

Economic prosperity: is it actually in our Nature?

It is sometimes said that the answer to any question in a headline is generally “no”. But with the question that we pose today – “Economic prosperity: is it actually in our Nature?” – the response from me is a resounding “yes”! As we’ll see, though, that isn’t just the view of the Chair of Natural England: it’s the verdict of a growing body of evidence from across the spectrum of science, business and government, and going back now for some years.

The question of whether we must sacrifice Nature for economic growth is not a new one, but the stakes have never been higher. Today we face not only into economic crisis, but also climate change and Nature emergencies, which means that if we take the wrong approaches, trading growth against environment, we risk plunging our country into a vicious spiral of decline, that is both ecological and economic.

The peril is already clear, with each week bringing yet more stark evidence of the climate and Nature emergency enveloping our planet: catastrophic flooding in Pakistan, wildfires across southern Europe and the demise of such rare and wonderful creatures such as the dugong.

In Britain this summer temperatures have comfortably broken the 40 C barrier for the first time, exacerbating a choking drought. Our web of life is unravelling with many once common wildlife, from hedgehogs to turtle doves, suffering decades of decline.

Too many people seem blind to the fact that our economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Nature, with our entire way of life sustained by ecosystems as diverse as soils and the sea. Nature is the basis of our food supply, clean water, air and vital for human health and wellbeing. Degrading those key services means money has to be spent dealing with the fall-out, money that could be better spent elsewhere.

When it comes to food security, it’s estimated that the pollination carried out by bees and other insects is worth nearly £700m to the UK economy, helping secure a farming industry worth over £120bn. Take that service away and we would have to spend an estimated £1.8bn a year hand-pollinating our crops, in the way they do in parts of southwestern China, where fruit farmers climb into the trees in the Spring to use feather dusters on sticks to move the pollen between blossoms by hand. 20 farmers are needed to replace the work of one bumblebee nest in those landscapes.

Peatlands are one of the best examples we have of the multiple benefits that Nature brings to society. Waterlogged blankets of dead plant matter cover a tenth of England and the high-quality water they filter into British rivers is valued at up to £888m per year. These wonderful wet places also make a huge contribution to conserving the native wildlife of our islands, hosting

some of our rarest species, bittern, swallowtail butterfly and plants such as carnivorous sundews. Such is their outstanding importance that nearly a third of our areas of deep peat is notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Considering the urgency of the climate change emergency, it is perhaps not surprising that most prominent in the benefits peatlands provide is the fact of them being England's biggest natural carbon store, locking away 580m tonnes of carbon in the ground, and in the process keeping it out of the atmosphere.

Unfortunately, and just as in the case of many tropical rainforests, their degradation is now such that they are currently net emitters of carbon, rather than the net sinks that they once were. We rightly express our horror at the destruction of the Amazon but need to recognise that we have important recovery work to do right here in our own doorstep.

Just 13% of peat is in a natural state and this means the rest of it – drying out and degrading – works against us, releasing 10m tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere each year and sending discoloured water cascading from hillsides to expensive treatment works. And the water our broken peatlands can no longer store instead rushes downstream and has been associated with various flooding incidents, in Yorkshire.

The Office for National Statistics has said that restoring all UK peatlands would cost £8bn-£21bn – but the carbon benefits alone would be around £109bn, giving a cost/benefit ratio of at least 5:1 and possibly 10:1. Got to be a good rate of return by anyone's estimation

This is before the millions of pounds of savings from water treatment and flood damage is factored in, never mind the wildlife benefits or the great potential for increased eco tourism.

Turning to the health benefits that arise from access to wonderful wildlife-rich landscapes, the strength of the connection between these has been underlined by a host of studies. One found that outdoor recreation provided health benefits worth more than £6bn a year, while another estimated that visits to woodlands saved £141m in reduced mental health treatment.

An often-overlooked aspect of the economy versus environment debate is how breathing life back into Nature results in life being breathed back into business too. In the United States there is evidence suggesting that for every \$1 million invested in Nature-based solutions, close to 40 jobs are created, about ten times more than would be secured via investments in fossil fuels.

The Dearne Valley in South Yorkshire, a former industrial wasteland has been transformed now the green lungs of communities across the North of England not only providing a wonderful place for people but the home of the increasingly scarce Willow Tit, it has led to a large number of new business enterprises springing up. This demonstrates how high-quality Nature is the precursor to high-quality investment and jobs.

Businesses understand this and are seeking opportunities to support Nature recovery with their own and investors' money. More than 160 companies have already joined forces with Natural England to help deliver the Government's promise to create a Nature Recovery Network across the country, which will be just as good for businesses as it will be for wildlife and people, because employees like to live in attractive Nature-filled places. On top of that are a range of other benefits that help companies to manage risk and realise opportunities. It's a case of both and rather than either or, business and nature.

The picture coming into sharp focus reveals how investing in Nature is not a drag on public finances, it actually saves the country money and creates the conditions necessary for economic prosperity. Far from being a block to economic development, it is increasingly clear that functioning natural systems are a vital prerequisite for it. The simple fact is that Nature is vital for our health, wealth and security. We can't do without it.

And of course on top of the financial and economic case is a moral and ethical one. It is recognised in the Government's ambitious 25 Year Environment Plan, which commits us to being the first generation that will leave the environment in a better state for the next generation. This is a pioneering idea and one that we must honour to hand to not leave future generations with ecological and financial debt, but instead to invest in nature recovery in a way that makes sense for the future as well as today.

Economic development will be even harder to achieve as the riches of Nature become even more depleted than now, unless we take immediate, coordinated action.

The broad goal to improve the state of the natural environment is backed by targets enshrined in the Environment Act 2021 – including that to halt the catastrophic decline of species by 2030. The UK has also adopted the goal of protecting 30 per cent of our land for Nature by 2030. That act of Parliament also brought forward some of the key tools to advance both these ambitions including Biodiversity Net Gain, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Conservation Covenants.

If we are to meet those targets – and we must – then, in the words of the Environment Secretary, we need to ensure that Nature and the economy are partners rather than seen as choices. That means weaving Nature recovery into the growth planning up front – the cheapest point at which to invest in Nature, and the one that also yields the biggest returns. That sort of logic appeals to all investors, whether their favourite colour is the green of Nature or the black of profit.

Nature recovery must be based on taking a more strategic approach to land use at the start of development planning, incorporating Nature recovery into the same process as planning for housing, infrastructure and industry. This would allow the identification of the most important places for Nature and the services society needs from Nature recovery. The resulting plans would deliver the beautiful places that would attract investment and enable people to enjoy healthy lives, as well as contributing to those 2030 targets.

Natural England, as the Government's statutory adviser on the environment, will continue to provide evidence-based advice to government on how it can progress its economic plans while establishing a better, more tailored British regime for Nature protection and recovery than the one implemented during the EU years. We do believe it is possible to do better, but only if Nature is taken to front and centre and if new regimes do not diminish existing protections, and indeed where possible seek to enhance them. At Natural England we have experience on how to do this, including from work on District Level Licensing for Great-crested Newts, and can see scope to expand that approach in proposed reforms.

Despite the opportunities to do better, some people are nonetheless understandably nervous about what a sharper focus on economic growth might mean for Nature. This is where an expression of more joined up thinking could help reveal the potential to secure bigger and quicker gains for Nature, including in Investment Zones which, if set up in an intelligent and integrated way, could allow Nature recovery to be planned into development at an early stage.

This in turn will give businesses the certainty needed to commit to Nature recovery in their planning, knowing that this will diminish risk, reduce costs, contribute to the more attractive places that will drive additional investment whilst fostering good relations with stakeholders. And if we can conceive processes that have the ecologists and planners sitting down together from the start, then the whole thing can go more quickly.

One important thing to bear in mind about Nature and economic development is that we already have the evidence that they can flourish together. A particularly strong case is the Thames Basin Heaths, which was declared a Special Protection Area for ground-nesting birds, stalling plans to build more than 50,000 homes. NE worked with the 11 local authorities involved and the developers on providing alternative greenspace for residents to use, resulting in the homes being built ahead of schedule and the populations of Dartford warbler, woodlark and nightjar actually increasing.

It's easy to look at this example and see how things might have gone very differently for the environment, without the intelligence and integration shown by all sides. This is the key to our debate. Short term economic growth achieved by trampling over Nature and its protections will not result in a healthy or sustainable economy. On the contrary, centuries of that kind of activity, whereby Nature has been liquidated for growth, has brought us to the doorstep of disaster, in the form of potentially catastrophic climate change and a mass extinction of animals and plants.

We cannot afford to carry on like that. Now is the time to take an integrated approach, whereby Nature recovery migrates to the centre of economic policy, and is no longer seen as an inevitable casualty of it.