

WALES'S NATURE CRISIS:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN IMMEDIATE
EMERGENCY RESPONSE

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INTRODUCTION

In spring 2019, the Welsh Government declared a climate and ecological emergency. This was a critical first step to addressing one of the biggest challenges of our time and has been widely welcomed.

The need to act to tackle climate change has long been recognised by governments throughout the world and is a unifying issue across political divides. In response, many - including the Welsh and UK governments - have dedicated substantial resources towards programmes to reduce carbon emissions.

Yet it is only more recently that the full scale of the wider ecological crisis, or nature crisis, has started to become apparent to national policy-makers. This new understanding is leading to a recognition of a knowledge gap in policy-making and the desire to develop policy solutions not only to halt further ecological damage, but also to proactively restore nature for future generations. In Wales the evidence of the ecological crisis we face has been mounting. The Natural Resources Wales (NRW) 2016 *State of Natural Resources Report* found that none of our ecosystems had all the necessary attributes of resilience.

Since then, WWF's *Living Planet Report* 2018 found that population sizes of wildlife have fallen an average of 60% globally since 1970. Closer to home, the 2019 *State of Nature* report revealed that of the 3,902 species assessed in Wales, 73 have been lost already, with birds like turtle doves and corn buntings now gone from Welsh skies. A further 666 species are threatened with extinction in Wales. The abundance and distribution of these species provides a strong indicator of the wider health of Welsh ecosystems and acts as a stark warning that significant action is required.

The State of Nature report also analysed the drivers of biodiversity loss across the UK. These are:

- Agricultural management
- Climate change
- Hydrological change
- Urbanisation
- Invasive non-native species, pests and pathogens
- Pollution
- Woodland management.

“We need nature to provide for our basic needs. We depend on it for clean air and water, fertile soils, food and a stable climate. It protects us from flooding, improves our mental well-being and provides space to improve our physical health”

– **Anne Meikle,**
WWF Cymru Director

These reports, coupled with the campaigning work of people like Greta Thunberg and prominent television series such as the BBC's *Blue Planet II* and Netflix's *Our Planet*, have increased public demand for action in response to the crisis we face. These demands have manifested in the global youth strikes movement and high-profile direct action by groups such as Extinction Rebellion. Taken together, a movement is building which requires a detailed and effective response by policy-makers in Wales.

So, what should be done to tackle this crisis, and what action should the Welsh Government take to bend the curve of biodiversity loss in Wales before it's too late? Answering this question has become a crucial challenge for Welsh policy-makers. It is not an easy task. Our natural world is dependent on a highly complex series of inter-dependent systems, and we do not fully understand our influence on them. Unlike some other policy areas, there are few simple fixes with direct and predictable results.

To contribute to the emergency response, WWF Cymru worked with leading ecological consultancy Ecosulis to produce a synthesis report on the drivers of biodiversity loss in Wales and possible policy instruments to address them. It drew on the Welsh Government's existing competencies within the unique legislative framework of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WFGA) and Environment (Wales) Act 2016 (EWA). This work formed the foundation of this summary report.

RESPONDING TO WALES'S NATURE EMERGENCY: FOUR POLICY FRAMES

The synthesis report identified and investigated a long list of policy instruments with the potential to address the drivers of biodiversity loss in Wales – while also highlighting the complexity of the issues involved, data gaps and evolving legislative frameworks.

For this summary report, we recognised that this list needed to be shortened. To do so, WWF Cymru brought together a small group of environmental policy professionals to identify policy instruments that can form part of the rapid response to the ecological crisis.

This process did not identify which policy instruments were quantifiably the 'best' for Wales to undertake at this current time. While this was our initial desire, a definitive prioritisation within such a complex system proved impractical given the resources available and would need to take place as part of a much wider discussion with all stakeholders.

Instead, we looked for common themes and started to consider which of the policy instruments had the potential to work together to form a route map for a wider response to the ecological crisis.

This is because, while direct policy action will drive change, it cannot maximise its potential to do so in a vacuum. Instead, the Welsh Government needs to ensure that the wider public is involved; understands the motivation for action; and connects this action with the wider and growing movement to restore nature. This approach is consistent with the ways of working of the WFGA and should provide the necessary public buy-in for the changes that need to be made.

Out of this process emerged the four policy frames of **Ambition**, **Innovation**, **Collaboration** and **Knowledge**. The specifics of each of these themes are explained in their subsequent sections.

Across these four frames, we recommend ten policy instruments that can be delivered immediately within the Welsh Government's current powers and frameworks. While some constitute only small changes to existing practices or forthcoming policy developments, collectively they will have a substantial positive impact on Welsh nature. This offers the beginnings of the Welsh Government's response to the nature crisis. At the same time, WWF will continue to work with the Welsh Government and partners to develop and implement initiatives that build on these foundations to restore Wales's nature over the long term.

The recommendations cover a range of scales and will need to be implemented across government through different mechanisms. This report does not attempt to define each of those mechanisms unless it is immediately apparent, as these are liable to change. What is important is the outcome they are seeking to achieve, rather than the mechanism through which they are implemented.

Photo by Lukas Julias

SUMMARY OF POLICY FRAMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WELSH GOVERNMENT



AMBITION

- Commit to allocating 5% of annual spend to incentivising and supporting the restoration of nature and combating climate change.
- End incidents of avoidable agricultural pollution.
- Commit to remove all problematic 'grey infrastructure' installations in Welsh river systems.



INNOVATION

- Introduce a public competition for pilot projects that use nature-based solutions to restore biodiversity.
- Use the Environment Act's 'Experimental Schemes' clauses to fund and evaluate pilot projects in each of the seven Area Statement regions, in coordination with Natural Resources Wales.



COLLABORATION

- Commit to developing a collaborative nature investment fund within the new Sustainable Land Management scheme to incentivise and reward coordinated landscape-scale activities designed to improve local ecosystem resilience.
- Require land managers to incorporate the outcomes of ongoing consultations with local communities to be eligible for the Sustainable Land Management scheme.
- Empower communities to manage land owned by public bodies for projects that use nature-based solutions to restore local biodiversity and the resilience of ecosystems.



KNOWLEDGE

- Incorporate the latest thinking on ecosystem approach and the relationship between nature recovery and well-being into Welsh education.
- Require all public officials to undergo training in the relationship between nature and well-being.

AMBITION

Each of the policy frames discussed in this report has been designed to work together. Setting a strong Ambition is the starting point for telling the story of the resilient, nature-rich Wales we need to create in response to the emergency we face.

The Welsh Government should take the lead with an ambitious policy response to the declared emergency, which moves past the words of recognising the problem and clearly sets out its intent to rise to the challenge.

In practical terms this means that the Welsh Government needs to significantly invest in nature to ensure that it leaves Wales in a better state for future generations.

RECOMMENDED POLICY INSTRUMENTS

COMMIT TO ALLOCATING 5% OF ANNUAL SPEND TO INCENTIVISING AND SUPPORTING THE RESTORATION OF NATURE AND COMBATING CLIMATE CHANGE

At a UK level, WWF is calling on the UK Government to allocate at least £42bn of public expenditure each year to respond to the climate and nature emergency. Doing so would enable us to seize the huge environmental, economic, social and cultural benefits of healthy, resilient ecosystems, which are currently jeopardised by climate change and other threats.

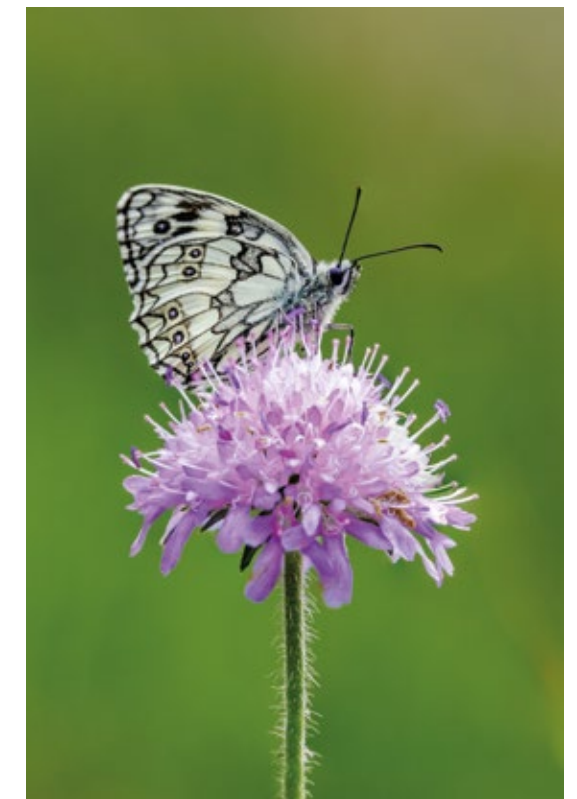
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This broadly equates to around 5% of total UK Government spending – or around 2% of GDP. In real terms we estimate that the UK Government currently spends around £17bn on climate and nature, and that an additional £25bn is required.

This is the real-world cost of responding to the emergency we face. It sits roughly in line with the defence budget and is far smaller than for many policy areas.

Given Wales's funding mechanism it is reasonable for the Welsh Government to at least match the 5% of budget figure, rather than linking spending to Welsh GDP.

It is currently unclear how much of the Welsh Government's annual budget is spent on climate and nature. For example, the Welsh Government is currently unable to identify its annual spend on biodiversity.¹



It can demonstrate its ambition by committing to spend 5% of its annual budget on incentivising and supporting the restoration of nature and combating climate change. This funding can be used to develop and implement the large-scale changes that need to occur as part of the longer-term response to the nature crisis, from investing in designated sites to creating a national forest.

Based on current figures this would amount to an allocation in the region of £900m. This would still be a significantly smaller amount than is presently spent by all other departments other than Central Services and Administration.

¹ <https://record.assembly.wales/WrittenQuestion/78811>

The Welsh Government is taking a positive step towards this by making biodiversity a cross-cutting theme of the 2020-2021 budget and has committed an additional £140m of capital spend for new projects. This is a welcome first step, which the First Minister has described as a “down payment” on what is to come. Making this 5% commitment would be a significant step towards delivering upon that down payment.

One key developing challenge is the link between nature restoration and action on climate change, and ensuring that the latter does not undermine the former. For example, the Welsh Government should ensure that expanding renewable energy does not have negative impacts on vulnerable ecosystems and biodiversity. In addition, it should seek opportunities to combine climate mitigation and adaptation with nature restoration, for example through planting trees, restoring wetlands and rehabilitating soils.

At a Welsh level it is not yet possible to separate climate and nature spend with sufficient confidence, so this report does not attempt to do so. As work and resources in this area increase as part of the Welsh Government's emergency response, knowledge and transparency should be strengthened to ensure increased government spending delivers the maximum value for the nature, people and climate of Wales.

END INCIDENTS OF AVOIDABLE AGRICULTURAL POLLUTION

The level of avoidable agricultural pollution incidents in Welsh rivers is a significant threat to nature and requires urgent attention². Such pollution can kill fish and other aquatic life and is a contributor towards why only one out of six freshwater habitat types are in Favourable Conservation Status³. Current incidents result from a mix of factors including:

- the topography of the Welsh landscape
- nitrate and phosphate applications
- insufficient environmental stewardship among a small minority of land managers
- a weak enforcement regime

While agricultural pollution is not the only form of pollution, it is a recognised problem in Wales. Tackling avoidable incidents would deliver huge biodiversity and well-being benefits by supporting the recovery of freshwater ecosystems and fisheries.

The Government is due to bring forward new agricultural regulations in 2020 which could represent a good starting point, but regulations alone are not the answer. To be effective they need to be developed with stakeholders and delivered alongside support for improved management, advice services and enforcement practices. The Welsh Government should underpin this approach through having the ambition to lead a culture where no avoidable pollution is acceptable.

COMMIT TO REMOVE ALL PROBLEMATIC ‘GREY INFRASTRUCTURE’ INSTALLATIONS IN WELSH RIVER SYSTEMS

River systems can recover dramatically when connectivity is improved. Yet old infrastructure such as weirs, dams and culverts associated with mills, power stations and the like remain in place when these facilities have been demolished or repurposed, causing unnecessary disruption to ecosystem flows.

NRW has already recognised the need to address grey infrastructure and has removed some installations, such as Merthyr Vale Weir.⁴ However, NRW does not have the resources to identify and remove all examples that would most benefit nature.

To that end, the Welsh Government should work with NRW to conduct a national inventory and classification of all problematic grey river infrastructures and fund a programme to remove them. Much of this information is already collected in existing river catchment management plans.

Removing unnecessary and damaging installations would restore the natural flow of our rivers, improving their resilience to seasonal changes; flooding; pollution incidents; and major events such as storms which are liable to increase in frequency as a result of climate change. Over the longer term, this promotes biodiversity by enabling displaced species to return and historic habitats to reform.

² www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-46212790

³ Natural Resources Wales. 2016. *State of Natural Resources Report*

⁴ <https://naturalresources.wales/about-us/our-projects/river-projects/merthyr-vale-weir-removal/?lang=en>

INNOVATION



Over the last decade the Welsh Government has been at the forefront of a paradigm shift in how national legislation is designed, moving from a traditional prescriptive approach to what can be broadly described as a principles-led approach.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act and the Environment Act are prime examples of this new and innovative approach. Both acts are intended to work together to create a framework of goals, approaches and obligations, but to allow flexible implementation. They take steps to decentralise power structures and encourage those subject to them to move beyond business as usual. In addition, the Environment Act is ground-breaking in embracing the concept of 'nature recovery' and its ambition to complement protection with restoration.

In keeping with this new approach, the Welsh Government should encourage and embrace innovation to develop new approaches to policy-making and provide the resources and opportunities necessary to bring them to fruition.



A successful development of this policy should:

- I. Consult on criteria for submissions from both individual and multi-agency/stakeholder teams
- II. Provide funding to support shortlisted teams to develop their policy or concept
- III. Promote shortlisted ideas to generate interest and discussion
- IV. Establish an independent committee to choose prize winners
- V. Require relevant agencies (and government) to publish an open response to the winning entry which identifies opportunities for implementation.

But this competition should only be the start. Wales has never been shy of ideas, but this policy must not result in pilots being identified and then allowed to die once they have exhausted their funding. The next policy provides an opportunity to take things further.

RECOMMENDED POLICY INSTRUMENTS

INTRODUCE AND FUND A PUBLIC COMPETITION FOR PILOT PROJECTS WHICH USE NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS TO RESTORE BIODIVERSITY

The Welsh Government recognises it does not hold a monopoly on good ideas. Throughout Wales individuals and communities are developing their own solutions to the problems they face. Yet they struggle to get the support they need. This policy would establish an open to all national competition to enable promising new ideas to be developed, regardless of their source.

Such competitions are a proven means to break out of the rut of traditional policy-making and bring new people into the conversation. A similar approach in the Netherlands sparked a transition in delta management from river engineering to nature-based solutions.

USE THE ENVIRONMENT ACT'S 'EXPERIMENTAL SCHEMES' CLAUSES TO FUND AND EVALUATE PILOT PROJECTS IN EACH OF THE SEVEN AREA STATEMENT REGIONS

The Environment Act includes powers for Welsh ministers to suspend statutory requirements to “trial new approaches to [...] achieve the sustainable management of natural resources ... [including] the development of or application of new methods, concepts or techniques, or the application or further development of existing methods, concepts or techniques”.⁵

These powers have the potential to be used in a variety of ways to embrace innovative approaches to land management, but this has not yet been fully explored. It is disappointing that the original ambition of the Environment Act has not yet translated into delivery.

One approach should be to set aside locations in each of the seven Area Statement regions for the purposes of running and evaluating pilot projects. This should be integrated with the previous policy recommendation of launching a competition to identify new solutions. For example, were the winner of that competition to be a heathland restoration pilot, NRW should identify a suitable location to take it forward, and the Welsh Government should provide the resources to deliver and evaluate it.

Outside of competition winners, the Welsh Government has already set out a policy ambition for a new National Forest. However, there is still a significant amount of work to be done on refining what this looks like on the ground. This policy recommendation could be used to experiment with how and where to use the National Forest to create a system of regional nature recovery areas.

Making use of the Environment Act's Area Statements function in this way would also enable the development of a place-based approach (in line with the national priority found in the Natural Resources Policy) and contribute towards local environmental needs in innovative ways. Limiting the experiments to one per Area Statement region ensures that the schemes remain manageable, and sufficient resources can be dedicated to assessing their impact.

⁵ Environment (Wales) Act 2016 Explanatory Notes, Section 22.
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2016/3/notes/division/2/1/22>

COLLABORATION

The policy recommendations in the previous frame focused on creating new opportunities for collaboration by bringing together new people with new ideas and giving them the backing required to bring them to fruition. The Welsh Government has a long history of embracing collaboration since its inception and took steps with the Well-being of Future Generations Act in 2015 to formally establish it as a way of working for public bodies. The challenge has been to ensure that genuine collaboration occurs, rather than consultation processes that confuse the ability to respond with the sincere co-production of ideas from inception through to delivery.

The Welsh Government needs to continue to build on this ambition by bringing forward policy instruments that enhance collaboration and place it at the heart of addressing the climate and ecological emergency Wales faces.

Opportunities for better collaboration exist in many sectors. However, we know from the State of Nature 2019 report that unsustainable agricultural management is the single largest driver of biodiversity decline. In making this point we recognise that while unsustainable farming is a cause of nature's decline, sustainable farming is also the answer, and that farmers and other land managers cooperating at appropriate scales are essential in restoring and maintaining biodiversity. Given this, we focus on that sector to identify opportunities for enhanced collaboration that will benefit biodiversity within the Welsh legislative context.

RECOMMENDED POLICY INSTRUMENTS

COMMIT TO DEVELOPING A COLLABORATIVE NATURE INVESTMENT FUND WITHIN THE NEW SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT SCHEME TO INCENTIVISE AND REWARD COORDINATED LANDSCAPE-SCALE ACTIVITIES DESIGNED TO IMPROVE LOCAL ECOSYSTEM RESILIENCE

REQUIRE LAND MANAGERS TO INCORPORATE THE OUTCOMES OF ONGOING CONSULTATIONS WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO BE ELIGIBLE FOR THE SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT SCHEME

Wales will soon exit the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and work is underway to establish a Sustainable Land Management scheme to replace it. This scheme is likely to be the most important lever the Welsh Government has to influence land management practices across Wales, so it's essential to get this policy area right.

The present CAP has prioritised food production over other rural activities. Farmers and other land managers have needed to chase subsidies to stay in business,



while their work for the betterment of the environment has been at best undervalued and at worst ignored or hindered. This has left many farms in a poor state of financial viability and led to a loss of rural cohesion and ecosystem resilience. There is a clear imperative for the sector to transform.

Beyond the existing Welsh Government commitment that “future support should be designed around the principle of sustainability”⁶ it will be essential for the new scheme to offer new and enhanced opportunities to collaborate. The Sustainable Farming and Our Land consultation does recognise this need (especially around Commoners), but it should go further to ensure better collaboration both among land managers and between land managers and their local communities.

⁶ Welsh Government. 2019. Sustainable Farming and Our Land Consultation.
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2019-07/brexit-consultation-document.pdf>



**RECREATION AND NATURE
CONSERVATION WOULD
PROVIDE BENEFITS
IN TERMS OF
HEALTH AND
WELL-BEING**

We suggest the new scheme does two additional things. First, it should break away from the farm-level approach and make use of the evidence base of Area Statements to incentivise and reward land managers who work together at a landscape scale. Within the post-Brexit scheme, the Welsh Government should create a new fund which is only accessible through collaborative projects, where land managers in a given area combine their forces to achieve a collective outcome. For example, should an Area Statement identify the need for more woodland in a given river catchment, land managers in that catchment could collectively propose to address that, and access dedicated funding to support it.

But true collaboration needs to involve more than just land managers and government agencies. To ensure greater community involvement, we propose that to be eligible for the Sustainable Land Management scheme, land managers must incorporate the outcomes of ongoing consultations with local communities. While Area Statements already create space for community consultation, this policy recommendation aims to achieve change by affording communities a role in the decision-making process.

**EMPOWER COMMUNITIES TO MANAGE LAND OWNED BY
PUBLIC BODIES FOR PROJECTS THAT USE NATURE-BASED
SOLUTIONS TO RESTORE LOCAL BIODIVERSITY AND THE
RESILIENCE OF ECOSYSTEMS.**

This policy would introduce a facility to empower communities to take over the management of parcels of publicly owned land (such as urban green spaces and unused fields or verges) for the explicit purpose of developing and deploying nature-based solutions projects to restore local biodiversity and the resilience of ecosystems. This would include agreed eligibility criteria, management principles and performance reviews.

The expansion of community management of natural assets for recreation and nature conservation would provide benefits in terms of health and well-being, as well as engaging local communities with nature. People are more likely to become involved in addressing the nature emergency if they feel they have a stake in the resources in question and are trusted by government to develop solutions that meet local needs.

This policy would deliver the principles of collaborative governance, ecosystem enhancement and well-being and is consistent with the place-based approach of the Natural Resources Policy. It would empower communities to organise themselves to better

imagine and shape landscapes, engage in rewarding practices of land management and develop new enterprises. At the same time, it would reduce the perception of 'distance' between local communities and NRW. It would support a site and context-specific approach to managing government land assets, maximise the value generated by economically marginal land assets (such as difficult to access forestry areas) and contribute to regeneration.

Project Skyline⁷ has recently explored the feasibility of community land ownership at a far larger scale than envisioned in this policy recommendation, yet the findings of that project around questions of legal transfer, governance, business sustainability and environmental impacts remain consistent with this policy's intent. Alongside this, recent years have seen communities come forward with proposals to create gardens on community land, but getting permission is a long and difficult process. This new policy would make it quicker and easier for people to make a difference.

For these voluntary management projects to succeed they are likely to need some funding, as most will be too small to have a robust business model. One way to achieve this would be to provide the community with the resources that the relevant authority currently spends on the maintenance of the land in question. While this is likely to be a small amount (for services such as seasonal grass cutting, for example), it would go some way to providing the necessary funding for capital investment by communities to support their voluntary activities.

⁷Project Skyline: <https://skyline.wales/about>

KNOWLEDGE

The success of the policies discussed in this report require mechanisms through which the Welsh Government can improve public and specialist knowledge about the change it is trying to bring about. This will need a combination of updating old approaches and developing new ones.

The policy instruments below reflect where the Welsh Government has the greatest opportunities to convey change. In doing so, it will be vital that the new language of Wales's bespoke legislative frameworks is fully understood and embraced.



The Welsh Government has a responsibility to equip everyone with an understanding of the importance of ecosystems and how nature is the foundation of national well-being. As the Government embarks on its agenda to deliver transformational change to its educational system there is a golden opportunity to ensure the next generation has a firm grounding in the importance of the ecosystem approach and nature recovery, as well as Wales's unique legislative approach to environmental management through the Well-being of Future Generations and Environment Acts.

REQUIRE ALL PUBLIC OFFICIALS TO UNDERGO TRAINING IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND WELL-BEING

As well as cultivating the specialist knowledge of land managers and the generalist knowledge of the public at large, more work is required to expand and improve technical understanding within the Welsh civil service. To that end, we recommend developing compulsory professional development training for all staff within Welsh public bodies. This would mirror requirements introduced following the 2010 Equality Act. The Government should provide statutory advice on the procurement of such training, specifying the learning outcomes required.

Under this policy all officials would receive this training as part of their orientation, with existing officials expected to remain up to date with the latest developments through their ongoing professional development processes.

RECOMMENDED POLICY INSTRUMENTS

EMBED THE ECOSYSTEM APPROACH AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE RECOVERY AND WELL-BEING INTO WELSH EDUCATION

While many land managers may be at the forefront of tackling biodiversity loss and climate change it is not a battle they can win alone. The scale of the emergency we face will require action from everyone in Wales. The global climate strikes have already demonstrated the passion of young people to help tackle climate change and biodiversity loss. But we need to build on this passion by enabling them to start developing the solutions of tomorrow.

WALES'S NATURE CRISIS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN IMMEDIATE EMERGENCY RESPONSE



**60%
DECLINE**

GLOBALLY, SPECIES POPULATIONS
HAVE DECLINED BY 60%
SINCE 1970

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ANOTHER
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DRIVERS OF BIODIVERSITY LOSS



AGRICULTURAL MANAGEMENT



CLIMATE CHANGE



HYDROLOGICAL CHANGE



URBANISATION



INVASIVE NON-NATIVE SPECIES,
PESTS AND PATHOGENS



POLLUTION



WOODLAND MANAGEMENT

IN 2019, THE WELSH GOVERNMENT DECLARED A
CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCY. WWF HAS
OUTLINED 10 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS THAT CAN
BE DELIVERED RIGHT NOW AS PART OF THE WELSH
GOVERNMENT'S EMERGENCY RESPONSE.



AMBITION

Commit to allocating
5% of annual spend
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End incidents of avoidable
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Introduce a public
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Use the Environment Act's
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