



**Written Submission to European Chapter of the Global Youth
Biodiversity Network on the European Youth Biodiversity Position
Contribution**

January 2021

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI)

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in Further and Higher Education Colleges across the island of Ireland. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal post-secondary education system in Ireland. USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries, and a member of Eurodoc, the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers.

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the European Chapter of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network on the European Youth Biodiversity Position Contribution.

We have grouped our responses into the following key areas:

- 1. *Top priorities for the conservation and sustainable use of nature in the next 10-30 years***
 - a. Pollination action plans
 - b. Promoting Diversity in Nature
 - c. Green Energy
 - d. Reforming farming
 - e. Urban greening
 - f. Restoring carbon sinks (and other systems that remove greenhouse gases)
 - g. Ocean protection
- 2. *Biggest obstacles/challenges to the vision of living in harmony with nature by 2050?***
 - a. Apathy and Cognitive Dissonance/Fostering a positive sense of nature in education.
 - b. Capacity to reverse the damage inflicted on Nature in time.
- 3. *Expectations of decision-makers regarding the post-2020 global biodiversity framework (and the related EU biodiversity strategy)***

Introduction

The following Document produced by the Union of Students in Ireland is the culmination of multiple contributions of students and young people across the student movement in Ireland. This document covers key areas put forward by the organisation and its members in relation to biodiversity in Europe for the readers consideration drawing from examples across Europe as well as on a local level.

1. Top priorities for the conservation and sustainable use of nature in the next 10-30 years

a. Pollination action plans:

According to the ICUN¹ fauna directly responsible in the pollination process for our vital flora are gravely under threat with the issue building year upon year. It is further noted that over three quarters of Europe's crops and wild vegetation are largely dependent on up to four fifths of invertebrates within the European Union for its survival. The economic implications for which range in the Billions. There are a range of societal and health concerns which lie in the balance should such an area lose its equilibrium as noted by the European Food safety Authority².

It is important now more than ever that the European community comes together on a local level as well as a business and political level to purpose a pollination plan across all sectors with youth involvement if we are to thrive in terms of biodiversity. An example to draw from is the all-Ireland National pollination plan which outlines strategies for farmland, business, community, schools³.

b. Promoting Diversity in Nature:

If nature is to thrive for the safeguarding of future generations, then it is imperative that the broad natural landscape be preserved and given the essential elements required to flourish. This goes for all aspects of nature ensuring a landscape that is diverse in its

¹ ICUN, [Pollinators in Europe](#) (2017, January)

² EFSA, [Bee health](#), January 2021.

³ National Biodiversity Data Center, [All-Ireland Pollinator Plan](#) (2021 - 2025)

design. According to the Environmental agency, approximately 60% of fauna in addition to a staggering 70% of plant life in Europe are in danger of significant decline. This must be addressed with radical plans and strategies before this crisis reaches its tipping point. The European Environmental agency outlines key areas which to focus on in promoting biodiversity, with human activities and its effect on the environment being clearly outlined⁴. The target to meet the majority these aims was set for 2020 which was noted at the time as a serious obstacle to overcome in the time given. The time period for this has passed and while it could be argued that the situation could be better in some regards, one only needs to look around themselves to see that this is still by in large, not good enough.

c. Green Energy:

Clean air is vital to promoting the growth of plant life and the flourishing of flora, fauna and of life on earth as we know it. It is imperative that European nations and beyond secure an efficient transition from the burning of finite greenhouse gasses. Such gases which would otherwise damage our air quality or seep into our soils and water systems due to the industry processes which are fuelled by these unsustainable practices. Carbon emissions and Greenhouse gases which are predicted to have devastating effects on the earth's fragile ozone layer are of significant concern. Attempts in the past to curb these in the form of carbon capture units, green seals of approval on products and carbon offsetting while partially successful, have mostly fallen victim to manipulations by industry. Prime examples include Green washing and the unequal distributions of Carbon Bonds to name a few. Thus, developing countries are being hindered in this process while main contributors to emissions such as the USA and China continue to thrive, expand and grow on such industry. Recent attempts to bring Europe and its global partners together in solidarity when tackling the climate crises hurting our biodiversity have been hit and miss to say the least. Previous agreements such as the Kyoto Agreement and the more recent Paris agreement have seen some successes but with not as much of a buy in from major players like the USA and China which is needed. With the current altering of the USA political landscape towards more sustainability driven policy that is friendlier to our biodiversity, now is the time to reinforce these commitments across Europe and with partners beyond. Strategies which give youths on a local level the power to take part while ensuring a just transition across industry are integral to this process. Recent movements inspired by youths such as the Fridays for Future protests have seen a Green wave of sorts across the political landscape, and it is important that we secure buy in from both local community all the way up through industry and government in securing such a just transition.

⁴ European Environmental Agency, [Biodiversity](#), May 2020

d. Reforming farming:

Reducing our water consumption, land usage, use of pesticides and the type of foods we farm. Farms should also include space for wildlife, with a special focus on creating corridors that allows wildlife to move from one area to another with minimal risk of road death. Strategies which promote more sustainable farming practice which is more ethical to animals and the ecosystem are required if the land is to flourish adequately. Stronger ties within local community are paramount here. A good example of sustainable farming practice which is run by the heart of the community is the aspects set out by high nature value farming (HNV).

In lieu of this, we need to rethink our relationship with wilderness which is linked very much to farmland and can be drastically affected by how humans cultivate. The spreading of pesticides It is more important to have widespread habitat that is interlinked than to have isolated pockets of untouched land.

e. Urban greening:

Society needs to stop viewing urban and rural as separate. Nature should be brought back into our cities, through use of low-impact materials, vertical gardens and green walls, accessible and open green spaces for peoples' use, designing buildings/housing estates to accommodate wildlife, by providing feeding and nesting areas nearby as well as removing wildlife hostile design.⁵ This will improve mental health, air quality, biodiversity preservation, reduce heat in cities and noise pollution. Generally, we need to restore people's connection to the land around them.

f. Restoring carbon sinks (and other systems that remove greenhouse gases):

Boglands, mangrove forests, rainforests, forests, sea grass and other natural systems are our natural ally against climate change. PASTURES on farms need to be managed in a way that stores carbon more effectively. We need to use nature as a tool in tandem with emissions reductions. Nature cannot be saved if we cannot find a way to stabilise the climate. Preserving nature in a strategic way will give us the time we need to make change ergo we should focus on restoring carbon sinking nature.

⁵ Architectural Digest, [How Architects Are Designing Buildings With Birds in Mind](#), February 2019.

g. Ocean protection:

The oceans have saved us for decades by taking carbon out of the atmosphere. Now they are full of carbon and becoming acidified. They are filled with plastics and emptied of life. Without rapid and drastic action nothing will change. Whales must be a central part of this conservation⁶. They are keystone animals in the system and their decreasing populations are causing severe harm.

- Ireland is the number one contributor to plastic waste in the EU, producing 300 million tonnes of plastic each year
- Each year over eight million tonnes of plastic material or waste ends up in our oceans
- Three main contributors to plastic waste in the ocean from Ireland products, industry, clothing
- More ethical products and practices required.
- Moving towards many products having Reduced waste. Products must be reusable, re-purposable, recyclable (or compostable), with that being the order of priority. This will reduce resource demand, use of materials, overall waste polluting our soil and water and less pressure on energy sources. These demands for materials and energy are currently contributing to nature's destruction.

2. Biggest obstacles/challenges to the vision of living in harmony with nature by 2050?

a. Apathy and Cognitive Dissonance/Fostering a positive sense of nature in education:

In some his best work on play in the outdoor such as ecophobia author David Sobel describes the risk of exposing youths to the wider more complicated issues of environmental crises too early in their lives. To focus on things out of their control such as the degradation of the coral reef, the decline of whale and fish populations and the burning of the Amazon rain forest to name a few can very well lead to feelings of despair and apathy towards the negative before a positive association can take hold. Certainly,

⁶ BBC, [How whales help cool the Earth](#), January 2021.

with previous failings of the last generation of activists to secure adequate buy in both society and politically, the inclination to turn a blind eye to the situation at hand and to numb oneself to recognising the immediate need to take action. The same can be said of media where peoples focus can often be drawn to the negative hopelessness of the situation. Therefore, a main challenge facing Europe in promoting biodiversity is trying to instil a sense of connection towards something worth saving such as nature in young people from a young age. This should be coupled with an emphasis on local action and small steps which can roll over into effective activism. Changing the attitude of hopelessness will be a big challenge considering past failures but there is hope yet⁷

b. Capacity to reverse the damage inflicted on Nature in time:

To para phrase Greta Thunberg, if your house was on fire you would want to put it out immediately. It has been well emphasised by the scientific community (citation) as well as numerous environmental groups (XR, SCC, FFF) that immediate radical action is required to tackle the issue of declining biodiversity in the natural world which in turn contributes to the overarching climate crises. The failure of governments and the wider society to recognise this to date may have already tipped the scales against us in tackling the issue in time. Poor and lacklustre government leadership in implementing steps that would have been sufficient 30 or 40 years ago but fail to address the escalation of the crisis. Notable Irish environmentalist and writer Paul Kings North⁸ notes in his works that it may be a matter of preparing for the impending catastrophe that is to come as a damage control strategy citation. We cannot simply rely on science alone to solve these issues. As we have seen with the past years Covid 19 pandemic, swift political action as well as a change in culture can be very challenging, but that it is also possible with strong perseverance and a clear understanding of the issue. Therefore, it is seen as a massive challenge to consider when changing people's attitudes is in fact possible.

- Other areas to consider in tackling this challenge include:
- Lack of thorough planning with ill-defined targets and lack of short/medium term goals:
- Lack of education in citizenship and key voting issues:
- Lack of connection to nature:
- Media's focus on climate change while ignoring the biodiversity crisis:
- Refusal to acknowledge that the biodiversity crisis has accelerated climate change and that it is one of the most important parts of solving the current crisis:

⁷ Sobel, D. (1996). [Beyond Econphobia, Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education](#). Great Barrington: Orion Society.

⁸ KingsNorth, P. (2017). [Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist](#). Minenapolis: Greywolf Press.

A clearly defined roadmap with realistic and efficient goals should be established with buy in from the global community that is comprehensible to the populace which does not hinder the growth of the less privileged.

3. Expectations of decision-makers regarding the post-2020 global biodiversity framework (and the related EU biodiversity strategy)

As noted throughout this document, there are many areas for which we can focus on and improve upon our biodiversity for the years to come. The trials and tribulations which we have gone through and which lie ahead will not be easy and the challenges are quite numerous. However, it is most important to note that there is much hope in work that is being done on a local and national level in not shying away from the turmoil and there is of course hope yet for our natural ecosystems. Below are the key areas which are expected of decision makers for consideration for promoting bio – Diversity in the European community and beyond.

- For the European Union to conduct a review of current strategies and plans for pollination distribution.
- Set out plans to support diverse landscapes which values all aspects of nature and not just those which are deemed profitable.
- Work with Government and businesses, industry and local community to ensure a just transition away from the use of green house gasses and fossil fuels to Green clean sustainable energy.
- Promote sustainable farm practices which are good for both the wild and cultivated environment and to provide incentives for farmers to do so.
- Ensure more Greenery in urban areas which can otherwise appear grey with poor conditions for Biodiversity.
- Ensure the protection, conservation, and rehabilitation of natural carbon sinks such as bog lands and to allow for exploited areas of value in this regard to heal.
- Take necessary steps to ban products and bad industry practice which can result in small plastics entering the ocean and damaging fragile ecosystems.
- Promote awareness around dark skies areas which otherwise affect plant and wildlife distributed in urban areas.
- Layout a realistic and efficient timeline for achieving bio diversity goals which incentivise buy in from the community.

Conclusion

USI is committed to working to support biodiversity in Ireland and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the European Youth Biodiversity Position Contribution.

The Union of Students in Ireland would be happy to engage in further discussions on the European Youth Biodiversity Position Contribution.

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References

1. ICUN, [Pollinators in Europe](#) (2017, January)
2. EFSA, [Bee health](#), January 2021.
3. National Biodiversity Data Center, [All-Ireland Pollinator Plan](#) (2021 - 2025)
4. European Environmental Agency, [Biodiversity](#), May 2020
5. Architectural Digest, [How Architects Are Designing Buildings With Birds in Mind](#), February 2019.
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