

Researchers say nature recovery must be integrated across all sectors to bend the curve of biodiversity loss

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Montagu's harrier, a rare bird of prey, hunting in an agricultural landscape in the North of the Netherlands. Credit: Hens Runhaar

The alarming rates of biodiversity loss worldwide have made clear that the classical way of governing biodiversity recovery based on protected areas and programs for the protection of endangered species is not

enough. To tackle this, almost 200 countries committed to the active 'mainstreaming' or integration of biodiversity targets into policies and plans across relevant sectors.

However, research led by Utrecht University and UFZ Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research suggests that this has until now been largely ineffective due to non-binding commitments, vaguely formulated targets, "add-on" biodiversity initiatives, and too few resources. "Top down regulation is also needed," say the authors.

The study is [published](#) in the journal *Earth System Governance*.

"Biodiversity mainstreaming" refers to the process of integrating biodiversity considerations into various sectors, policies, and plans. It aims to ensure that [biodiversity conservation](#) and [sustainable use](#) are incorporated into decision-making across different sectors such as agriculture, forestry, [urban planning](#), and infrastructure development. The goal is to make biodiversity a central consideration rather than treating it as a separate or peripheral issue.

Almost 200 countries have ratified the UN Convention on Global Diversity (CBD) and committed to "bending the curve of biodiversity loss" since it was first drafted in 1992. Biodiversity mainstreaming is an increasingly key strategy, with the CBD's Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, ratified in 2022, promoted as a "Paris Agreement for Nature."

Although mainstreaming biodiversity targets into sectoral policies is considered essential to address the direct and indirect drivers of biodiversity loss, such as [land use change](#), resource exploitation, pollution, and consumption patterns, the study, which analyzed 43 studies on the topic, shows that current efforts are ineffective.

"Biodiversity targets are often vague, initiatives are "add-on" rather than integrated, and resources allocated to biodiversity recovery are insufficient," explains lead author Hens Runhaar, Professor of Sustainable Food System Governance at Utrecht University's Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development.

For example, biodiversity initiatives often exist in isolation from policies that directly regulate drivers of biodiversity loss such as agricultural intensification or spatial planning.

Conflicting targets between sectors and unclear responsibilities also hamper effective mainstreaming. It is often felt that efforts to conserve or restore biodiversity imply a loss of productivity in sectors like agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

However, there are more and more indications to the contrary. Increasing plant biodiversity in grasslands can help [dairy farmers](#) become more resilient against droughts, which occur more often due to [climate change](#).

"This discourse in combination with a predominantly voluntary approach has also contributed to the ineffectiveness of mainstreaming efforts," says Runhaar.

On the positive side, note the authors, biodiversity loss is increasingly considered a risk among financial institutions. In their 2023 report, the European Central Bank calculated that 75% of bank loans in the Euro Zone are highly dependent on at least one ecosystem service which are at risk due to biodiversity loss.

"This is ramping up financial interest in halting biodiversity loss," says co-author Yves Zinngrebe, researcher at UFZ Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research in Germany.

A combination of regulatory measures ("sticks") and incentives ("carrots") may be more effective than voluntary approaches alone, say the authors. Legal requirements for biodiversity action, along with showcasing the benefits of biodiversity to different sectors, could encourage greater commitment to mainstreaming.

"For example, the increased popularity of 'urban Nature Based Solutions' that simultaneously contribute to biodiversity, climate change adaptation, [social cohesion](#), and healthy urban living, suggests win-wins are possible" says Runhaar, "but this way of thinking is not widely accepted yet".

More information: Hens Runhaar et al, Mainstreaming biodiversity targets into sectoral policies and plans: A review from a Biodiversity Policy Integration perspective, *Earth System Governance* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.esg.2024.100209](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2024.100209)

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