Don't dilute the term Nature Positive

E.J. Milner-Gulland
Department of Biology, Oxford University, UK
ej.milner-gulland@zoo.ox.ac.uk

Nature Positive is an aspirational term that is increasingly being used by businesses, governments and NGOs, but there is a danger that its meaning is being diluted away from measurable overall net gain in biodiversity towards merely any action that benefits nature, argues E.J. Milner-Gulland.

The term "Nature Positive" is becoming common currency in discourses around biodiversity conservation, particularly at the intersection with actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Many businesses have expressed interest in becoming Nature Positive (at the latest count 153 have signed up at the business-focussed getnaturepositive.com site, including some major multinationals), and governments and multilateral organisations are increasingly using the term.

The term is appealing because it suggests an optimistic, intuitive and clear summary of where society needs to get to, and it can be used equally by business, government and civil society to describe their aspirations to protect and recover nature. However, once terms start gaining traction, particularly relatively general terms like Nature Positive, there is a risk of slippage and loss of meaning. It is already starting to feel like any actions that increase biodiversity anywhere, and by any amount, can be called Nature Positive. This trend has to be resisted.

The naturepositive.org site gives a clear definition of what they mean by the term: "We need to halt and reverse nature loss measured from a baseline of 2020, through increasing the health, abundance, diversity and resilience of species, populations and ecosystems so that by 2030 nature is visibly and measurably on the path of recovery."

Implicit in this definition is the "net" idea; that overall and on balance, there will be more nature after 2030 than there is in 2020. "Net" recognises that human activities will continue to impact negatively on nature, but that this needs to be appropriately compensated for. The definition aligns with the concept of "biodiversity net gain", with the shift from "biodiversity" to "nature" making it more inclusive and the shift from "net gain" to "positive" making it much less technical-sounding. A number of papers have advocated for this type of framing, including refs. 1 and 2.

However, the aspirational language in some more recent definitions can hide an erosion in the importance attached to measurable net gain. Examples include:

"Nature positive means enhancing the resilience of our planet and societies to halt and reverse nature loss." World Economic Forum

"A nature positive approach puts nature and biodiversity gain at the heart of decision-making and design." Council for Sustainable Business.

The idea of reversing nature loss and moving towards recovery (usually by 2030) is present in most such definitions, but the concrete specificity of the need for quantitatively-demonstrated overall net gain is much less prominent than in the naturepositive.org definition. For example in order to join "Get Nature Positive", a business has to sign the following statement: "*We agree with Get Nature Positive's goal to elevate nature within the business agenda, we will seek to continuously enhance our understanding of our nature-related business impacts and identify opportunities to take Nature Positive action and where possible share case studies and learnings of our journey towards nature positivity".*

The importance of insisting on Nature Positive entailing measurable overall net gain has been brought home strongly to me by our recently-published analysis of my home institution's impacts on biodiversity and greenhouse gas emissions[3].

Oxford University made a bold commitment in 2021 to achieve Net Zero for climate change and Net Gain for Biodiversity across all its operations by 2035 (https://sustainability.admin.ox.ac.uk/environmental-sustainability-strategy). One of Oxford's first actions was to calculate its environmental impact, and report transparently on an annual basis. The first of these reports produced sobering results, showing how far adrift the organisation is from achieving its goals[3]. This is not because Oxford is a particularly environmentally-damaging institution - in fact it is relatively sector-leading - but because the analysis included impacts down the supply chain and not just within its direct control.

On the biodiversity side, the analysis showed that Oxford must heavily invest in nature restoration in the areas where it is having impacts (which are largely overseas) if it is to reach Nature Positive by 2035. Only 33% of its impacts could be mitigated by implementing the direct actions set out in its new Environmental Sustainability Strategy (and only 4% via restoration of university-owned land). Even if the university mandates change in areas that its staff and students would find very hard to accept, such as no more sales of meat or dairy, no more construction, no more paper use, no more flights, and a zero-waste policy, 32% of impacts would still need to be offset elsewhere. I expect that any large, multi-faceted organisation carrying out this analysis would come up with similar conclusions.

No wonder there is the danger of slippage towards Nature Positive encompassing anything a business, government or household can do to support nature. Although we must welcome all actions to support nature recovery, "better than nothing" partial compensation for our impacts is not good enough. It allows us to continue to erode biodiversity while continuing largely with business as usual. Hence the need to underline the need for:

- a measured biodiversity baseline
- a timeframe
- a target (e.g. biodiversity 20% above baseline)
- a clear set of actions to be carried out, costed and sequenced
- an analysis of how these actions will add up to get us to net gain
- regular monitoring and disclosure of progress towards our goal

Without these things I do not believe that it is possible to make claims to being on the journey towards Nature Positive.

As a scientific community we're working on methods for tracing the supply chains of products so that impacts can be accounted for at source (e.g. ref 4), and for measuring their biodiversity impacts (e.g. ref 5). There are still major gaps in knowledge, but the Oxford analysis shows that it's already possible to have a rough understanding of the impacts that a given organisation is having on nature - positive and negative. A number of groups are working towards better targets and indicators for nature for different user groups, including the Biodiversity Indicators Partnership, Science-Based Targets Network and the Taskforce for Nature-Related Financial Disclosure. Within a few years, it will be feasible to expect organisations to be able to track their supply chains to source and to estimate the environmental impacts of their activities, as a first step towards reducing and compensating for these impacts (e.g. ref 6).

In the meantime, of course it is important that industry, governments and individuals commit to embarking on journeys towards Nature Positive. But unless those making these commitments are brutally honest with themselves about how long and challenging the journey will be, and how large the scale of change is that needs to be made, the temptation will be to focus on proximate and relatively visible easy wins (wild flower meadows, compostable packaging, vegetarian default food). These are all good "no regrets" policies with positive impact on nature and climate. But global nature recovery requires us all to look difficult issues in the face, and commit to making systemic change with optimism, realism, and adequate financial and institutional backing.

References

1. Bull, J., Milner-Gulland, E.J., Addison, P., Arlidge, W., Baker, J., Brooks, T.M., Burgass, M.J., Hinsley, A., Maron, M., Robinson, J.G., Sekhran, N., Sinclair, S.P., Stuart, S.N., zu Ermgassen, S., Watson, J.E.M. (2020) Net positive outcomes for nature. *Nature Ecology and Evolution* **4**, 4-7. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-019-1022-z

2. Maron, M., Simmonds, J.S., Watson, J.E.M. Sonter, L. J., Bennun, L., Griffiths, V. F., Quétier, F., von Hase, A., Edwards, S., Rainey, H., Bull, J.W., Savy, C., Victurine, R., Kiesecker, J., Puydarrieux, P., Strvens, T., Cozannet, N., Jones, J. P.G. (3030) Global no net loss of natural ecosystems. *Nat Ecol Evol* **4,** 46–49. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-019-1067-z

3. Bull, J.W., Taylor, I., Biggs, E., Grub, H., Yearley, T., Waters, H., Milner-Gulland, E.J. (2022a) A roadmap to biodiversity net gain for large organisations. *Nature.* https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-01034-1https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-01034-1

4. Green, J.M., Croft, S.A., Durán, A.P., Balmford, A.P., Burgess, N.D., Fick, S., Gardner, T.A., Godar, J., Suavet, C., Virah-Sawmy, M. Young, L.E., West, C.D. (2019) Linking global drivers of agricultural trade to on-the-ground impacts on biodiversity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *116*(46), 23202-23208. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1905618116

5. Kastner, T., Chaudhary, A., Gingrich, S., Marques, A., Persson, U.M., Bidoglio, G., Le Provost, G., Schwarzmüller, F., (2021) Global agricultural trade and land system sustainability: Implications for ecosystem carbon storage, biodiversity, and human nutrition. *One Earth*, *4*(10), 1425-1443. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.09.006

6. Verones, F., Hellweg, S., Antón, A., Azevedo, L.B., Chaudhary, A., Cosme, N., Cucurachi, S., de Baan, L., Dong, Y., Fantke, P., Golsteijn, L., et al. 2020. LC-IMPACT: A regionalized life cycle damage assessment method. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, *24*(6), pp.1201-1219. **https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.13018**

Competing Interests
The author declares no competing interests.