



## **NESC Shared Island Consultation Paper on Climate and Biodiversity Challenges and Opportunities: Comments**

### **Response from Ulster Wildlife**

Ulster Wildlife is Northern Ireland's largest local nature conservation charity with over 14,000 members. Our vision is for a healthy, well-cared for natural environment which contributes to enjoyment, quality of life, prosperity, health and well-being.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the NESC Shared Island Consultation Paper on Climate and Biodiversity Challenges and Opportunities.

***Q1. Is there one of the 5 areas identified which should be prioritised for more detailed consideration in a shared island context? If so, which one and why? The 5 areas are:***

- 1. Climate policy: Shared focus on increasing ambition for 2030***
- 2. Resilience in Cities: Sharing good practice***
- 3. Valuing nature: Biodiversity accounting, policy and engagement***
- 4. Renewable energy: Dialogue and practice***
- 5. Local wealth building, resilience and a just transition in rural farming communities.***

Ulster Wildlife would emphasise that the island of Ireland is facing a twin climate and biodiversity crisis, and that these issues are intrinsically linked and therefore issues (1) and (3) should be addressed together as the single highest priority. From this key challenge all else stems, such as resilience, renewable energy and addressing challenges facing rural farming communities. It is important that significant efforts are made to embed joint climate and biodiversity action, with SMART targets, in all policy areas across government departments, in both Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, and where possible agreement is sought on these targets so that as a biogeographical unit the island of Ireland is moving toward the same goals. All-Island targets must accommodate the shifts in species and habitats of conservation importance as a result of their response to climate change, and policies must enable such shifts through the careful management of land and sea.

***Q2. Is there another area not listed in the 5 identified areas that should be considered for further exploration on a shared island basis? If so, what is it and why?***

There are specific issues facing border counties, such as shared river catchments, and an urgent need to create and co-manage wildlife corridors spanning both jurisdictions in order to promote climate change resilience and adaptation (this is especially vital for tree cover, for the extensive upland habitats in border areas, and in the marine environment). This could warrant an additional, separate area, for example "***Border areas and habitat continuity***".

**Q3. Are there any points of clarification required in this paper or new issues which should be considered in relation to climate and biodiversity in a shared island context?**

Ulster Wildlife makes the following key asks for inclusion in the paper:

**1. Nature-based Solutions (NbS) to climate change**

Nature-based solutions (NbS) are only mentioned once, and fairly peripherally, in the paper. We believe that NbS are vital in addressing both the climate and biodiversity crisis. NbS must underpin land management and land use policy, including our approach to dealing with the agricultural emissions that present an obstacle to achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, an issue that is especially challenging on the island of Ireland by comparison to other countries. Significant, long term support should be put in place to enable landowners and farmers to make the necessary changes to reduce emissions and promote carbon capture and storage, as well as to co-design such changes in a way that promotes biodiversity and provides other ecosystem benefits such as flood protection: a win-win scenario.

**Climate-friendly farming** should be incentivised and supported, accessing the latest knowledge and research into dietary manipulation, soil management and encouraging a ‘carbon custodianship’ approach – through protection and restoration of hedgerows, woodlands and peatlands. This should be viewed in association with wildlife-friendly farming, such that both climate and biodiversity targets are jointly addressed.

The contribution of ‘**blue carbon**’ should be fully acknowledged, particularly when investing in a blue economy and ensuring that development is cognisant of both climate and biodiversity functions of habitats. Coastal and marine ecosystems play very significant roles in carbon sequestration and storage, but coastal habitats in particular are already at risk of ‘coastal squeeze’ in developments and face the challenges of climate change through sea level rise and increased storminess resulting in erosion. Development of **shoreline management plans** that promote the blue carbon role of natural habitats and their biodiversity benefits, as well as the role such habitats play in reducing flood risk and coastal erosion, must underpin coastal planning approaches.

**Border areas and habitat continuity:** Specific consideration of habitat and landscape continuity in cross-border areas when implementing NbS requires attention as differences in legislation, policy and support might be greatly exacerbated in those areas (compared to the rest of the country) to the detriment of the natural environment generally.

**2. Protected sites and Nature Recovery Networks**

We recognise the significant efforts made by governments in designating protected areas both on land and at sea, and the recent commitment made by the Republic of Ireland for further Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), but would like to see within the paper recognition of:

- a) The need for strong targets relating to implementation and enforcement of **management measures** at all sites, with appropriate monitoring;
- b) The need to ensure protected areas, both on land and at sea, are ‘**climate smart**’ – where their vulnerability to climate change is understood and that sites are managed accordingly with further designations implemented to facilitate climate resilience;
- c) That all protected sites are part of a wider **Nature Recovery Network (NRN)** – an ecological network which joins up habitat patches across the island of Ireland, protecting

priority species and habitats now and into the future- acknowledging the need for climate change resilience. A NRN will enable **targeted recovery and restoration** of habitat areas and improve their biodiversity value, with network maps underpinning a multitude of policy areas such as environmental farming schemes, land management strategies, blue-, green- and blue-green infrastructure - becoming an integral part of new developments and management of public lands. NRNs can also be used to support urban resilience and creation of accessible urban green spaces, which provide benefits to human well-being, as well as a variety of ecosystem services (e.g. flood resilience, water and air quality, biodiversity);

- d) That those areas within a NRN that that aren't being managed directly for targeted species or habitat recovery etc., are also managed sustainably;
- e) Implementation of stronger policies that embed NRNs and prioritise biodiversity across sectors, for example environmental net gain in planning, legally binding commitments to environmental improvement plans and within environmental farming schemes.

Together, these approaches should be reflected by a minimum commitment of **30% of land and sea protected and effectively managed for biodiversity by 2030**, in line with EU Biodiversity Strategy.

#### **Wider cross-border working**

Ulster Wildlife applauds the cross-border working that has been demonstrated through INTERREG projects and development of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan; these are an excellent foundation upon which further collaborative working and wider sectoral plans could be developed. As Northern Ireland develops a Climate Change Bill it is crucial that independent advisory bodies used in setting interim targets and carbon budgets consider cross-border issues and harmonise their approaches where possible. Similarly, all policies developed must have a strong evidence base, provided by independent scientific advice. We would have concerns that the wider ramifications of Brexit might weaken the ability of universities and research institutes to maintain the long tradition of cross-border working they have built up over a long time. We would urge the All-Island Climate and Biodiversity Research Network to address this issue, and we fully support the proposed green paper which can further underpin and strengthen cross-border action for nature.

Within the marine environment, the Loughs Agency only applies to the two shared water bodies of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough, however many loughs and coastal areas across the whole island of Ireland act ecologically as a single resource, particularly for migratory birds, and such wider cross-border management approaches are needed for these and for our wider marine environment.