



Time for Action on Biodiversity Loss

Submission to the Citizens Assembly

Global Action Plan Ireland

September 2022

“Humanity is waging a war on nature. This is suicidal. Making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century. It must be the top, top priority of everyone, everywhere.”

- UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, December 2020

In May 2019, Ireland became the second country in the world to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency. In doing so, Dáil Éireann called for urgent action and tasked the Citizens’ Assembly with examining how the State can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss.

Global Action Plan notes that since then, there has been significant progress on the twin issues of climate change and biodiversity loss, with the Government delivering on a number of key measures announced in the Programme for Government agreed in June 2020. However, despite the declaration of an “emergency”, progress has been slow.

KEY POINTS

The dangerous and worsening decline of biodiversity has been well documented. In our submission, Global Action Plan will not seek to duplicate the very important submissions of other organisations that have documented the serious consequences of Ireland’s deteriorating environmental health, its impact on humanity and on all other life.

Rather, Global Action Plan has chosen to use the invitation issued by the Citizens Assembly to highlight the steps that can be taken to empower people and communities all over Ireland to take charge of their future, and to break the cycle of environmental destruction, climate chaos and human development inequity. In this submission, we list a series of biodiversity smart actions for people to take in their communities, at work or in their homes.

In addition, we argue that there is an urgent need to move beyond harm reduction (which is based on a view that humanity will *necessarily* do damage to the natural world), and move towards a model of development that is *nature positive*: a view of the role of humanity as contributing to nature’s diversity, wherein all human activity is focused on bringing about an equitable, carbon-neutral, nature-positive world.

1. Biodiversity Loss and Ecology

Biodiversity loss is generally considered to be caused by five primary drivers: habitat loss, invasive species, overexploitation, pollution, and climate change.

It is important to state that these drivers are not autonomous, but that they are intrinsically related to the development of a globalised economy and society. In this global system, prosperity is measured in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) - an indicator exclusively focused on monetary benefits of economic activity, and blind to the degradation of the natural environment or the multidimensional nature of human welfare and wellbeing.

This economic model has put enormous pressure on our natural environment, and one of its consequences is the unprecedented decline in the level of diversity in the natural world that we are witnessing at present, at the levels of individual species and entire ecosystems.

The reduction of the variety of living beings that inhabit the planet is now one of humanity's great challenges - threatening humanity itself.

Loss of biodiversity undermines the ability of ecosystems to function effectively and efficiently, and reduces their capacity to support life. This is particularly important in a changing climate in which loss of biodiversity reduces nature's resilience to change.

Unlike many of the impacts of climate change - which, if we put real effort into addressing, can be mitigated - the loss of a species cannot be undone.

2. Biodiversity Loss and Human Society

Climate change and biodiversity loss pose an enormous challenge to all aspects of society.

Biodiversity loss affects economic systems and human society. As humans, we rely on various plants, animals, and other organisms for our food, building materials, medicines and cultural aspects.

The loss of biodiversity among these critical natural resources threatens global food security, exacerbates global climate change, impacts on our physical and mental health, contributes to violent conflict, and also impacts on our economy.

Biodiversity Loss and Climate Change

The link between biodiversity loss and climate change is two-fold: On the one hand, climate change is one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss, but destruction of ecosystems also undermines nature's ability to regulate greenhouse gas emissions and protect against extreme weather. The capacity of forests and oceans, for instance, to absorb CO₂ decreases if their ecosystems are damaged.

Biodiversity loss serves to accelerate global warming, and increases our vulnerability to its effects.

Biodiversity Loss and Food

A reduction in the diversity of our natural environment means that there will be fewer plants, animals and microorganisms that are critical in maintaining soil health, water quality and plant pollination. Furthermore, imbalances in ecosystems can lead to the emergence of pests that damage crops.

Biodiversity loss means that it is harder for farmers to grow the crops on which humanity relies for food.

Biodiversity Loss and Health

Climate change and biodiversity loss have significant implications for the health and future of children and young people.

The loss of habitats and species diversity means that wild animals are changing their geographical reach and moving ever closer to humans and livestock. The resulting increase in contact between wildlife and people increases the risk of infectious diseases to cross over to human populations.

In addition, decreased biodiversity poses a threat for modern medicine. With around half of all modern drugs developed or derived from natural products, the loss of plant species reduces the potential for new and emerging therapeutic options.

Biodiversity Loss and Mental Health

Through our work with young people, we have experienced what research has also indicated: that young people, whose health and future will be most heavily impacted by ecological crises, feel that they have little power to limit their impact. The scale and urgency of the crises, and their perceived lack of influence on their causes and consequences, have made young people more vulnerable to increased environmental anxiety.

A 2021 global survey of young people¹ and research commissioned by the GAP International network² showed that significant proportions of

¹ "Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change", The Lancet, December 2021

² "United in Compassion: Bringing young people together to create a better world", Global Action Plan UK, 2020

respondents felt worried, anxious, angry, helpless and guilty about climate change and biodiversity loss, and they expressed that these feelings negatively affected their daily life and functioning.

But other groups in society are also keenly aware of the contribution nature makes to our quality of life. Many of us depend on nature for inspiration, learning, physical exercise or relaxation. The reduction of the richness of our natural environment will negatively impact our mental wellbeing.

Biodiversity Loss and Conflict

Conflict can both be the cause and consequence of biodiversity loss.

Violent conflict is known to accelerate a decline in biodiversity. Warfare has led to direct environmental damage, and violence or insecurity have often led to an escalation of illegal killing of wildlife, or a suspension of environmental protection measures. Inversely, degradation of ecosystems can also contribute to violent conflict, as it impacts negatively on livelihoods and incomes, gives rise to forced migration, or can cause or exacerbate political tensions.

Biodiversity Loss and Business

The biodiversity crisis is also a business crisis.

If natural systems collapse, so will the world's economic and financial systems. While many have argued that it is time to place a value on the benefits we derive from the natural environment, others have made the case that even from a narrow economic perspective, the cost of the damage being done to our ecosystems is going to impact economic growth: Our global economic and financial systems rely on our natural environment.

3. Action: the Antidote to Anxiety

Global Action Plan is part of an international network of organisations who believe that we need a radical change to human consumption patterns across the globe to avoid irreversible destruction of our planet.

To effectively address biodiversity loss, we need not only address the direct drivers of ecological degradation (habitat loss, invasive species, overexploitation, pollution, and climate change) but the *root causes* of those drivers.

We believe that Western consumption, and the economic policies and practices that have encouraged it, is at the root of the processes that result in biodiversity loss.

Consequently, we work to influence unsustainable consumption and lifestyle choices, seeking to empower people to make lasting changes in their behaviour and value systems.

As an organisation specialising in education and behaviour change, we focus on helping people access the *knowledge, opportunity and motivation* to change.

Our role as an organisation is to assist people, as members of their communities, to begin the journey towards more sustainable lifestyles.

Our experience reflects research findings that, if new habits and behaviour are to be durable, people need to be supported by others in their community. We therefore work with people in their *communities of place* (eg. towns, villages), *communities of interest* (eg. places of work, clubs), *communities of circumstance* (eg. tenants, people with disabilities) and *communities of practice* (eg. membership organisations, work teams).

4. Individual and community action on biodiversity

As an organisation focused on individual behaviour change, we support people in making changes in their everyday lives, in the pursuit of more sustainable lifestyles. We do so, based on our experience in supporting systemic change processes through inspirational and effective action at individual and community level.

To address the biodiversity crisis, we must promote a new relationship between humankind and nature, built on a culture of environmental responsibility and care, rather than extraction and alienation.

As an organisation, Global Action Plan seeks to re-establish people's connections with nature. GAP envisions a global economy that does not harm nature but instead promotes nature-positive effects.

Currently, our economies and societies are often considered to operate independently of the environment in which they are deeply embedded, and the ecosystem services without which they would not exist. Nature and the environment continue to be, in popular culture, treated as externalities which are 'nice to have' but not essential. This attitude toward natural systems has resulted in the abuse and extraction of natural resources, and the third mass extinction of the present day.

The current state of the biodiversity crisis is dire, and the data which evidences it can result in individuals becoming overwhelmed and disenfranchised. The complexity of the economic, political and governance systems which have led to the extinction crisis are intangible for many, and cannot be addressed by most.

In the face of deeply entrenched global economic forces and lifestyle habits, individuals who are seeking to effect change need support, in a wide variety of ways.

A diverse array of civil society groups and organisations have achieved meaningful progress in relation to the protection of ecosystems, and their efforts are continuing to gain public support.

Regeneration, restoration or creation of ecosystems, an act which appears on the surface to be accessible and almost passive, offers an avenue for small but potentially impactful action for individuals and community groups which may otherwise lack the time, resources or political voice required to enact large-scale change. Taking action within the realistic and achievable capacity of the individual or community group generates agency, cultivates power, and ignites inspiration. It also contributes to the global-scale restoration and expansion of healthy ecosystems necessary for human survival.

It is for these reasons that Global Action Plan works at the grassroots level, assisting and supporting citizens in education, restoration and enhancement projects that promote biodiversity and environmental awareness.

Through our evidence-based programmes with community groups, schools and businesses we have learned that local communities play a vital role in biodiversity conservation.

The reversal of biodiversity loss requires a re-think of the way we have organised our society; it requires new approaches at all levels. To succeed, it is important that partnerships are built, and that people of many different backgrounds are involved in the discussions.

When governments, communities, environmental NGOs and others work together, their work has a greater long-term impact, and their work together also contributes to mutual trust.

To make that happen, local communities must be supported. Organisations such as Global Action Plan provide support and suggestions for action - as we do in this Submission - to people in their communities. But such actions need a framework of support, in the shape of policies, practices and funding. And for decision-makers to understand the background and experiences of community groups, they must make the tools, time and knowledge available to ensure groups are given a chance to participate meaningfully.

5. Actions that people can take to restore biodiversity

As argued above, individual actions are impactful in themselves, and are also an essential element in any strategy to bring about structural behavioural and policy change.

The government strategy in this regard could include, for instance, a concerted communications campaign, as recommended by the National Biodiversity

Impact Plan³; more grants for community groups, as exhibited by the Community Foundation for Ireland; and more support for community level activities, through the initiatives of town and county councils and local environmental and conservation groups, for example.

GAP Ireland recommends that the Citizens' Assembly, in the context of its remit to promote greater support for urgent action, highlight actions that people can take in their communities, now.

In addition, as the Citizens Assembly considers opportunities to improve the State's response to the challenge of biodiversity loss, we highlight the need for enhancing practical and strategic support for such local, biodiversity-smart actions.

Below are sections detailing examples of biodiversity actions which can be taken by communities, business and individuals. These and other actions should be highlighted and supported, and could be incorporated into legislation and public policy processes, in addition to public communications initiatives.

While most biodiversity and climate action plans to date are oriented around sectoral aims and ambitions, GAP places emphasis on the translation of individual action into systemic change, and on the potential for everyone to live regenerative lifestyles through the combined support of top-down and bottom-up initiatives.

Actions to take in our communities:

- Join a wildlife survey: There are many 'citizen science' initiatives that rely on volunteers to gather data on the state of our natural environment.
- Localise your economy: By buying local produce, and locally grown food, we can support our local economy and strengthen local accountability mechanisms. Community Supported Agriculture promotes partnerships between farmers and consumers, with greater concern for our natural environment.
- Community Gardens: Community gardens can bring biodiversity to abandoned or waste land, in addition to bringing a general sense of life and vibrancy to any area. Community gardens contribute to local food security, social cohesion, human well-being and skills development amongst local people.
- Campaign for space for biodiversity: Many housing estates, neighbourhoods and streets have a local Neighbourhood Watch or other

³ The National Biodiversity Impact Plan was authored and endorsed by members of the National Biodiversity Forum.

community group with a remit to bring people together. By advocating for a wildflower bed, community garden, orchard, nuttery or tiny forest, such groups can help both local wildlife and local communities benefit.

- Use local buildings for biodiversity: Local community groups have been instrumental in providing suitable habitat for species such as bats and swifts. By making adjustments to buildings and/or gardens, communities can support many species, such as the Barn Owl, Swift, House Martin, Pine Marten, a diversity of bat species, insect species and more⁴.
- Speak up for biodiversity in your local sports clubs: For example, members of GAA, rugby or hockey teams could create a wildflower strip around pitches; kayak or rowing clubs could host workshops on the importance of cleaning boats to prevent the spread of crayfish plague and invasive species, and golf clubs could dedicate a portion of land to rewilding. The opportunities are limited only by imagination!
- Green-space maintenance teams: Green and blue spaces can require a degree of stewardship and protection. A volunteer group which monitors and reports littering and anti-social behaviour may encourage more people to enjoy their local green and blue spaces. This volunteer team may also campaign to have a paid ranger or steward hired to protect and maintain the biodiversity of the local green/blue space.

Actions to take in businesses:

Awareness of the scale of the biodiversity crisis is growing, and we have seen a significant rise in the number of companies that are now beginning to consider biodiversity risk and climate change as systemic risks to their operations. Growing knowledge, aided by improved regulation, has resulted in ecological considerations now beginning to be included in financial and corporate decision making processes. Many businesses are no longer operating within the “business as usual” model.

In our work, we have been approached by many companies who are looking to engage their employees in the complex issues they are facing, and we are heartened by a number of trends in Ireland’s corporate sector:

- More and more companies are beginning to see financial capital as a subset of natural capital, rather than the other way round.
- Whereas ESG (Environmental Social and Governance) reporting initially focused heavily on reducing carbon emissions, more companies are now looking more closely at water, forests, landscapes and other nature-related aspects of their operations.
- The introduction of “double materiality” considerations, with companies looking at the environmental as well as financial impacts of their investments.

⁴ Sullivan, I. and Lusby, J. (2021) *Wildlife in Buildings: linking our built and natural heritage*. BirdWatch Ireland.

- The development of new tools - including the Inclusive Wealth Index (IWI) and the UN-supported System of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA) - to gauge the worth of nature and its many benefits to people.

What businesses can do to promote biodiversity:

- Analyse: Integrate biodiversity risk and impact reporting and analysis in all investment decisions.
- “Be Generous”: At a minimum, companies must develop strategies to adhere to a ‘Do No Harm’ principle to business decisions, and eliminate investment practices that are harmful to biodiversity. However, given the current state of the biodiversity crisis, best business practice focuses on “giving back,” rather than “doing no harm”⁵. Nature has long been considered to be a free, inexhaustible resource. Businesses must internalise environmental costs, and in gratitude for what they extract, return what they can, through a portfolio of measures designed to recover biodiversity.
- Clean-up: Organisations such as Global Action Plan facilitate employee engagement in clean-up activities, removing plastic waste and litter from our public spaces. Such activities have a direct effect on the environment, but are also an effective starting point for further employee engagement on issues of littering, environmental protection and biodiversity.
- Support Environmental Literacy: Companies can play an important role in raising awareness of the scale and significance of biodiversity loss, by supporting organisations and initiatives that aim to increase public education on the issue.
- Create a Pocket Forest: Companies can turn parts of their grounds into small havens for plants and insects, by planting small biodiverse forests, or designating areas for wildflowers.
- Invite biodiversity into the business: Biodiversity can be encouraged on the land surrounding a business, on green-roofs, car parking spaces, balconies, in courtyards and window boxes. Businesses can also explore what potential there is to accommodate biodiversity in buildings.
- Talk about it: Some Irish businesses have already gone to considerable lengths to accommodate wildlife through a variety of means. Sharing stories with other businesses, both successes and failures, can build momentum within the sector. Additionally, businesses can spread the word on social media to inspire others.
- Green the canteen: Businesses can work to ensure that catering sources locally-produced, seasonal food and vegan/vegetarian options to minimise impact on biodiversity.

⁵ Doughnut Economics Action Lab (2020) *Business meets the Doughnut, V1.0*. Accessed via YouTube.

- Protect biodiversity throughout value chains: Businesses can be considerate of biodiversity in every step of their production lines.
- Get involved in “Business for Biodiversity,” an initiative by the government of Ireland.

Actions to take *in the home:*

Many of the actions aimed at community groups and businesses can also be carried out by individuals and households - indeed, these actions are often championed by a passionate individual or two. There are countless small actions people can take in the settings of their own homes; small actions that, collectively, have an enormous impact⁶.

- Look after our pollinators: By increasing the diversity of species in our gardens and public spaces, we can provide food and shelter for many important pollinator species. Allowing a section of a garden to rewild; planting nectar-producing wildflowers, building bee boxes, installing ‘bug hotels’, or creating a little pond in the garden: all these simple measures greatly enhance the diversity of species. Pollinating species can be protected at the local level through promotion of gardening for biodiversity on private land, e.g. housing estates, individuals’ gardens, hotels, businesses etc.
- Ditch the lawn: Many people who are lucky enough to own a garden cultivate lawns with immaculately mown and weed-free grass. Such lawns are monocultures that contribute little to the natural environment, and are usually only possible through the use of pesticides and chemicals. Changing the lawn to a flowering lawn or a low-maintenance tapestry lawn will greatly enhance its value for many different species.
- Stop using pesticides: Help break the myth that gardens and public lands should be tidy. Help others to embrace nature in its slightly untidy beauty and help pass on a richer and more diverse landscape for future generations.
- Respect local habitats: Our parks and natural spaces are full of plants, animals and microorganisms that play an important role in preserving the local ecosystem. On our outdoor trips, we must all take care to protect local biodiversity by sticking to the walking paths or hiking trails - and by ensuring our children and pets do the same. Minimising disturbance to wildlife, and respecting their space, is also important when we wish to observe.
- Grow your own: Growing food needs biodiversity – from the insects that pollinate the crops to clean water and healthy soil. By buying seasonally and locally you can support this biodiversity, or you can make space for

⁶ A sample source for individual actions is *52 Tips for Biodiversity* (2011) published by the European Commission. More examples can be found on www.globalactionplan.ie

biodiversity through growing some of your own food.

- Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Recycle and Rot: These 6 “R’s,” prevent the unwarranted abuse of ecosystems by reducing the need to extract the Earth’s resources - thereby reducing pollution, energy demand and waste. Practising the 6 R’s contributes to a culture of environmental and resource consciousness.
- Cutting out water wastage: Biodiversity depends on the abundance of local fresh water. Taking five-minute showers and turning the water off while washing your hands, doing the dishes, or brushing your teeth, are easy ways to conserve water.⁷
- Shop consciously: Check the products you buy, and the companies you buy from. Look for labels such as FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) or Fair Trade, which indicate that the company behind the product has higher standards regarding conservation of the Earth’s resources and the human rights of people who inhabit the land many products are sourced from.
- Experience nature on your doorstep: Join those who are active outdoors, and enjoy nature. It’s easier than you might think, it’s cheap, and it’s good for your physical and mental health.
- Speak Up: Possibly the most important action anyone can take is to speak out, and try to get other people involved. Let people know what you are doing, or trying to do. Share your initiatives on social media, and ask your colleagues, friends and local representatives (councillors or TDs) what they are doing to promote biodiversity.
- Encourage biodiversity in buildings: Human constructions provide a variety of niche habitats and breeding sites for a significant diversity of Ireland’s wildlife. Advice on how to maximise and promote the built environment’s capacity to include nature can be found via a variety of online resources and conservation organisations.

6. Envisioning a biodiverse future

Numerous barriers to ecological recovery exist in the form of lack of will amongst politicians and private sector actors and a general lack of understanding among the wider public of the severity of the biodiversity crisis, based largely on cognitive biases and a fear of change. However, the potential for ecological recovery is as limitless as the passion amongst those of us who care.

At present, the ‘Overton window’⁸ of policy options being considered in Ireland is shifting. As public perception of nature and our role within it is changing, options

⁷ For further water saving tips, see www.globalactionplan.ie

⁸ The core concept behind the ‘Overton Window’ is that politicians are limited in what policy ideas they can support, if they do not want to appear too extreme. The Overton Window can shift and expand, changing the number - and the nature - of ideas politicians are likely to support.

for government to support individuals, communities and grassroots organisations are increasing - be that in a financial, advisory, supportive or educational capacity.

To restore biodiversity GAP provides the following recommendations:

1. Support individuals and communities to act on biodiversity loss, by creating legislation, funding avenues and communications platforms which make ecologically healthy and biodiverse landscapes a defining feature of our era.
2. Engage individuals and communities to understand and care about biodiversity loss through a communications plan of the same breadth and impact as the campaign to promote awareness and caution during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Explore the opportunities to strengthen public policy-making in the many policy areas that impact on our biodiversity. This could entail, for instance, mechanisms to enhance cross-governmental policy coherence, the development of a national indicator that incorporates a biodiversity index, and enhanced policy dialogue mechanisms to ensure that the voices and experiences of experts and local actors are taken into account.
4. Ensure adequate funding of national, regional and local biodiversity initiatives, including much-needed educational initiatives.
5. Explore the potential for 'De-growth' principles and policies to be applied to the Irish economy, to prevent further damage to Irish biodiversity, and to repair existing damages. One initiative in this regard would be to shift emphasis in economic policy away from GDP expansion as a goal in itself, prioritising instead goals of societal and ecological wellbeing.

It is essential that we curtail biodiversity loss globally; indeed, we have no other option. The benefits to humanity from nature recovery are infinite. In addition, actions taken to restore biodiversity are hugely beneficial for human health and well-being.

GAP imagines a world in which everyone has access to biodiverse green and blue spaces; a world in which nature is accommodated in every new development, and is restored to existing developments.

We encourage members of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss to consider how individual actions taken on behalf of nature can be supported and encouraged at a national scale.