

Climate change means we will have to radically rethink how we use our landscapes

British landscapes are likely to change profoundly in the coming decades as global temperatures rise. [Heiko Balzter](#) explains why the country needs a coherent landscape strategy for adapting to the new climatic conditions and reducing our climate footprint.

The heat waves that have hit the UK this year provide a stark reminder of the impact climate change is having on our planet. Concerns are now mounting about whether the Earth will remain habitable to humans as the climate heats up and species go extinct. If we are to navigate this crisis, politicians will need to respond decisively by introducing a range of new policy instruments that radically alter our approach to the environment.

Nowhere is this change likely to be more visible than in the case of our landscapes. Plant species that may have thrived in the UK in the past will no longer be able to survive as temperatures rise. The species we plant will therefore have to be tailored to the new climatic conditions. This is why the Forestry Commission recently [altered its tree planting plans](#) to use tree species that are more resilient to prolonged periods of drought and floods.

The way we use landscapes also has a major role in determining our climate footprint. Planting trees, experimenting with new ways of agroforestry, moving from peatland degradation to peatland restoration, and eating less meat and dairy all contribute to reducing our impact on the planet. Everything from the way we farm to our recreational activities will have to be adapted if we are to respond effectively to global warming. The result is likely to be the biggest and most rapid transformation in British landscapes since at least the Second World War.

The blueprint for this process is a [25 Year Environment Plan](#) published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2018. The plan sets out a bold range of ten goals, ranging from clean air, clean water, thriving wildlife and reduced harm from floods and droughts to the sustainable use of natural resources, enhanced environmental beauty, climate mitigation and adaptation, as well as waste reduction, managing exposure to chemicals and enhancing biosecurity. The devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are experimenting with a range of other policies as well.

These policy innovations will have important implications for other issues such as food security. The pressure on food supply chains brought on by the war in Ukraine, coupled with extreme weather destroying harvests around the world, shortages of lorry drivers, and Covid-19 restrictions, has underlined the need for better food security in terms of domestic food production. This would mean less reliance on imports and a balance in our use of overseas supply chains to prevent problems like deforestation.

The term 'food security' as used by the United Nations also includes social and economic access to a balanced diet, which is clearly an issue in the UK where more and more people rely on food banks. Access to nature is similarly linked to socio-economic status and the locations where people live. Over 90% of land in England [is private property](#) and is not accessible to people due to trespassing laws.

Given what we know now about the huge positive impact access to nature has on people's mental health, stress levels, and physiology, better access to green spaces and recreation outdoors should become the mantra of governmental land policies to take pressure off the National Health Service.

This is also true of efforts to reduce air pollution – an area in which the UK has been underperforming in recent years. Air pollution in cities from petrol and diesel cars and lorries, as well as from certain types of industries, causes respiratory illnesses and in some cases death. The World Health Organization estimates that the combined effects of ambient air pollution and household air pollution are associated with seven million premature deaths annually worldwide.

If the transformation of British landscapes is to be managed successfully, it is vital that all of these distinct factors are integrated into a coherent strategy. It will be necessary for multiple decision-makers and stakeholders as well as a cross-section of local communities to come together and agree on the way forward. The aim should be to create landscapes that alleviate global warming, restore habitats for wildlife, and ensure our planet remains habitable for animals and humans alike.

None of this is likely to be achieved easily, but the window for getting a handle on climate change and species loss is rapidly closing. Only an integrated approach to landscape management will be able to meet these challenges. And a prerequisite for this will be to fundamentally change the way we think about landscapes and how we use the land around us.

About the Author



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