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forum

# Nature Recovery Networks

## A Landscape Partnership Project in Northern Ireland



### Background

Image via Pixabay

Nature Recovery Networks (NRNs) are widely recognised as an effective response to achieve ecological sustainability in environments that have become fragmented by human activities.

The 2010 'Making Space for Nature' Report, by Professor Sir John Lawton, defined Nature Recovery Networks as comprising 'a suite of high-quality sites which collectively contain the diversity and area of habitat that are needed to support species and which have ecological connections between them that enable species, or at least their genes, to move.'

The Lawton report concluded that in order to create a coherent and resilient ecological network, we need **more, bigger, better** and **more joined up** spaces for nature.

Since 2020, Ulster Wildlife has been working in partnership with RSPB NI, National Trust and Woodland Trust (in the spirit of the Landscape Partnership) on a project to build capacity to deliver Nature Recovery Networks in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Landscape Partnership define NRNs as 'a strategic, long-term approach to managing, creating, restoring, and enhancing habitats and landscapes, linking together ecological processes across protected areas and the wider landscape, while highlighting the link between the status of our natural world and human well-being.'

As a result of The Northern Ireland Landscape Partnership's NRN project, the first set of National habitat network maps for Northern Ireland have been produced. These National habitat network maps provide the starting point for the creation of a spatial plan to help identify the best sites for wildlife, and how to restore and join up these areas.

The topic of NRNs allows us to understand how positive action can be taken to achieve ecological sustainability in Northern Ireland, addressing the climate and biodiversity crises, whilst also meeting the needs of people.

For full detail of the Landscape Partnership's Nature Recovery Network Project in Northern Ireland, please see [here](#).

## Why do we need Nature Recovery Networks in Northern Ireland?

### Globally

Biodiversity is the diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems. Biodiversity and functioning ecosystems are essential for our survival and quality of life.

Biodiversity and the vital services it provides to people, are deteriorating globally. Biodiversity is declining faster than at any time in human history.<sup>iv</sup>

Ecosystems with their full complement of biodiversity are more productive and resilient, providing greater benefits to more people and underpinning sustainable economic prosperity.

### In Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland ranks as the 12th-worst performing country for biodiversity loss out of 240 countries. We have lost more wildlife than anywhere in the UK, with 97% of wildflower meadows gone, 11% of species on the island of Ireland at risk from extinction, and no rivers or lakes achieving good overall status.

Nature is in crisis, and current strategies and actions haven't stopped the decline. We know that existing protected sites alone will not achieve wildlife's recovery or help us in our fight against climate change. If we want a resilient and prosperous future, we need to take bold steps to establish a network of wild places that are bigger, better, more and joined up.



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***We need Nature Recovery Networks in Northern Ireland as a response to the biodiversity and climate crises that are negatively impacting nature and people here.***

## What is a Nature Recovery Network?

### Explainer Videos

- See The Northern Ireland Landscape Partnership's short video explaining NRN's [here](#).
- See The Wildlife Trust's short video 'David Attenborough explains a Nature Recovery Network' [here](#).

***“Everything works better when  
it's connected”  
- Sir David Attenborough***

## Definition of a Nature Recovery Network

The Northern Ireland Landscape Partnership defines Nature Recovery Networks (NRNs) as:

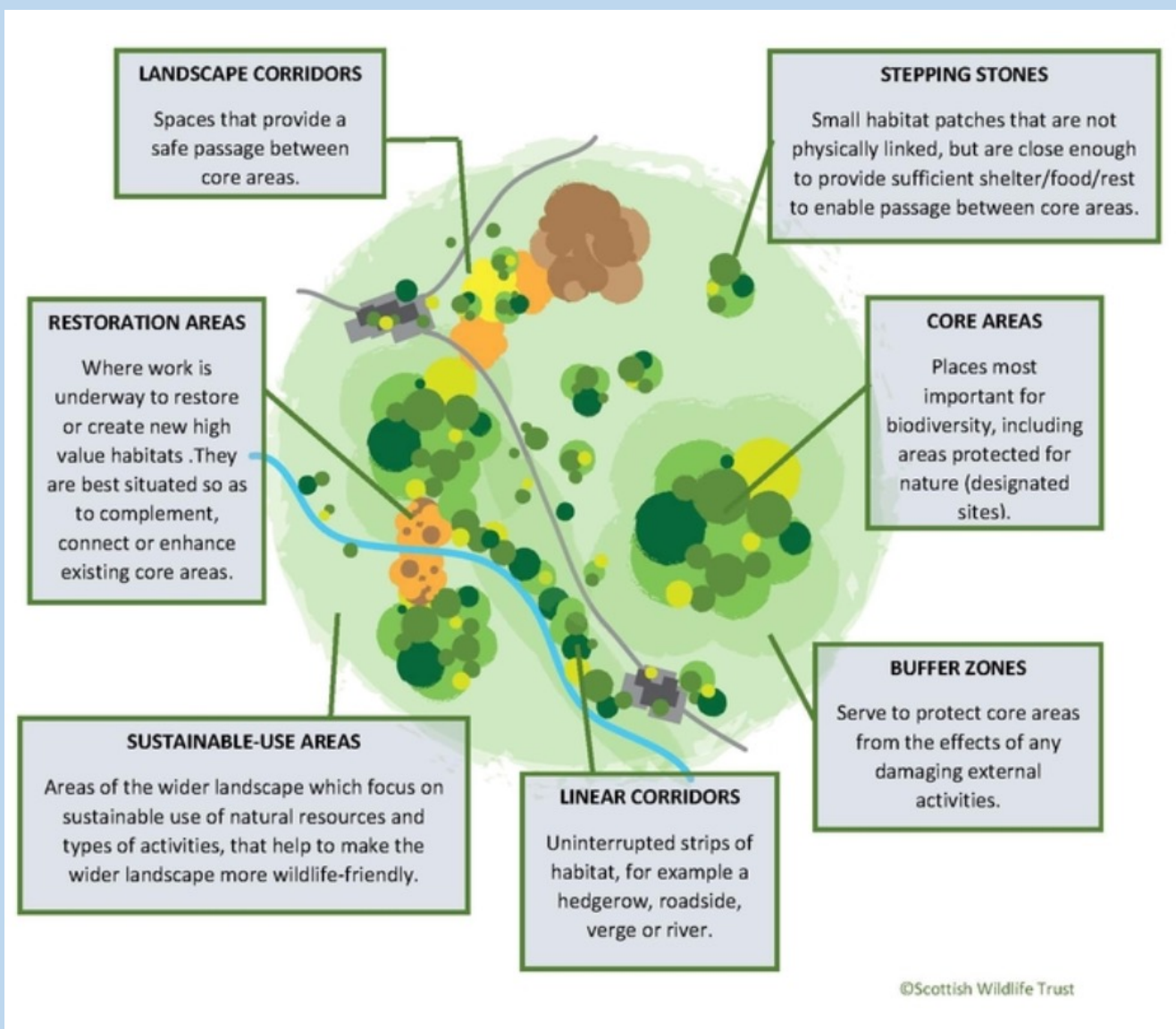
'a strategic, long-term approach to managing, creating, restoring, and enhancing habitats and landscapes, linking together ecological processes across protected areas and the wider landscape, while highlighting the link between the status of our natural world and human well-being.'<sup>ix</sup>

## What does this mean?

It means that:

- NRNs need to be planned to maximise benefits to nature and people.
- NRNs identify and protect the most critical areas for biodiversity.
- NRNs need to be in place long-term.
- NRNs are functioning ecological units.
- NRNs are established at landscape scale.
- NRNs allow wildlife to move easily and adapt to change.
- NRNs include 'buffer zones' that protect core areas.
- NRNs are connected for people and wildlife.

See the diagram below for the physical features of a Nature Recovery Network.



## How do we create a Nature Recovery Network in Northern Ireland?

Using Geographical Information Systems (GIS), the Northern Ireland Landscape Partnership have produced the first set of National habitat network maps for Northern Ireland.

The habitat network maps were created using GIS datasets that map areas of land into different habitat categories, such as primary habitat, e.g. Ancient Semi-natural Woodland, restorable habitats, and areas that can reduce fragmentation, and expand and enhance the overall NRN, with the aim of eventually becoming a functioning Nature Network.

The habitat network maps provide a guide that help to identify the best potential sites for actions to restore nature in line with the Lawton principles of making habitats bigger, better and more joined-up.<sup>ii</sup>

This information, along with other evidence such as on species needs, can be used by decision makers and stakeholders, whilst also considering the provision of ecosystem services, such as surface water regulation, carbon storage, air quality regulation, food production and recreational value. This will help to ensure that land is prioritised for conservation and restoration in a way that maximises the benefits for people and nature.

The components of NRNs can be natural or man-made, and of any size ranging from green roofs to large scale conservation projects. However, to achieve ecological sustainability, habitat conservation and restoration will need to take place at landscape scale across Northern Ireland to form a National NRN.

## Where has the Nature Recovery Network approach been implemented?

- **Fingal County Council, North Dublin**, have been implementing ecological networks since 2010. The Council has found that every unit of ecological network is multifunctional and has multiple benefits such as flood alleviation, recreational use, protection of wildlife, water quality control and carbon capture, representing good value for money. They have since developed a [draft biodiversity action plan](#) that sets out the action plan to implement ecological networks across all of Fingal.
- **Edinburgh Nature Network** was created by bringing together a range of experts and city residents to create a unique, fully-integrated urban map of habitats and the ecosystem services being provided by outdoor spaces in the city. By combining geographical data with local knowledge and practical considerations, the [Edinburgh Living Landscape partnership](#) identified opportunities for nature-based solutions and environmental enhancements that provide multiple benefits for both people and wildlife.
- The Edinburgh Nature Network is part of the wider **Central Scotland Green Network (CSGN)**, which is one of the largest environmental projects of its kind in Europe. The network is made up of quality environments that are connected for people and wildlife, and provide nature-based solutions that contribute to net zero and climate resilience. The [CSGN website](#) provides many examples of the smaller projects in Central Scotland that are contributing to this large-scale nature network.
- In the **Netherlands** they have been implementing ecological networks since 1990. They have seen how the [National Ecological Network](#) facilitates species dispersal, migration, foraging and reproduction. Habitat connectivity and restoration allowed the otter to be re-introduced to the North in 2002 and it is now successfully expanding into the South.
- Ulster Wildlife highlight how they have been helping nature recover by implementing the principles of NRNs into many aspects of their work:
  - [creating a supersized nature reserve in the Belfast Hills](#)
  - [restoring peatlands across Northern Ireland](#)
  - [farming for nature's recovery](#)
  - [helping species such as the red squirrel](#)

## Who needs to get involved to establish Nature Recovery Networks in Northern Ireland?

***Everyone! From global to local level,  
we can all make a difference.***

### Global Conventions and Targets

2021 marked the start of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration with key global conferences for climate change (COP26) and Biological Diversity (COP15) taking place. Out of these 'conference of parties,' or COPs, global commitments and targets are agreed. The overall outcome of COP15 is to agree a Global Biodiversity Framework, which must be realised at national level by each country that is a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity. This includes the UK.

See [Everything you need to know about COP15 in Montreal](#).

### National Strategies and Action Plans

These global targets must be built into our national policies and actions, including the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for the UK. The NI Assembly must ensure we deliver upon these targets in Northern Ireland through our own policies, strategies and action plans.

### What is needed in Northern Ireland?

We currently need a new, binding and ambitious Biodiversity Strategy in Northern Ireland. The last NI Biodiversity Strategy (2015-2020) failed to halt biodiversity decline.

The NI Executive and Assembly needs to legislate for and adequately finance the development and establishment of a National Nature Recovery Network in Northern Ireland, to put nature onto the path of recovery.

Legislation needs to set targets to recover biodiversity and it needs to call on everyone to play their part – all government departments, local Councils and authorities, land managers, businesses and communities.

See the Northern Ireland Landscape Partnership's short videos on:

- [Nature Recovery Networks – How could Local Authorities help to deliver them?](#)
- [Nature Recovery Networks – How could future Land-use Policy help to deliver them?](#)

## What can you do to support Nature Recovery Networks in Northern Ireland?

***We can all take action to help nature  
and contribute to a Nature Recovery  
Network for Northern Ireland.***

### Practical action for biodiversity

Simple changes to the way we manage our gardens, community spaces and school grounds can make a big difference in supporting nature.

- Lawns and verges can be left longer to grow between cuts to allow wildflowers like daisies, clover and dandelions to bloom to provide nectar for bees. See Buglife's [Don't Mow, Let it Grow](#) and Plantlife's [No Mow May](#).
- Green areas can be made more biodiverse by growing wildflowers or other native plants to support pollinators, creating 'bee lines' across Northern Ireland. See [Buglife's B-Lines](#).

- Plant a native hedge or trees, see Woodland Trust for [free trees for schools and communities](#). Sign up to take action for nature in your garden with Ulster Wildlife's [Let Nature In](#)
- Take part in a beach clean or a litter pick to tackle litter and plastic pollution or 'Adopt a spot' that you care for, see [Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful](#)
- Reach out to [Education for Sustainable Development Forum](#) members who can support you in connecting with and taking action for nature.
- Land managers and farmers can come together to champion a way of farming which is sustainable and good for nature with the [Nature Friendly Farming Network NI](#). Ulster Wildlife's Environmental Farming Scheme supports [farming for nature's recovery](#). RSPB provides many case studies and examples of farmer's in Northern Ireland [doing their bit for nature](#).

### **Live a more sustainable lifestyle**

- Look at Ulster Wildlife's excellent compilation of [simple actions](#) that we can take to lead a lifestyle that better supports nature.
- Get your school on board. [Eco Schools NI](#) supports whole-school action with learning resources, management tools and the internationally recognised Green Flag award scheme.

### **Get connected and Advocate for Nature**

As David Attenborough says, 'Everything works better when it's connected'. This is true for nature and for us!

Join Ulster Wildlife's [Youth Forum](#) to find out more about action for wildlife and the environment, and to amplify your voice.

Let other schools know about NRNs, tell your friends and families, connect with community and youth groups, land managers and the local authorities in your area such as your local elected representative or MP, your local council or education board.

Ask for the changes you want to see. This could be writing to your local elected representative calling for the legislation to establish NRNs. Or it could be making connections in your local area to find ways to contribute to a NRN in Northern Ireland.

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