

Episode 11 Script

1. Introduction

SL: 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's Sophie and I'm the Marketing Officer at CIEEM, the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management. I'm joined by my two colleagues and co-hosts, Jason and Doug who will be breaking down the big news stories this month affecting people and nature.

JR: Hi, this is Jason, I'm CIEEM's Head of Policy.

D: And I'm Doug, CIEEM's Policy Officer.

S: What are we covering in today's episode?

J: Today we've got the latest OEP report, a new national park for Scotland, and the latest on Biodiversity Net Gain.

2. Topic 1 - OEP report – Government off track to meet environmental ambitions

D: This month we've had a pretty landmark moment in England with the publication of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) first major review of the Government's 2023 Environment Improvement Plan (EIP).

The OEP for those not familiar is the public watchdog created under the Environment Act 2021 with the mission of protecting and improving the environment by holding Government and other public authorities to account.

The report has provided an assessment of the Government's progress towards its own legally binding environment targets and goals, and has found that the Government is largely off track and must significantly speed up and scale up its efforts to achieve them. In fact the Chair of the OEP Dame Glenys Stacey commented that "Deeply, deeply concerning adverse environmental trends continue" and that the Government has "not been clear enough about how its ambitions will actually be delivered".

So what do the numbers say? Well, of the 40 environmental targets assessed, the Government is mostly on track to achieve 4, partially on track to achieve 11, and largely off track to achieve 10. The remaining 15 could not be assessed due to a lack of evidence, which doesn't spark much hope for their progress.

Some of these targets include things like protected site conditions, in which the Government has already missed its target as set in the previous strategy paper, Biodiversity 2020 of ensuring that at least 50% of SSSIs or sites of special scientific interest were in favourable condition. To make up for this the Government has set a new target of 75% of sites in favourable condition but by 2042, which doesn't exactly put us in a good place to achieve the COP15 goal of 30x30 (30% of the planet protected and 30% of degraded ecosystems restored by 2030), a goal which I may add the UK Government made lots of noise about pushing for.

Alongside this the OEP's assessment of 51 recent environmental trends found that 25 are improving, 10 are static, 8 are deteriorating and 8 could not be assessed due to lack of data, with most progress being

made in reducing some environmental pressures like air pollutants, greenhouse gasses and chemical pollutants.

The OEP concludes that in terms of overall prospects of meeting its seven goal areas within the Environmental Improvement Plan, including the primary goal of “thriving plants and wildlife” Government is largely off track. In two goal areas, ‘clean air’ and ‘reducing the risk of harm from environment hazards’ it is partially on track and in one area, ‘enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment’ it could not be assessed due to lack of evidence.

So all in all, not a great showing for the Government on Environment. But the OEP has identified some key factors impeding progress:

- Key policies, strategies and regulatory frameworks are announced and anticipated but then not delivered or developed. Lots of bark and no bite.
- Actions are not addressing all major pressures, and often approaching issues piecemeal e.g. water quality investments increasing substantially in some but not all areas of need.
- Resources are not allocated as needed, even when the tools or actions are well understood. For example, we know how to tackle non-native invasive species but resources are inadequate to actually take action.
- Urgency is severely lacking when implementing positive actions, such as the rate of tree planting not being remotely enough to achieve woodland creation goals.

The report finishes by reaffirming the key recommendations made by the OEP during last years assessment of progress, as well as further ones relating to the EIP, these are that the Government should:

- Implement the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 effectively
- Develop and implement clear and effective Governance
- Develop and implement delivery plans
- Set and vigorously pursue clear and achievable interim targets
- Develop and implement an effective monitoring evaluation and learning framework

<https://cieem.net/oep-slams-government-for-poor-performance-on-environment-and-nature/>

3. Topic 2 – National Parks

J: Towards the end of last year, Scottish Government opened the nominations process for a new national park in Scotland. And at the beginning of this year we’re seeing more interest and activity on this and sites put themselves forward.

Proposals need to be submitted by 29 February 2024.

Scotland currently has 2 national parks,

- Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, established in 2002.
- Cairngorms National Park, established in 2003.

There is interest from across Scotland for a new park, including Galloway, the Scottish Borders, the Tay Forest, Lochaber, the Isle of Skye, Affric to Alladale, Glen Affric, the Lammermuirs, Largo Bay, Loch Awe, Ben Nevis and Glen Coe, or potentially a coastal and marine park.

Overall it's an exciting time, putting a spotlight on nature, wildlife, the great outdoors, and hopefully adds to the impetus to get people outside and connecting with nature. National Parks need to play a bigger part in restoring biodiversity and helping to get to the global 30x30 target of having 30% of our land and seas protected for nature by 2030.

Doug, I think there's also something similar going on in Wales, can you tell us more about that?

D: Yes so there's been a lot of discussion in Wales about creating a new national park to go along with the existing three, which would be the first time a new park has been created since 1957. So we've already got Eryri (Snowdonia) the Pembrokeshire coast and Bannau Brycheiniog (the Brecon Beacons) and this fourth is planned for the North-East of the country.

The pledge for this new park was started in 2021 and the plan is for it centre on the Clywdian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. So this is right in the NE of the country, right next to the border with England. It's a really striking area with lots of cultural heritage as well as natural, as you might have guessed from its existing status as an AONB. Now you might say that surely that means its already protected, well yes sort of, AONB's are meant to conserve an enhance a regions natural beauty but its down to local authorities to handle that, a National park however would have a new authority set up to oversee it and would also mean the park would need to conserve and enhance wildlife alongside its cultural heritage.

So in theory this should be good for the environment there, and we've already seen a big campaign last year to turn around the state of the environment in Bannau Brycheiniog, but it remains to be seen how successful this is.

The current timeline is that Natural Resources Wales (NRW) will publish the Final map of the proposed area this year ahead of a public consultation and then a formal recommendation will be made in 2026 to Welsh Government who will then decide if it goes ahead.

<https://www.gov.scot/news/new-national-parks-in-scotland/>

<https://www.gov.scot/news/next-steps-for-national-parks-in-scotland/>

4. Topic 3 - BNG Go live date in Feb and April

J: To finish off the news items for this month, we now have the dates for when Biodiversity Net Gain will become mandatory in England.

It has been confirmed that Biodiversity Net Gain will become mandatory for new developments from 12 February 2024, and for small developments from 2 April 2024.

From 12 February 2024, BNG will be mandatory for new planning applications for major development made under the Town and Country Planning Act. Major development includes residential developments with 10 or more dwellings, or where the site area is greater than 0.5 hectares.

There is an extended transition for small sites, which means that BNG becomes mandatory for them from 2 April 2024. Small site developments include:

- Residential developments where the number of dwellings is less than 10, or the site area is less than 0.5 hectares
- Commercial developments where floor space created is less than 1,000 square metres or the total site area is less than 1 hectare

BNG will only apply where the planning application was made on or after 12 February 2024. Defra has put transitional arrangements in place in the main BNG commencement regulations to ensure that BNG will not apply to a planning permission granted before this date.

There has also been an amendment to the statutory instrument that covers the biodiversity gain hierarchy. There have been concerns that this hierarchy wasn't quite the same as the mitigation hierarchy in planning (avoid, reduce, restore, offset) and that habitats assessed as "low" or "medium" distinctiveness wouldn't get the same protection from development as "high" or "very high" distinctiveness habitats. The amendment tries to solve this issue but the wording could be tighter.

D: It's good that we've finally got BNG becoming mandatory in England, but what are the other countries in the UK up to?

J: Thanks Doug, yes, we've been so focused on this in England but it is also progressing in the other UK countries too.

Scotland – biodiversity strategy consultation which closed at the end of last year asked for views on a metric approach to biodiversity enhancement. So it could be that we see some in the Natural Environment Bill that the Scottish Government is due to publish later this year.

In Wales, Welsh Government is still interested in biodiversity enhancements through the planning system and we've helped to draft an advice note on that for planners.

And in Ireland, we've actually just published a briefing paper on biodiversity enhance on the island of Ireland. There's currently no gov't policy (north or south) but it is happening at a voluntary level so our Ireland Policy Group has published a paper setting out some information and recommendations and we'll be using this paper to continue discussion about how biodiversity enhancement can be taken forward across the island of Ireland.

S: Thanks Jason. If you want to find out more about BNG, visit the CIEEM website, we have a resource page linked from the homepage. You could also go back and listen to episode 6 or this podcast, where Julia Baker explains what BNG is and how it works.

<https://cieem.net/bng-go-live-date-announced/>

<https://cieem.net/bng-final-regulations-laid-before-parliament/>

<https://cieem.net/i-am/influencing-policy/biodiversity-enhancement-approaches/>

5. Positive news – Pine Martens

Moving onto our positive news now...pine martens have returned to the South of England.

Pine martens were once widespread across the UK, but habitat loss and human activity reduced their numbers so drastically that only small populations have been observed in the North of England, until now that is.

It's been confirmed by Forestry England Wild New Forest, with support from the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust in a long-term study that pine martens are now settled in the New Forest National Park in Hampshire. Hidden remote cameras have captured incredible footage of the species and have observed successful breeding too.

As a side note, people working on this study have reviewed over 60 hours of hidden camera footage and been rewarded with just 5 separate video clips of the elusive species, but this is enough for the New Forest to have been deemed a suitable habitat to support the pine martens.

Is there anything else you want to add about this?

Do we need to mention the controversy about how they were first introduced here?

6. Conclusion

Thanks 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. We'll see you next month! Bye