

# Conservation commitments should focus on the best places to protect rare species, new study suggests

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Under existing commitments, wheat fields in the Howardian Hills are considered to be delivering for nature. Credit: Charles Cunningham

The British Prime Minister has pledged to protect 30% of land to support the recovery of nature, but a new study finds that much of the new land that has been allocated to meet this aspiration is not in the highest priority areas for biodiversity conservation.

Currently, only 9% of Britain's land area has a legal status that specifically mandates biodiversity protection.

The UK 30by30 commitment includes land that is currently designated as 'protected landscapes' in England, such as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but these areas were not originally chosen nor managed for biodiversity.

New research by the University of York and Natural England finds that 58% of British 'protected landscapes' lie outside the highest 30% priority land for species conservation.

The study comes in response to the UK Government's pledge to protect 30% of land to support the recovery of nature by 2030, made last September.

The authors of the report say the 30by30 commitment is a positive step for UK conservation, but requires better planning and implementation if it is to deliver its intended goals.

They argue that designating areas with high landscape value does not offer efficient protection of high priority species (such as tree sparrows and white-letter hairstreak butterflies) and habitats. This is because many attractive landscapes are not in the right places to enhance the country's existing protected area network.

The team identified potential areas for nature recovery, which they say could improve species representation outcomes by 68%, compared to only 38% using the pledged landscapes

The study found the most important areas to prioritize, in a way that is likely to benefit the most species, are largely concentrated in southern and eastern England. Northern and upland areas of Britain have

disproportionately larger areas protected for biodiversity, so the greatest gains in species representation can potentially be achieved by increased levels of protection and habitat restoration in southern and lowland areas.

Charles Cunningham, a Ph.D. researcher from the University of York's Leverhulme Centre for Anthropocene Biodiversity who is first author of the study, says that "increasingly, ambitious conservation pledges that focus on large areas may draw attention away from where threatened species are actually located."

"Our findings show that including all of these landscapes is an inefficient way to expand the existing conservation network, and a mixture of landscapes inside and outside of protected landscapes would result in much better [species](#) protection."

"In our paper, we demonstrate the importance of carefully and systematically considering where new conservation areas should be located to ensure they include the most important

Dr. Humphrey Crick, Principal Specialist in Conservation Ecology at Natural England, said, "The research shows how we can most effectively use our [landscape](#) designations, like National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, to help meet the Prime Minister's goal of protecting 30% of our land for nature by 2030. This is a great example of how, by working together with research councils, like the Natural Environment Research Council, to support Ph.D. students, we can develop the science that will be the backbone of our evidence base to underpin our work in [conservation](#)."

Provided by University of York

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