report about where this money might actually be coming from, considering some of the money. Or the budget that was allocated. This might actually be getting reduced or even scrapped.

On top of this, many experts have called the plan too weak and that it falls far short of being a strategy that will effectively protect people's lives and livelihoods from sort of really frequent climate extremes. So the report needs to really recognise that you know these climatic extremes like droughts and floods and heat waves will be happening possibly every year, every two years and maybe multiple times in the year. Alongside this, many existing measures have been restated through the programme, so without actually outlining new approaches or how existing measures will be progressed further, it cites things like building Regulation that have been for since early June, or last June actually. And a 5.2 billion investment in flood and coastal defences that was announced in 2020 and those essentially come under the remit of the previous NAP. There's quite a lot of difficulty there.

Yeah, it's a bit of a mixed bag really. There are some positives in the programme and it's good to see that clearly there's a stated ambition and the government understands that this is something that should be developed and pushed forward but on the whole, it does actually lack scope and haste that is necessary to create a truly resilient country, and it's hard to think of a time where it's more clear how dangerous impacts of climate change will be. Especially in countries which have previously by politicians often considered less at risk and so there's been less action taken. That's the sort of a rundown of the current NAPs.

Jason

Thanks, Doug. I think it's interesting to compare that report towards the controls that report with the recent Defence Committee from the House of Commons report as well on defence and climate change. I think it's pleasing to see that not they're coming around to it, but just open to the issues and the implications and I mean it's good in two ways. One is that it recognises that the military has



a real role to play in reducing its own emissions, but then also just recognising the huge impact that climate change is going to have and the implications for national security on so many levels for the UK and across the world, it's just a real overlap there.

Douglas

Yeah, absolutely. I think it will be interesting to see where the funding will flow from those sorts of discussions in terms of the role that defence gets a huge amount of allocated funding in terms of will there be essentially a meshing of those two roles to sort of try and tackle the threats.

Sophie

OK, let's move on to our positive news segment then.

Jason

Thanks very much. So we're a member of Scottish Environment LINK. They're an umbrella group for ENGO's and charities and saying as a member we're an NGO and a charity and one of the strands of their work is called Nature Champions. And this is an initiative to encourage members of the Scottish Parliament MSP's to champion threatened and iconic species and habitats in Scotland, helping to raise awareness, helping to promote action to protect and restore those habitats and species.

As CIEEM and jointly with the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, we are jointly the hosts for blanket bogs and we're really lucky to have Fiona Hyslop MSP as our champion for blanket bogs. She's already been out in the field, had a visit with our Scottish project officer Annie Robinson, in January this year to see a blanket bog in action at Lawhorn Moss Nature Reserve in West Lothian. So for nature champions, this year is the 10th anniversary and to mark the occasion there's been an audio visual exhibition at the Scottish Parliament. So it's running from Monday the 28th of August to Friday the 22nd of September so if you're in Edinburgh during this time, please do go and check it out. One element of the exhibition is recordings from MSP's talking about the species or habitat that they are championing. So rather than me talking about what we're doing with blanket bogs and with Fiona, I'll let you listen to the clip that Fiona herself has recorded on blanket bogs.

Fiona

Hello, I am Fiona Hyslop, the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Linlithgow, and I am the Nature Champion for Scotland's extraordinary Blanket bogs, which are a type of peatland.

Peatlands are incredibly special habitats, made up of highly adapted plant species and home to a range of rare and important wildlife. Healthy peatlands are also critical in our efforts to tackle climate change as they trap enormous amounts of carbon. In fact, over 1.6 billion tonnes of carbon are stored in Scottish peatlands – that is a third of the carbon held in the Amazon!

Peatlands are formed over thousands of years, with waterlogged conditions meaning that plants don't fully decompose, instead slowly forming thick layers of organic matter.

Blanket bogs are a type of peatland found in places with cool, wet climates. They consist of mostly of water, with numerous moss hummocks and hollows interspersed throughout. They are also very



rare habitats globally, with the UK and Ireland holding over 20% of the world's blanket bogs, most of which is in the north and west of mainland Scotland and the Western and Northern Isles.

In the lowlands, Scotland has some of the finest examples of raised bogs in Europe. Lowland raised bogs are another type of peatland habitat that create raised domes of peat on wet soils, such as clay.

Unfortunately, around 80% of the UK's peatlands are degraded in some way, leaking climate change emissions out into our atmosphere. But once restored, peatlands can once again absorb vast amounts of carbon dioxide, making them a priority for tackling the climate crisis.

Jason

Well, that was really great and it's so pleasing to hear Fiona talk so engagingly about blanket bogs and their benefits.

Sophie

Yeah, we do hope you go and see the exhibition. So take some photos and tag us in social media as well, we'd love to see that. Thank you for listening to another episode of Nature In a nutshell. We hope you enjoyed it. Please don't forget to go ahead and rate and review the podcast and we will see you all next month.

Jason

Thanks very much.

Douglas

Bye.