

NOVEMBER 2021

# Youth Position on EU Nature Restoration Law



This paper represents the position on the upcoming EU Nature Restoration Law of the youth NGOs Generation Climate Europe, Youth and Environment Europe, Biodiversity Action Europe, Global Youth Biodiversity Network Europe, Young Rewilders & Young Friends of the Earth Europe.

GENERATION CLIMATE EUROPE

---

# Introduction

After the failure to meet the objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2020 and every single Aichi Target, there is the need for a transformative intervention to halt biodiversity loss and degradation of ecosystems. As this degradation is so severe and wide-spread, **merely protecting what is left is no longer enough and timely, large-scale nature restoration is needed.** The EU new Nature Restoration Law must therefore be strong and lead to the urgent change needed.

According to the last European Environment Agency (EEA) State of Nature Report, 81% of protected habitats and 63% of species in the EU have poor or bad conservation status - an increase from the previous report.<sup>1</sup> More than 1600 European species are threatened with extinction and over half of Europe's endemic trees are at risk.<sup>2</sup> Pollinators are dramatically declining, with one out of ten bee and butterfly species on the verge of extinction in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

**Human life depends on ecosystems and a healthy environment.** Ecosystems represent the history of our planet which have evolved to provide the key conditions that are essential to sustained natural life, such as the provision of clean air, nutrient diverse soil, and drinking water.<sup>4</sup> As embraced by the Commission through the idea of "One Health" funding for **restorative action is an investment for all human health and well-being.**

The lack of opportunities to connect with nature not only restrains the numerous benefits associated with this kind of experience, but also prevents more people from realising how dependent they are on a healthy planet and creating change. **Ecosystem restoration is a unique opportunity to go beyond the human/nature dichotomy** that has guided policies, practices and lifestyles for too long and created the situation we find ourselves in.<sup>5</sup> Nature restoration should be thought of as a strategy to repair our relationship with the Earth.

---

# Why young people are important?

**Young people and future generations will be the ones to disproportionately suffer the consequences of current inaction and harmful activities.** Young people have the highest stake in the fight against environmental threats but can also be part of the solution if adequately empowered. This is why **we demand a strong, urgent and ambitious law that fully and genuinely includes youth and contributes to intergenerational equity.**

Youth involvement in nature restoration activities offer great possibilities for the development of knowledge and awareness of the value of nature and biodiversity within the rising generations. Therefore, young people need to be at the forefront of both policy-development and nature restoration projects to contribute to reducing the ecological rift separating humans to their natural environment. Restoration actions can show to first-time job applicants the importance of reconciling nature with livelihoods, and equip them with skills in sustainable business and spirit of entrepreneurship. **Including youth in restoration efforts means guaranteeing a solid long-term outreach of the upcoming Nature Restoration Law.**

As shown by different initiatives around the world,<sup>6</sup> **young people also have the knowledge and the know-how to restore ecosystems.** It is fundamental that efforts are taken to provide accessible fundings to youth initiatives and allow the new generation to take leadership roles, decide and manage their own projects.

The success of restoration initiatives, and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, as the World Economic Forum states: *"...should not only be measured by the numbers of trees and forests grown, but by how many young people have been able to build successful professions, organizations and livelihoods around ecosystem restoration".*<sup>7</sup>

To engage with EU youth and to further back up the following demands, during September and October 2021 **Generation Climate Europe ran a survey (GCE Restoration Survey)** to gather youth's views on the upcoming Restoration Law, receiving answers from 17 different European countries.

---

# Key Demands

In the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the European Commission committed to put forward a proposal for legally binding nature restoration targets by the end of 2021. This represents an important occasion for action. **The new Nature Restoration Law can be the opportunity for this decade to simultaneously address biodiversity, climate and human health while translating intergenerational equity into practice.**

**Legally binding targets are rightly necessary for effective implementation** as previous global and EU commitments to restore 15% of degraded ecosystems have largely missed their targets mainly due to the voluntary nature of such pledges, which ultimately resulted in continuous losses of biodiversity<sup>8</sup>. As the drafting of the Nature Restoration Law is currently under development, **we endorse the [NGOs' Position "Restoring EU's nature"](#).**

Most importantly, we emphasise the need to **seize the opportunity of this law for the protection of the fundamental rights of younger generations as well as which should also be reflected with an explicit reference to the important role of youth in future restorative action in the EU and beyond.** As young people we propose three crucial points that the Nature Restoration Law must take into account:

1. **Genuine and full stakeholders and youth engagement;**
2. **Policy consistency (coherence, additionality, linearity);**
3. **Funds and subsidies aligned with biodiversity and youth;**

## 1. GENUINE AND FULL STAKEHOLDER AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

**All relevant stakeholders, including youth, Indigenous peoples and local communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), finance organisations and business, under the principle of Corporate Social Responsibility, should be engaged** and join Member States and political actors in all stages of the implementation of the Nature Restoration Law. The wide range of stakeholders must be included in the process in order to ensure that restorative action meets necessary targets over the coming years. **Inclusion needs to be genuine and complete, from the beginning of the decision-making processes to the implementation of activities.**

GCE has recently advocated for a revision of societal indicators as part of Europe's recovery plan.<sup>9</sup> This also means that restoration initiatives need to be designed by, or in conjunction with, local populations rather than against them, as it has happened in the past. **This should be done using right-based approaches that recognise that the environmental integrity of land and local communities' rights are intrinsically connected**<sup>10</sup>. Restoration provides equal opportunities for career and livelihood development for many people.

---

**Local communities are to be involved in the restoration operations because they can create pertinent initiatives fitting their local environment and contexts.** Their voices need to be heard also because they are the first impacted by restoration projects; they can better evaluate the trade-offs of restoration projects on their lands, given their traditional knowledge and practices (this idea is also shared by 84% of the respondents to the GCE Restoration Survey). It has been shown that ecosystem restoration projects involving indigenous people and local communities are more successful.<sup>11</sup>

In parallel, NGOs have driven the restoration efforts for years and are still the main actors and organisers of biodiversity restoration initiatives. Their inclusion is essential to conduct the local operations needed and empower youth in the processes of restoring ecosystems and biodiversity. However, **national governments should also do their share of work through their own funds.** This law is important to oblige Member States to set in motion actions that go beyond the (over)reliance on NGO and volunteer work.

Last but not least, **youth are stakeholders in the present and in the future of our planet and its habitats, as well as competent actors in restoration.** We, the young people, must be empowered and allowed to act in developing and implementing sustainable solutions for the emerging environmental challenges. It is vital to deliver young people the knowledge, the resources and support to act. As already mentioned, successful examples of youth-led restoration activities can be found all around the world (see one example thereof in the case study box below). Implementation of similar efforts need to be upscaled with appropriate funding to ensure bold and important actions are taken to restore global ecosystems. More than 90% of the respondents to the GCE Restoration Survey believe that the Restoration Law should stimulate job opportunities for young people in nature conservation or restoration sectors.

### **Youth Restoration Case Study: Youth and River<sup>12</sup>**

The Youth and River Project was implemented by Youth and Environment Europe (YEE), funded by the European Union through the Youth in Action Programme. Its main objective was to equip young Europeans with practical tools and knowledge to enable them to contribute to the development and improvement of the state of European river systems. The driver of this project lies in the transfer of knowledge in local communities to provide skills to properly address existing environmental problems.

The biggest river of Latvia, the Gauja, saw a huge transformation after the government built hydro power stations on the upper part of the river. It significantly changed the water flow regime with frequent and sharp water flow fluctuation that caused biodiversity to decrease along with habitat destruction. Those dams were also built for agricultural purposes reducing water quality due to agricultural nutrients dumped into the river. Because the dams couldn't be removed, the youth aimed to increase water quality by increasing its oxygen level. They put boulders and stones to increase flow heterogeneity and increase the level of oxygen in the river. They also removed an invasive aquatic plant that was reducing oxygen levels. In a single week the 22 young Europeans successfully raised the oxygen level allowing biodiversity to increase.

---

## 2. POLICY CONSISTENCY

### 2.1 Coherence

**Legislation must reflect the interdependence within the environment and between its components.** Ecological restoration is a multi-faceted approach to environmental conservation that concerns and intertwines with other areas including; species protection, ecological connectivity, carbon storage, and ecological processes functioning. As such, it is an interdependent and collaborative process that requires explicit, concrete and aligned rules. Therefore, policy coherence is the premise for effective regulation and protection. Given the potential for carbon storage of certain restored ecosystems, **climate and restoration laws should work conjointly.** Such coherency should not be limited to the content, but should also consider pace and timing, so that the outcomes will not be jeopardized. Policy objectives and tools, even those not directly related to environmental protection, should not conflict with present and future environmental obligations - unless it is to upscale previous ambitions.

For example, given the direct interlink between nature and agriculture, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a major arena to reconcile efforts for ecological restoration as well as to ensure the sustainable and non-harmful use of land. Furthermore, in a highly fragmented environment such as the European Union, ecological connectivity should be a collateral goal in future environmental legislation and spatial planning, in order to maintain migration routes and avoid genetic isolation of species.

More broadly, **the Nature Restoration Law should be coherent with the EU position on the role of youth and citizens' participation,** to recognise their importance and include them as significant stakeholders. Acknowledging the significance of young people in restoring EU ecosystems needs to be translated with practical opportunities to empower them with effective participation in the policy design process.

### 2.2 Additionality

**The new Nature Restoration Law must bring new obligations and must be clearly additional to existing obligations, particularly under the Birds and Habitats Directives.** The baseline for the new obligations must be the full implementation and enforcement of pre-existing ones, which will require a sharp increase of political will and funding. This additionality is crucial for the new law to bring the necessary additional biodiversity benefits and to protect fundamental principles of the rule of law. The Habitats Directive already requires Member States to take the necessary action to reach favourable conservation status in protected habitats, including by taking restoration measures where necessary. The new law must therefore clearly go beyond these obligations to avoid weakening the existing legislation by letting Member States off the hook for their past failures or by delaying enforcement efforts. **A law that mainly serves as an implementation tool for obligations that have been around for almost 30 years would drastically fail to recognise the urgency of the biodiversity crisis, would waste this major opportunity the Nature Restoration Law brings and would make a mockery of any**

---

**stated concern for younger generations.** It would also make a mockery of the EU's strive to be a global leader on biodiversity.

### 2.3 Linearity

In addition, **the ambition level of the targets must be linear, meaning that restoration efforts must be distributed fairly over time, with the majority of the work being done in the years leading up to 2030 and not delayed to future decades.** As they are formulated, current deadlines of 2030/2040/2050 risks shifting the burden of dealing with the effects of the exacerbating climate and biodiversity crisis to younger generations. The longer we wait, the more costly, difficult and cumbersome restoration measures will become and the more severe will be the effects of the crises on our most fundamental freedoms.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, restoration measures must be adopted in a timely manner, fairly spreading out the burden of the crisis across generations. Concretely this means that the majority of restoration measures must be taken by 2030. For around 80% of surveyed young people, the new Restoration Law should include targets for 2025 to encourage urgent action and ensure deadlines are met and Member States should provide information on how their current commitments can be linked towards restoration.

## 3. FUNDING AND INVESTMENTS ALIGNED WITH POLICY PRIORITIES AND ECOSYSTEMS' NEEDS

Investing in nature restoration is a win-win for society and the environment. Given the potential of carbon capture of some restored ecosystems, **financing restoration is a cost-effective approach to tackle the biodiversity and the climate crises.** Ecological restoration can provide new job opportunities and income for young people and local communities, as well enhancing the health of all populations and fuelling recreation.

We welcome and acknowledge that the EU planned spending of €20 billion per year on nature will play a key role in achieving the EU restoration targets. However, **it is crucial that this funding genuinely contributes to the protection of biodiversity and is tracked appropriately.**

At the same time, this **funding should be made accessible and usable especially for youth** and other stakeholders. Accessible funding includes various sizes of grants, lowering the bureaucratic hurdles (especially for smaller grants) in applications, having grants with various time scales (from short to long term). Usable funding needs to give youth and other stakeholders agency and control of the grants, allowing them to finance previously unpaid labour, make resources available for disadvantaged groups to participate, and cover fixed costs and intangible resources (e.g. online tools for awareness raising).

Echoing the [position of the NGOs](#), the new Nature Restoration Law should prescribe an obligation to **facilitate the use of existing EU funds in the short term for restoration and possibly create a dedicated EU Restoration Fund.** More than 80% of the surveyed European youth agrees that the Restoration Law should create an EU obligation to co-fund

---

effective restoration (GCE Restoration Survey). Member States, from their side, must match their restoration plans with an investment plan from both the EU, national and private funding sources - lifting the economic burden from NGOs.

Once again endorsing the [NGOs' demands](#), this should be combined with the **phasing out of subsidies to sectors that cause ecosystem degradation, and taxation and pricing systems that reflect the true social and environmental costs** of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation. On the other hand, financial incentives should be made available to adopt practices supporting biodiversity.

Lastly, **all investments must be biodiversity-proof, and aligned with policy priorities and ecosystems' needs**. There is the need for a mechanism that prevents imbalanced distribution of funds across ecosystems, as it has happened between 2010 and 2020.<sup>14</sup> Without this combined approach, meaningful restoration can not be achieved and dedicated funds risk to be useless.

## Conclusion

Protecting what is left of nature is not enough anymore. **The new Nature Restoration Law is a golden opportunity to heal the unnatural split between people and ecosystems and create pathways to allow us to contribute to increasing biodiversity.** On top of that, it can help to **restore some intergenerational equity** and justice between the generations. To do so, it is crucial that the law involves and empowers young people. There is currently a big opportunity for positive change but **we cannot afford poorly-inclusive, under-funded and conflicting environmental legislation**. True impact can be achieved by conscious and radical changes to the ways humanity values nature and its biodiversity. We are surrounded everyday by evidence that the business-as-usual does not work anymore. The new law must not only be ambitious but transformative and systematic.



---

# Endnotes

- [1] European Environment Agency (2020), “State of nature in the EU: Results from reporting under the nature directives 2013-2018”.
- [2] European Parliament (2020), [Endangered species in Europe: facts and figures](#). Updated 09.06.21.
- [3] European Parliament (2019), [What’s behind the decline in bees and other pollinators?](#). Updated 09.06.21.
- [4] Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), “Ecosystems and Human Well Being: Synthesis.” Island Press, Washington DC.
- [5] Welden, E. A., Chausson, A., & Melanidis, M. S. (2021). “Leveraging Nature-based Solutions for transformation: Reconnecting people and nature. People and Nature”.
- [6] See Restoration Stewards by Youth in Landscape Initiative and Generation Restoration Youth Challenge by the World Economic Forum.
- [7] World Economic Forum (2021) [A new generation of young people is putting the planet first. Here's everything you need to know](#).
- [8] European Commission & European Environment Agency (2015) [Mid-term review of the EU biodiversity strategy to 2020](#).
- [9] Generation Climate Europe (2021), [Object: thriving without economic growth to better rebuild Europe’s economy post Covid-19 and to respect the Paris Agreement](#)
- [10] Global Landscapes Forum & Youth in Landscapes Initiative (2021), [One World, One Health. Recommendations to harness the power of landscapes](#).
- [11] Victoria Reyes-García et al (2018), The contributions of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to ecological restoration, Restoration Ecology.
- [12] More info can be found [here](#).
- [13] Cf. the German Constitutional Court decision of 24 March 2021 on the intertemporal nature of fundamental rights and the need to ‘spread the opportunities associated with freedom proportionately across generations’
- [14] Only 11% of all the funding was committed to marine ecosystems' restoration projects, when compared to 86% allocated to terrestrial restoration projects. Source: [Funding Ecosystem Restoration in Europe](#).