



Episode 10: Reflecting on 2023 Environment News and Our 2024 Predictions

[Audio file](#)

Transcript

Sophie

Hi everyone, Happy New Year and welcome back to another episode of Nature In A Nutshell, the podcast which breaks down the latest ecology and environmental news. My name's Sophie and I'm the Marketing Officer at CIEEM, the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management. Today I'm joined by my normal co-hosts Jason and Doug.

Doug

I'm Doug. I'm CIEEM's Policy Officer.

Jason

And I'm Jason. I'm CIEEM's Head of Policy.

Sophie

But today, we're also joined by Sally Hayns.

Sally

Hi, I'm Sally and I'm the Chief Executive Officer of CIEEM. So thank you for inviting me to join the gang for this month's podcast, Sophie.

Sophie

No problem, Sally. It's good to have you on. This is an extra special episode because today we're going to be summarising the top news stories affecting people and nature during 2023. I'm sure we can all agree that 2023 absolutely flew by, but we thought a good way to start 2024 is by looking back at what happened last year...the good, the bad and the ugly and everything in between. We'll also spend some time at the end of the episode predicting what we expect to see happen in 2024. This is going to be a great episode and we hope you enjoy but for now, let's start off with new story number one. So this has had huge environmental, political and just general media coverage this year. Over to you, Sally.

Sally

Thank you, Sophie. So I'm going to talk about nutrient neutrality. So a relatively recent story in terms of 2023.

In September, we heard that the government was going to amend the current nutrient neutrality rules in England by inserting amendments into the levelling up and regeneration bill. Arguing that the current rules which derive from EU case law relating to the habitat regs are defective and



blocking the building of much needed new homes. I guess although rumours of such an about turn had been circulating some time, it still came as a disappointment. I guess the environmental community, including CIEEM, were understandably critical of the government's move, which feels like another attack on nature recovery and completely undermines already identified nutrient mitigation schemes, creating further delay and uncertainty for the housing market in the short term. Unfortunately, I feel this response from government is typical of the blinkered view that sees protection and enhancement of the environment as a choice, not an essential, and pits the environment against other societal and economic needs, such as infrastructure development. The government argues that we need a more strategic response to managing nutrient overload rather than placing a burden on the House building market. It's also recently announced additional funding for the local nutrient mitigation fund, which allows local authorities to develop nutrient mitigation schemes.

I find it difficult to argue against taking a strategic approach as a principle. But what concerns me is that the government thinks it's OK to remove the shorter term controls on nutrient loading before the strategic approaches are all in place and are shown to be working. So yes, the water companies are developing statutory water resource management plans. But these are not finalised yet and it's not been shown that they can be delivered effectively. And yes, we all recognise that we need to do much better at controlling nutrient impacts from agriculture, which remains the biggest cause of nutrient pollution. And yes, it can be argued that house builders should not bear the burden of managing nutrient load arising from housing development when there are other, much more significant sources of pollution that are not being addressed, but I think it's a flawed argument because householders are only being asked to manage the impacts arising from their activities, because there's little or no capacity or resilience in the system to manage the additional nutrient load effectively. You cannot make a case for one polluter not having to manage its impacts because the others are not doing so effectively. All polluters must pay the price for their environmentally harmful impacts.

So once again, the environmental sector finds itself in the position of defending the natural environment and as a result of the approach taken by politicians in an adversarial space with developers and planners. But I strongly feel it doesn't have to be like this. It creates a false narrative which I believe actually suits politicians because it allows them to create headlines and sound bites and to appear to be on whichever side they happen to be courting. Well, we've just had Christmas and one of the presents I wanted under the Christmas tree was a new approach where the government of the day says to developers, planners, ecologists and environmental managers. Here's the problem, sit down together and come up with the solution that will work to deliver all the outcomes we need. Is that really too much to ask? Please, let's move to a position of collaboration and co-designing effective ways forward rather than pandering to an argument that has the environment sector and the development sector glaring at each other across the fence.

Sophie

Thanks, Sally. We are now going to jump over to Doug. He's going to talk about COP 28 and what's come out of that.

Doug



Yeah, yeah, I think it's quite interesting actually. This segment has followed on from Sally's because you know that same thing with the environment being pitted against developers is basically identical to how climate change is often seen. The progress with climate change is almost the antithesis of economic development of sort of rapid industrialization. The loss of countries want and sort of the easy grab that you can get from fossil fuels. So I think it's really interesting having this, you know, it's the same problem across the environmental sector and all the industries. It's always in the different bits, but it's always this thing with the environment is always seen as the bad guy. But it's not.

Yeah. So sort of a quick rundown. As we said before on the podcast this last year has been the hottest year on record and this is essentially the hottest year in, I mean, recorded human history. So we've had a record number of days breaking the 1.5° threshold set during the Paris Agreement. So that was an agreement to keep the average global temperature well below 2° C and make every effort to keep it under 1.5° C hotter than pre industrial levels. So that's not a global temperature of two degrees C, But it's 2° on average above pre industrial levels, that's like 1850 to 1900s.

And already this year, you know we've already seen severe impacts this rise is having, we've had extreme marine heat waves in the North Atlantic of all places, you wouldn't think it's a marine heat wave spot, but we've had a huge marine heat wave over the summer there, coral bleaching, record low Antarctic sea ice, huge glaciers being knocked away, and we've had mass droughts across much of the southern hemisphere. So, you know, this is real life climate impacts happening now. And So what are nations doing about that? So you know, what are the updates from the 28th meeting of the Convention of Parties on Climate? So that's COP 28.

So we've had some pretty big headlines, actually, more than 130 countries, so that's including the US, China, the UK and the sort of the collection of countries, which is the European Union have signed a declaration to include food emissions in plans to tackle climate change. So food contributes about 1/3 to global greenhouse emissions and that sort of consumption and production. And these signatories are about 5.7 billion people and 75% of all emissions of food sort of global food production. So this is the first time that the COP has actually recognised that what people grow and what people eat is a key factor in global warming. I think it's amazing that it's taken this long to get to that point of saying, Oh yeah, you know, agriculture and food production is a big portion of greenhouse gases when that's sort of a very common knowledge among science. And I would even argue, you know, one of the aspects of climate change, it's fairly well understood by the general population. But I think it's really good to see that. And obviously signatories doesn't mean anything until they're taking action. But it shows that there is an appetite, or at least a willingness to accept that that's something needed for change.

Also, one of the positive thing was there was an agreement on the loss and damage fund for countries suffering under the effects of climate change. This has come up at a couple of the previous COPs, particularly the last one in Egypt, there was a loose agreement signed, and the idea is essentially that wealthier countries, more developed countries and also countries which emit lots of carbon currently should pay for the loss and damage to other nations inflicted by climate change. So think flooding from sea level rise or extreme weather events or draught. So they've agreed about 420 million U.S. dollars, a huge proportion of that actually comes from Germany and the UAE. And it's important to note as this was a very big sticking point and the USA in particular was very keen to



emphasise this, that this fund is not reparation for previous historic emissions. That is something that's not been agreed, that is something which still is in process. This is about current emissions, but again, that is a really positive step sort of acknowledging the impact that nations have on nations across the globe and I think just a little highlight at the end of that, there's been lots of conflict of this COP over the language that's being used over fossil fuels. And I think this is really important. I think it's important that we may around the exact language that we use because the current top president caused quite a lot of outcry over comments that really harken back to classic climate denial, saying that moving away from fossil fuels will sort of take us back to a Stone Age. We'll be living in caves. This sort of rhetoric we've been hearing for decades, which really hampers sustainable development because it makes it seem like sustainable development is the enemy of growth. And countries obviously hate that, you know, they want economic growth. And on the other side, we've had, you know, people saying that we have to move away from fossil fuels, but there's still no formal agreement to phase out all fossil fuels. You know, we talk about phasing out coal because it's sort of the dirtiest, but there's no plans to phase out oil or gas. So we're still in this limbo. We're still caught here where we're using old language that has sort of been existing for decades in climate denial, against moving forward with climate change. So I think it's just really disappointing to still see that come up with COPs. But I think it's important that we recognise when that language is being used and also then, you know, what language issue against it.

So that's a quick roundup of where COP is at at the time of recording and sort of, you know, where we are currently.

Sophie

Thanks, Doug. We will put a link in the show notes to our blog summarising COP 28 in a little bit more detail. So go and check that out if that's of interest. For now we will move on to Jason, who's going to talk about BNG or Biodiversity Net Gain.

Jason

So I don't think we could talk about 2023 without talking about Biodiversity Net Gain. Everyone's been talking about it. We have talked about Biodiversity Net Gain in a previous podcast with Julia Baker, well worth a listen. So I won't talk about the details of what Biodiversity Net Gain is, but I'll cover some of the highlights from the year and where we are now.

So in England we've had one delay to it becoming mandatory, it should of become mandatory in November. The plan now is that it becomes mandatory this month in January. We've had most of the guidance, the templates, the secondary legislation published, so we should be good to go. So fingers crossed with that one. We've also had some progress in the other devolved nations who aren't calling it Biodiversity Net Gain with similar processes. So in Scotland there has been some voluntary implementation of the Biodiversity Net Gain metric and process by private organisations, so that's been going on for some time. But we have seen the biodiversity strategy consultation from Scottish Government mention a biodiversity metric and taking forward a process in that light. So that's coming along as a similar vein.

In Ireland, similarly, there's been voluntary implementation as well by some state agencies as well there. And we've just published a briefing paper on implementation of biodiversity enhancements in



Ireland and how we see that going forward and hopefully that starts a conversation across the sea on how that can go forward.

And then in Wales, we've seen real interest from Welsh Government in how Biodiversity Net Gain is progressing in England, particularly in how the metric works, but they've taken a particularly different approach to biodiversity enhancements in Wales, using their DECCA framework as part of the planning process, which has its emphasis on wider landscape resilience and ecosystem functioning and for those who don't know, DECCA stands for diversity, extent, condition, connectivity and other aspects of ecosystem resilience. So parks back to the Environment Act, Wales and the well-being of future generations legislation, where they have that much bigger, broader approach to things. So a huge amount of progress this year on Biodiversity Net Gain and its other names, biodiversity enhancements across the UK nations. There's certainly more to come, but also just a little plug here that we've got a new Biodiversity Net Gain and biodiversity enhancements web page on the CIEEM website, it's linked from the home page and we've got some information there across all the different countries. So certainly go and check that out.

Sophie

Thanks, Jason. We are going to move on to green jobs and routes into the sector with Sally now.

Sally

Thank you, Sophie. It's also been a really big year, 2023, in terms of work to promote and support entry into green jobs. Hopefully listeners will recall that towards the end of 2022, we launched our green jobs for Nature website. As an information portal for those interested in pursuing a career in the natural environment. Throughout the year, we've been building on this and we've worked with numerous partner organisations and members to create lots of engaging content and undertaking outreach activities. We still need more. We always want more. But we're also looking to promote the website and reach out to young people.

In fact, we launched a specific programme targeting underrepresented audience in the ecology and environmental management sector. As part of our E, D and I work thanks to fantastic support from the Esme Fairburn Foundation and also Arup, Mott MacDonald, WSP, RSK Biocensus and Green Environmental Consultants and Atkins all supporting our E, D and I work. This work is aligned very closely with national initiatives to promote green jobs across the UK and Ireland. As governments recognise the need to make sure we have a pipeline of enough people to deliver on national environmental policies and strategies going forwards, so this is also trying to address the capacity issue that we've talked about in the past.

In Ireland, we've been engaging with key government departments and stakeholders to look at how we develop strategic responses to bring people into the sector and we're currently seeking match funding to help us develop a coherent action plan to be implemented across the island of Ireland. You find out more about that on our website.

In Scotland, Skills Development Scotland has recognised the growing demand of green jobs and there's some really good examples of joined up working across agencies in government, the voluntary sector and industry. And I would particularly highlight the work being done by Scottish



Environment Link and NatureScot to raise the visibility and value for nature related jobs. They've recently produced some really good videos.

Things have been a bit slower to take off in Wales, but there have been some encouraging signs recently of interest from the Welsh Government to work with CIEEM and agencies such as Nature Service for Wales and taking a collaborative approach to building the green workforce. So that's a really positive start for 2024 as well, and I must give a shout out to our country project officers who've been really proactive in engaging in some case leading aspects of this work.

In England, the government has been working on a green jobs action plan. As a member of the green Jobs Delivery Group and chair of Defra's Nature Skills Working Group, I've been at the heart of that work and it's been very inspiring. It has included workforce assessment and future planning, green jobs promotion and retention strategies and looking at entry routes into the profession. The plan should be published in the spring, but in the meantime we're just getting on with the identified actions. We don't need the plan. We know what to do. Some of those actions relate to diversifying and strengthening how people come into nature related jobs, especially through non degree routes, and this resonates with our very recently published research report, which is being Co funded with Lantra and delivered by Resources For Change, which looks at vocational routes into ecology and environmental management and what needs to be done to bring more people from more backgrounds into our industry, including creating more opportunities for career changes. So I really recommend you check out that report, which was published at the end of November last year.

Sophie

Thanks Sally, that was a great overview about a really important area of our work. And if you're listening to this and you want to get involved or find out a little bit more about all of this, please check the show notes because we will link to our Green Jobs for Nature website and also the report that was just mentioned. For now, we're going to go over to Jason, who's going to talk to us about the State of Nature report that came out in 2023.

Jason

Yes, thanks Soph. So moving onto the State of Nature, the 2023 report, so it's published every three years. This is probably the most comprehensive assessment of nature in the UK and pulls the data from a huge number of NGOs who put all of their information, pool it into this one document. Sadly, the 2023 reports continues to report on a decline in nature in the UK's wildlife. Some of the headlines from their reports are that across the UK species study continues to decline by an average 19% since 1970, with nearly one in six species threatened with extinction from Great Britain from the island. 151 of the 10,008 species assessed have already become extinct since 1500, one from Northern Ireland, 12% of assessed species were at risk of extinction. It's not entirely negative, so there is some positive news with 27% of species having increased their populations. Overall, the report continues to show a decline in the UK's wildlife which we need to reverse. The report is well worth the read if you haven't seen it. There's one overall report and then there's an individual report for each country as well. So well worth checking out. You can find those if you Google State of Nature report.

Sophie



Thanks, Jason. And now we are going to move into the marine world now.

Doug

So this is a little update that earlier this year England sort of announced its first highly protected marine areas. So HPMA's, so these are intended to be a step up from the sort of the current marine protected areas with the intention being that all sort of human extractive, destructive and depositional activities are prohibited within each site. So that's sort of your dredging construction and commercial recreational fish. And obviously this is intended to allow areas of ocean to recover ecosystem sort of, you know, which are heavily damaged by human activities. You know, we have a huge amount of biodiversity loss around the coasts. You know, these are really heavily impacted human areas. But the idea is that these really highly protecting marine areas would allow ecosystems to recover in these bubbles. And then eventually spill over into the surrounding environment.

So the locations are being chosen have been chosen because of the high levels of biodiversity and also ecosystem complexity. So the three designated sites are Allonby Bay, North East of Farnes Deep and Dolphin Head. So many of these zones are already either entirely within or overlap an existing marine protected area, so it's not like we haven't designated sort of an entirely new patch of ocean. These are already areas there was conservation effort. You know, there was an attempt to protect them, and there are protections in place. But the new designations hope to really improve the conservation of key habitats by fully restricting significant human activities within them.

So I think this is, you know, it's quite a positive change. There was a consultation process. And this is all part of the sort of the governments drive to achieve key environmental goals. So under the Environment Improvement plan, the 25 year Environment plan and 30 by 30 commitment, this all comes into that you know we have made commitments to protect a significant proportion of our marine environment and the hope is that properly managed highly protecting marine areas will help to achieve that.

Going over the border a bit, the Scottish Government had previously following the Kunming Montreal Biodiversity Agreement, had committed to designating at least 10% of all Scottish seas as highly protected marine areas to further come in line, sort of with those commitments. Currently about 37% of Scottish seas are marine protected areas and there was a consultation earlier this year in which CIEEM Scottish Policy Working Group responded to, but there was significant backlash from island communities and the fishing industry within Scotland to those plans. So the Scottish Government ended up backing down and scrapping these plans. The timetable had been that by 2026, I think at least 10% of, you know, Scottish seas should be these protected areas, but they've sort of completely backed down from that and they're currently totally back at the drawing board and will be consulting further with industry, communities and organisations about finding a new pathway. So it's quite interesting to see that there's, you know, these are still quite controversial, though the sort of the aim is the protection of the environment. There's a significant human element. There's lots of communities really rely on these areas economically. So I think there's a very fine line to tread possibly that's about what locations you pick. But also I think how you go about it with the community. So the Scottish Government is now going for a much more ground based approach and trying to develop those plans alongside communities. So it's something that has to



happen. I think it's something that will happen, but it's interesting to see those two differing processes going about. So that's the sort of a snap in the marine world. I think that was a really interesting thing that came out this year. I think it's quite positive and I just hope we see that expanded. Really, you know, I'd love to see more in Wales. I'd love to see all around the British coast really. And the island of Ireland, obviously we had our hope spot. You know, the great Skellig coast. So I think there's a lot of hope in the marine environment. We just need to keep pushing that.

Sophie

Let's turn to 2024 then. So what do you expect to see happen this year? Has anyone got any predictions? I'm going to come to you first, Sally.

Sally

Well, not so much prediction. I guess more of a hope. So I hope that in 2024 we see a bit more progress in rolling out the post-CAP Agri environment schemes across the UK given the proportion of land used for agriculture, we know that expanding nature friendly farming is absolutely key to nature's recovery. So in England the sustainable farming incentive, or SFI, is now underway. With farmers and land managers are able to take care was probably best described as a bit of a pick and mix approach to environmental measures they want to implement. But 2024 should see the launch of the local nature recovery and landscape recovery funds so local nature recovery pays farmers and land managers for implementing measures that meet local environmental priorities. Landscape recovery funding will support longer term projects at landscape and catchment scale, both schemes but particularly the latter encourage farmers to work collaboratively to deliver targeted interventions and meet project objectives. So the success of both of these schemes, I think are going to be really essential in halting biodiversity loss.

And similar approaches have been taken elsewhere in the UK, so Wales farming is in a transition phase between the current approach of the basic payment scheme and a new sustainable farming scheme, which should be rolled out in 2025, although there will be a few years sort of for the switch to be complete. The SFS combined some universal actions which have to be undertaken by all of those who sign up for the scheme, but a range of optional actions and some collaborative actions to be delivered again at a landscape or catchment or even a national scale.

In Northern Ireland, the environmental Farming scheme offers five year agreements to farmers and land managers with three different levels of delivery, but again, looking at local landscape or catchment scale delivery. And opportunities for collaboration whilst in Scotland, the Agri Environment Climate Scheme offers funding fractions that include restoring biodiversity, although specific priorities for funding will vary from year to year. So it'd be interesting to see how that one works.

The Republic of Ireland, of course, is still governed by EU Agri, environment policy and CAP funding, but is applying this through its Agri climate rural environment scheme, which is cunningly called ACRES. So overall it's encouraging to see this funding being made available to farmers to farm in a more nature friendly way. But I think what we do need to be prioritising is the targeted strategic actions, whether. The local or landscaping catchment scale that will really start to benefit and drive species recovery.



Sophie

I'm going to go over to Jason now because I think he's got a few predictions that he might want to share.

Jason

I've got a couple of things, and they're all sort of interrelated. So I was going to put them together, I'm going to come back to Biodiversity Net Gain, obviously in England, it should be mandatory from the end of this month see how it beds in. I'm sure there's going to be plenty for us to watch. Also looking ahead to the autumn, we should get a consultation on irreplaceable habitats which will link into Biodiversity Net Gain. Then and just a little plug for our Spring Conference will be on Biodiversity Net Gain. So if you're interested in it, please do come along to that.

In Ireland I've already mentioned the briefing paper that we've published on biodiversity enhancements, so we're hoping to use that to further discussions on where biodiversity enhancements in planning goes in Ireland.

In Wales, hopefully we can see some developments on where their approach net benefits for biodiversity goes, and incorporating that into the planning system

And then in Scotland, obviously I talked about the biodiversity strategy consultation that ended in December last year, but that talked specifically about the biodiversity metrics. So we hopefully see some progress on that and some follow up.

And then sticking with Scotland and the follow up to that, we are due to have a nature Restoration Bill published in Scottish Parliament which follows directly on from that biodiversity strategy consultation. We're hoping to see some real ambition in that Bill. So it'd be really great if that was a landmark Bill that took nature restoration forward in Scotland.

Sort of linked to that and I have to come back to it though, is the EU nature restoration law. So this has been going backwards and forwards in the European Parliament, Council and Commission. We've now got the final text, though that was agreed in November last year, hotly debated really controversial. It has been watered down to some extent. There's been concessions given, particularly to farmers and food production. The text, however, still needs to be formally adopted by the EU Parliament and the Council, but when it does come into force, it will require EU countries to restore at least 20% of their land and seas by 2030. And with binding targets to restore at least 30% of degraded habitats, also by 2030, but then with a moving target that rises to 60% by 2040 and 90% by 2050. Obviously this will apply to the Republic of Ireland and our Members there, and once formally adopted, EU countries will be expected to draft national restoration plans that they'll submit to the Commission within two years of the law coming into force, showing how they're going to deliver those targets and then they'll be required to monitor and report on progress as well and then the European Environment Agency will have a role to publish regular reports on overall progress. The link back to Scotland, though, is that Scotland's continuity Act says they're going to align with EU legislation, so we will have to see whether the Scottish national Nature Restoration Bill incorporates some of the texts of this EU Nature restoration law.

Sophie



I'm going to come over to Sally now. What do you think's going to happen with green jobs and routes into the sector?

Sally

Well, I think that we're in very interesting times. So I believe that this is actually a watershed moment for our sector and over the next two to three years, we have the opportunity to transform how people become ecologists and environmental managers. There's not just through new apprenticeships and other vocational routes, but also by working with universities to support practical skills acquisition through degree programmes and developing short courses like micro credentials. This is going to be a major focus of our work over the coming years and you can learn all about the next steps and how to get involved at our webinar on this topic. Which is scheduled for the 18th of January, and it's really important that employers in particular engage with this work and this process. And as part of this work, I also want to call time on the unfair and discriminatory practise of expecting people looking for their first paid role as an ecologist or environmental manager to have acquired practical, experienced skills through unpaid voluntary roles. We have to get our house in order and invest more in training up new entrants if we want to be taken seriously as a profession.

Sophie

And Doug last but definitely not least, what are your predictions on the UK general election?

Doug

OK. Yeah. So I mean, just sort of looking ahead and having a bit of, I guess the crystal ball gaze into the future, we are due a general election by January 2025. The most likely bet is that it's going to be in October, so an autumn election, but there's potentially it could be spring. So really it's uncertain and I think we've got to really, you know, keep an eye on it and CIEEM are keeping on our toes or trying to see if we can predict when it's going to happen, but it's possible there'll be a change of government, but I think whatever happens, it's likely we'll see new environmental policies. At least in England, obviously the devolved nations each have their own governments and they have their own independent environmental policies. But what happens at this election on the UK level will impact sort of our general approach to the environment. So I think it's really important that we make sure that environment messages are key.

Sophie

Sally, Jason, do you have any thoughts on the general election that you'd like ad?

Sally

To add, I think Doug is absolutely right. This is an opportunity to influence the thinking of political parties. We're competing with lots of other imperatives, of course. But the more that CIEEM members, organisations, environmental organisations and the public at large make politicians aware that the environment really matters, it matters to them and they want to see action on it. That message does start to hit home. So we do have to be proactive in setting out what we would like to see and seeing all the political parties responses to that because we need to challenge general



elections and any election processes give us the opportunity to challenge and that's the opportunity to advocate for the environment.

Jason

I have to echo what Sally and Doug have said. We're also supporting the wildlife and countryside links nature 2030 campaign which is around the general election and five asks there, but we're also developing our own specific asks for the Institute, so we'll be pushing those. But like Doug says, this is a critical moment for nature.

Sophie

Well, thank you. We'll wrap up the episode there. So we hope you enjoyed hearing about our key takeaways from 2023, but also our predictions for the coming year in 2024. Thank you for listening to another episode of Nature in a Nutshell, we hope you enjoyed it. And please don't forget to go ahead and rate and review the podcast. We'll see you next month!