Response to Scottish Government Consultation on 'Tackling the Nature Emergency - Strategic Framework for Biodiversity'.

December 2023

Established by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003, the Commissioner is responsible for promoting and safeguarding the rights of all children and young people in Scotland, giving particular attention to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Commissioner has powers to review law, policy and practice and to take action to promote and protect rights. The Commissioner is fully independent of the Scottish Government.

Question 2a: Have we captured the key actions needed to deliver the objective: accelerate restoration and regeneration?

- **Yes**

Please explain the reasons for your response:

Children and young people in Scotland have been voicing their concerns on environmental matters for a long time – they are clear that these issues need to be addressed urgently.

In the preparation of our response to the proposed Biodiversity Strategy we consulted with a group of our Young Advisors, they were overwhelmingly in support of this policy development. It is clear to children and young people that challenges facing biodiversity loss are as important as the challenge of combatting climate change. Children and young people care a lot about Scotland's nature. Whether this is protecting declining species from extinction, stopping pollution in our seas and rivers or protecting nature within towns and cities.

One Young Advisor told us;

"I live in a rural area surrounded by agriculture, and I see that the wildlife is not getting what it needs. I also see the impact of the non-native birds released for shooting, it is destroying the local wildlife." (CYPCS Young Advisor)

The Biodiversity Strategy outlines important objectives to work towards large scale ecosystem restoration, we understand that this can lead to a reduction of cardon emissions. The plan outlines targets which aim to enhance air quality and water quality, halt biodiversity loss, address the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss, create nature networks and protect vulnerable species and habitats. These are all considered to be important factors by the young people we consulted. They are also factors which directly engage rights under the UNCRC (outlined elsewhere in our response).

Our Young Advisors shared a range of experiences and knowledge relevant to the Biodiversity Strategy. Those who lived in rural areas were concerned about the effects that pheasant shooting has on the environment and the loss of species like the red squirrel. Those in urban areas were dismayed about the lack of green spaces, the fact they couldn't hear the birds sing or see bees in the gardens. They felt passionately about protecting nature but felt disempowered through a lack of available information and opportunities to connect with nature. Our Young Advisors were highly concerned about the evidence presented in the State of Nature report - Scottish wildlife has declined by 15% since 1994 and 1 in 9 native species are threatened with extinction.[1] They were clear that they wanted more done to tackle this.

We are encouraged that the Strategy includes the introduction of statutory targets as well as the proposed Natural Environment Bill, to support the delivery of Scottish Government's commitments to conserve 30% of land for nature by 2030.[2] Our Young Advisors highlighted the importance of setting targets. They spoke of the frustration they feel when the Government talk about things they should do but that they don't see a lot of that being implemented in practice. They felt it was important to put these matters into law so that it is not a choice. They were keen that people in power be held accountable. They told us about wanting to see the right types of trees in the right places, and incentives given to farmers to protect wildlife.

Setting targets is a way to measure progress towards the goal of halting biodiversity loss and restoring it.[3] It creates a level of accountability to the public, including children and young people. As supported by those in the environmental sector, these targets can serve as the turning point for threatened species and habitats.[4]

Together have also shared the views of children and young people on these issues, commenting that decision makers often do not take account of the impact of climate change and air pollution on children's rights.[5]

Question 2p: Have we captured the key actions needed to deliver the objective: take action on the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss?

- **Yes**

Please explain the reasons for your response:

The indirect drivers of biodiversity loss are of equal importance and should form a central part of the overall Strategy. They are directly relevant to the lives of children and young people. They focus on cultivating overall changes in culture and behaviour, including how children and young people learn about and engage with the environment around them.

[1] Scotland - State of Nature
[2] Layout 1 (scotlink.org)
[3] Legal targets for nature recovery can mark turning point for threatened species - Scotlink
[4] Legal targets for nature recovery can mark turning point for threatened species - Scotlink
[5] socrr23_final.pdf (togetherscotland.org.uk)

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) highlighted that people's disconnection to nature leads to a lack of value and importance being placed on it.[6] This is itself an indirect driver of biodiversity loss, it can lead to patterns of unsustainable production and consumption. Children and young people need to be taught, not just about nature, but what they can do to help it.

This was reflected in the most recent Concluding Observations on the UK by the UN Committee of the Rights of the Child who stressed that the UK needed to ensure education through 'active participation of schools' on climate change, to raise children's awareness. This should include; 'awareness-raising for children on relevant climate legislation and their right to a clean environment and the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health'.[7]

We must ensure that educational programmes increase children's understanding of environmental issues and strengthen their capacity to respond to environmental challenges.

Research has shown that many Scottish children and young people feel there are barriers to their involvement in contributing to a nature-rich future.[8] Although 76% of children and young people felt nature was important to them, the vast majority were not involved in any nature or conservation activities.[9] A lack of education and relevant opportunities have been highlighted as contributing to this. It has been shown that there is a relationship between the amount of time a young person spends outdoors and their attitudes towards enjoying and protecting the natural environment.[10]

The Scottish Government consultation document points out that;

'At the heart of this strategy is collaboration. No one can tackle the nature emergency alone, and we are committed to an inclusive approach that engages with and enlists communities'.

We want to make it clear that young people are a very important part of that. When they are provided with the right level of knowledge and opportunities to connect with nature - they can see things adults don't – suggest innovative approaches and give independent views. They have an important and active part to play in shaping the future they want to see.

As highlighted in the State of Nature report 'understanding the state of nature is a vital platform for change.' It is important that this is taught to children and young people, so they understand their environment alongside their rights.[11]

Children and young people clearly want to learn more about environmental issues, including biodiversity loss and what they can do to contribute to improving this.

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[6] Key pressures on biodiversity | NatureScot

[7] Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland :

[8] NatureScot Research Report 1295 - Youth Survey on NatureScot's Corporate Plan 2022-2026 | NatureScot

[9] Young Scot Corporate - Young People and Nature Text Only

[10] Young Scot Corporate - Young People and Nature Text Only

[11] Scotland - State of Nature

Our Young Advisors wanted young people to be involved in decisions that were made on these issues and highlighted that it's 'our future land'. They felt they needed more information to be able to do this;

"There was not enough education provided so I went out and researched it, I didn't get taught in school" (CYPCS Young Advisor).

They said that PSE could play a major role, teaching about social responsibility. They reflected that If you take higher level biology or geography then the subject will be covered but often this is not in a context applicable to Scotland, it might highlight species and habitat loss in other countries. In these subjects things are treated as facts to learn for exams and they comment that it is hard to share opinions on this in class. They want more education on what they can do in everyday life – 'teach us how we can help'.

There have been some good examples of projects which aim to educate and involve children and young people. Nature Scot have introduced projects like the Learning in Local Greenspace project[12] which was shown to nearly double the number of pupils who felt connected with nature. They have also introduced Scotland's Junior Rangers - Junior Rangers gives 11-18 year olds the opportunity to look after the countryside and environment.

Nature Scot also worked in collaboration with Young Scot to produce the Re-Route recommendations report 2018[13]. The group of volunteers from across Scotland aged 13-24, explored ways of increasing young people's engagement with Scotland's biodiversity. They found that proactively engaging young people in different topics enabled them to develop a deeper understanding of the key issues for Scotland's nature, and a better understanding of how they can safeguard it for the future. It can help young people develop new skills and confidence to look after nature and wildlife.[14]

The Scouts have highlighted the benefits of children and young people being in an outdoor environment and being encouraged to take part in nature-based activities. A large number of children and young people feel a lot of anxiety around their concerns for the environment and involving them in outdoor activities and practical work, including conservation work, can show steps they can take which can reduce their anxiety.[15]

Our Young Advisors told us that the options for involvement in such activities was not sufficient. Unless you lived in a rural area, looked for information yourself or had parents who encouraged you into this you were unlikely to get the information you needed or opportunities to connect with nature.

Question 3a: Do you have any comments on the Nature Networks Framework?

Please provide any comments:

[12] The Learning in Local Greenspace project | NatureScot
[13] YS_ReRoute_Recommendations_Online-1.pdf (squarespace.com)
[14] NatureScot and Youth Engagement | NatureScot
[15] Positive futures: outdoor youth work and mental health in young people (scouts.scot)

We see that the Nature Networks framework can have an important part to play in addressing the concerns that children and young people have about the access to green spaces in towns and cities in Scotland. It is important that space for nature is made in these areas, the vast majority of Scottish children and young people live in urban areas.[16] Studies have shown that children from deprived areas are disproportionately affected by air pollution and more likely to live near major roads.[17]

The Re-Route report[18] showed that young people in urban areas were less likely to believe their local area had nice natural spaces, were less likely to enjoy spending time outdoors and were more likely to spend less than one hour outside per week. It highlighted many potential barriers to engagement with nature such as transport and costs.

The Woodland Trust have recently highlighted the importance of tree equity in the UK, especially in urban areas.[19] The presence of trees can reduce air and noise pollution, but a great deal of work is needed to bring those living in urban areas onto an even footing.

Our Young Advisors reflected these thoughts to us;

"In Glasgow, where I live, the green spaces are not good enough. We keep telling you about the same things, the litter, the vape littering and the light pollution. It doesn't change." (CYPCS Young Advisor)

It was suggested that often green spaces were uncared for, even in schools;

"We had a nice green space in our school, but it is now a bin. No one has taken care of it." (CYPCS Young Advisor)

They felt that a lot of the green spaces in towns don't prioritise nature – they are sports fields with large areas of mown grass rather than spaces for wildlife and plants. They also told us;

"In towns loads of green spaces are gated off, please change this". (CYPCS Young Advisor)

This shows just how important this access is to young people and their need to be connected with nature. If young people have knowledge about their local nature they may be more likely to actively seek the benefits that it provides and take better care of it.[20]

The inclusion of Nature Networks is an important way in which biodiversity in cities and towns can be encouraged and restored.

Question 5n: Are there any additional actions or changes to existing actions which can be taken through the Delivery Plan to benefit child rights and wellbeing?

- **Yes**

[16] Mid-2020 Small Area Population Estimates, Report (nrscotland.gov.uk)
[17] socrr23_final.pdf (togetherscotland.org.uk)
[18] Re route report
[19] Is There Tree Equity Where You Live? - Woodland Trust
[20] Re route report

'Biological diversity (biodiversity) is necessary for healthy ecosystems, which in turn are necessary for the full enjoyment of human rights[21]'

It is clear that Scotland (along with the rest of the UK and indeed the world) faces an unprecedented nature-climate crisis. It is clear to us that biodiversity is a children's rights issue and as such a rights-based approach should be taken.

The climate crisis and the decline in biodiversity go hand in hand – we need to preserve nature to combat the climate crisis and provide clean air, water and food sources.

These issues directly engage the UNCRC rights including;

Article 6 - the right to life and development.

Article 12 - Governments must seek the views of children on matters affecting them and take them seriously.

Article 13 - Children have a right to seek and receive information.

Article 24 - the right to good quality health care and a clean environment.

Article 27 - the right to a decent standard of living, including food, housing, water.

Article 29 - Children should learn to respect the natural environment.

The UN Committee on Rights of the Child highlighted the importance of these issues in its most recent General Comment No. 26 (2023)[22] which focused on children's rights and the environment;

'The extent and magnitude of the triple planetary crisis, comprising the climate emergency, the collapse of biodiversity and pervasive pollution, is an urgent and systemic threat to children's rights globally'

The most recent Concluding Observations made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child with regard to the UK highlighted the need to;

'Ensure that national policies and programmes on addressing environmental protection, climate change and disaster risk management… are developed and implemented in accordance with the principles of the Convention and take into account children's needs and views[23].'

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[21] 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment' (2017) A_HRC_34_49_EN.docx (live.com)

[22] CRC/C/GC/26: General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change | OHCHR

[23] Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland :

There is a strong need to take a rights-based approach on the issue of biodiversity. The Special Rapporteur has commented that children are more at risk from environmental problems than adults but their views and interests are often left out of decisions.[24]

As discussed above, there is a need to ensure that education programmes increase children and young people's understanding of environmental issues, and that they have the information they need to respond to environmental issues. This includes ensuring that relevant materials are available in child friendly formats. We note that much of the information regarding this consultation, including the questions themselves, were not accessible to children and young people.

Proper assessments must be carried out on measures that are taken and policies that are created. Child rights impact assessments (CRIAs) should routinely be carried out. We note that a CRIA was 'partially' completed by the Scottish Government, in relation to this strategy, but that this was not made available to view.

Children and young people should be properly involved in decision making processes surrounding these issues. This should be meaningful, effective and not tokenistic. They must be actively involved in identifying solutions and policy and legislative changes to address the environmental emergency.

Meaningful participation of children and young people in matters surrounding environmental issues needs to be progressed. Children and young people are clear that it is their future environment and want to be properly involved in protecting it. They should be fully consulted in environmental decision making. They have clear ideas on how to protect their health, that of the planet, and ensure their right to a healthy environment.

Children and young people must also be properly protected from any negative reprisals from acting as human rights defenders, when taking part in demonstrations.

A child's right to a healthy environment goes beyond what is needed just for basic survival, their right to health and wellbeing should be to the highest attainable standard. There is an onus to go above and beyond. We can see clearly that children and young people's wellbeing improves when they are able to live, work and play in nature-rich environments.

Everyone depends on healthy ecosystems, children and young people require this for their development at key stages. It has been shown that interaction with microbial diversity is necessary for the development of healthy immune systems, the loss of this is linked to an increase in autoimmune diseases, allergic disorders and other inflammatory diseases[25].

Exposure to nature also has beneficial effects on mental health, but many children, especially in urban settings, have little or no contact with the natural environment.[26]

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[24] Children's rights and the environment | OHCHR

[25] 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment' (2017) A_HRC_34_49_EN.docx (live.com)

[26] Every one can benefit from using nature to support mental health - Inspiring Scotland

It is also relevant that many children and young people are experiencing higher levels of anxiety relating to environmental matters, they report to us that they feel disempowered and burnt out. They feel they have made their voices heard but those in power have not listened. Many of the provisions in the strategy have the potential to ease this as they can empower children and young people to feel like they can do something.