

# DEVELOPING STATEMENTS OF COMPLIANCE FOR UK PROTECTED AREAS AND 'OTHER EFFECTIVE AREA-BASED CONSERVATION MEASURES'

James A. Robinson<sup>1</sup>, David A. Stroud<sup>2</sup>, Kate Jennings<sup>1</sup>, Stephen Grady<sup>3</sup>, Chris Mahon<sup>4</sup>, Katherine Hawkins<sup>5</sup>, Pamela Abbott<sup>6</sup>, Ben McCarthy<sup>7</sup> and Mike W. Pienkowski<sup>8</sup>

Corresponding author: [james.robinson@rspb.org.uk](mailto:james.robinson@rspb.org.uk)

<sup>1</sup> The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK

<sup>2</sup> Spring Meadows, Taylors Green, Warmington, Peterborough PE8 6TG, UK

<sup>3</sup> Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Quay House, 2 East Station Road, Fletton Quays, Peterborough PE2 8YY, UK

<sup>4</sup> Holly House, 15 Church Street, Wangford, Beccles, Suffolk NR34 8RW, UK

<sup>5</sup> The Wildlife Trusts, The Kiln, Mather Road, Newark NG24 1WT, UK

<sup>6</sup> UNEP-WCMC, 219 Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0DL, UK

<sup>7</sup> The National Trust, Heelis, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2NA, UK

<sup>8</sup> UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum, 102 Broadway, Peterborough PE1 4DG, UK

## ABSTRACT

The Protected Areas Working Group of the IUCN National Committee for the UK assessed 23 types of designation of land and sea for biodiversity conservation against IUCN definitions of 'protected area' and 'other effective area-based conservation measures'. This assessment supersedes Statements of Compliance published in 2014, reassigns several categories on the basis of new information and understanding, and provides guidance to UK and devolved governments, and their agencies, on which types of sites should be incorporated within the Global Biodiversity Framework Target 3 total. There is a need for urgent investment in improving the management effectiveness of all sites considered to ensure they can all effectively contribute to the achievement of UK's 30x30 target.

**Key words:** Management effectiveness, OECM, site network

## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the IUCN National Committee for the United Kingdom (IUCN-NCUK) published an assessment – *Putting Nature on the Map* (PNOTM) – of potential types of protected areas in the United Kingdom (UK) against IUCN definitions and standards (Crofts & Phillips, 2013; Crofts et al., 2014).

This was a ground-breaking assessment of the many different types of areas historically established throughout the UK, at least in part, for the purposes of biodiversity conservation. However, in the nearly a decade since then, much has changed, not least internationally.

In December 2022, the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties (COP15) adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022). The GBF seeks to respond to the 2019 *Global Assessment Report of Biodiversity and Ecosystem*

*Services* issued by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019); the fifth edition of the *Global Biodiversity Outlook*; and many other scientific assessments which provide ample evidence that, despite ongoing efforts, biodiversity is deteriorating worldwide at rates unprecedented in human history.

Target 3 of the GBF, known colloquially as 30x30, calls for at least 30 per cent of the world's terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, to be in effective protection and management by 2030. This target will be achieved through the establishment of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs). Both these types of area-based conservation measures are well defined under the CBD, and both have extensive CBD and IUCN guidance (e.g. CBD, 2018; Dudley, 2008).

The UK and devolved governments have committed to implement Target 3 in the UK both on land and in



Ballachuan Hazelwood, Argyll – a ‘temperate rainforest’ – is a Scottish Wildlife Trust nature reserve, internationally important for very rich communities of epiphytic lichens, bryophytes and fungi but lacking any statutory protection © D.A. Stroud

the marine environment, for example in the Welsh Government’s Biodiversity Deep Dive [recommendations](#) (Welsh Government, 2022), the Westminster Government’s [Nature Recovery Green Paper](#) (DEFRA, 2022) and the Scottish Government’s draft Framework for 30x30 in Scotland (Nature Scot, 2023).

Since 2014, the UK has withdrawn from the European Union (EU), with the legal obligations for some protected areas established through the EU Birds and Habitats Directives now replaced with broadly corresponding requirements within new domestic legislation.

The period since PNOTM was published has also seen growing awareness of the importance of effective management of land for biodiversity, as well as formal recognition of the role, alongside formally protected areas, of OECMs, introduced as an element of ‘Aichi’ Target 11 of the CBD *Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020* (CBD, 2010). In November 2018, CBD Parties adopted at COP14 a definition of OECMs as well as guiding principles, common characteristics and criteria for identification (CBD, 2018), and additionally, the issues of governance and effective management have achieved even higher visibility in relation to protected areas and OECMs than was the case in 2014 (e.g. Olmeda et al., 2022). There has also been a critical review of the 2014 assessment (Starnes et al., 2021).

For all these national and international reasons, in 2021, the Protected Areas Working Group (PAWG) of the

IUCN-NCUK considered it timely to revisit the assessments made in PNOTM in the light of new knowledge and understanding, and in particular as an aid to governments in the UK in implementing the commitment to establish and effectively manage the protection of 30 per cent of land and 30 per cent of territorial marine areas by 2030 – a deadline that is now just six years away.

The assessment is aiming to establish whether site designation types that have historically been considered as protected areas across the UK should still be considered as such, based on accepted international definitions (CBD and IUCN). Therefore, some site designation types formerly recognised and reported as protected areas may now be more correctly considered as OECMs, either in their totality, or in part. This could be true at the site designation type level, or on a case-by-case basis of individual sites within a site designation type. Case by case assessment is necessary since, with its multiple designations and long history of protected areas, multiple designation types overlap. For example, a parcel of land in the Ouse Washes of eastern England may be in a nature reserve managed by one of three different conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs), be in a Site of Special Scientific Interest, Ramsar Site, Special Protection Area and Special Area of Conservation. Determining the levels of protection/management provided at any place thus needs detailed assessment of each case.

## METHODS

Objective questions were developed from formal protected area and OECM definitions, as well as to assess the effectiveness of management at the level of the site designation type. In the site designation type proforma (IUCN National Committee for the UK Protected Areas Working Group, 2023), the Statements of Compliance assessments are presented in three parts: relating to the definition, of protected areas, then that of OECMs as well as management effectiveness.

### Part 1. Protected area<sup>2</sup> definition

Protected areas are defined by IUCN (Dudley, 2008) as:

*“A clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.”*

#### Main elements of IUCN definition

Does this type of protected area have clearly defined geographical boundaries?

Is this type of site recognised, dedicated and managed to achieve the long-term conservation of nature?

Is the main management objective nature conservation?

Does the designation of the site prevent, or eliminate where necessary, any exploitation or management practice that will be harmful to their objectives of designation?

Is the long-term<sup>1</sup> nature conservation ensured through legal or other effective means?

**Based on the evidence available, does this type of site meet the IUCN's definition of a protected area?**

### Part 2. Other effective area-based conservation measures assessment

If the site designation type did not meet the definition of a protected area under Part 1, in Part 2, it was assessed in relation to CBD's 2018 OECM definition:

*“A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity [as defined by Article 2 of the Convention on Biological Diversity and in line with the provisions of the Convention], with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values.”*

#### IUCN screening tool tests

Is the designation type a protected area?

Does the site have the essential characteristics required to meet the OECM definition?

- It is geographically defined
- The site is governed and managed and such arrangements are expected to be ongoing and sustained over the long term (i.e. in perpetuity if the PA interpretation of 'long-term' is adopted)
- The site delivers effective in-situ conservation of biodiversity
- The site is free of environmentally-damaging activities and threats to biodiversity

Will the conservation outcome at the site endure over the long term?

What is the in-situ area-based conservation target (e.g. GBF Target 3) being met by this OECM?

**Based on the evidence available, does the site meet the IUCN's definition of an OECM?**

### Part 3. Management effectiveness assessment

All site types were then assessed for evidence of the effectiveness of their management in the delivery of positive biodiversity outcomes/conservation objectives in Part 3.

*“Management effectiveness evaluation is defined as the assessment of how well protected areas are being managed – primarily the extent to which they are protecting values and achieving goals and objectives.” (Hockings & Dudley, 2008).*

Is the management of this type of protected area/OECM documented?

What evidence is there that the measures to achieve the conservation objectives are being implemented?

Is monitoring in place to assess if measures are working?

Are the protected areas/OECMs moving towards or have they reached their conservation objectives?

**Based on the evidence available, is this site designation type/network of sites being managed effectively?**

In line with the requirements of the 1998 'Aarhus' [Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters](#), we considered it critical that information on the current status of protected areas and OECMs should be in the public domain, including at the very least useful and transparent summary data.

Accordingly, assessments were made following searches for relevant, publicly available data and information on the websites – or published elsewhere in other formats – of those organisations or statutory authorities responsible for the relevant site designation type. Searches were made during the period May to September 2023.

**Table 1.** Occurrence of different designation types across the UK (listed alphabetically).

Type of designation	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)	Yes	Yes		Yes
Butterfly Conservation's (BC) Nature Reserves	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Heritage Coasts	Yes			Yes
John Muir Trust (JMT) properties	Yes		Yes	
Local Nature Reserves (LNR)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Marine Protected Area (MPA) designations	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
National Nature Reserves (NNR)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
National Parks (including The Broads)	Yes		Yes	Yes
National Scenic Areas (NSAs)			Yes	
National Trust (NT) and National Trust for Scotland (NTS) properties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Plantlife Nature Reserves	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ramsar Sites	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Nature Reserves	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Wildlife Trusts' Nature Reserves	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sites and Areas of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI and ASSI)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Special Area of Conservation (SAC; part of the National Site Network)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Special Protection Areas (SPA; part of the National Site Network)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust's (WWT) sites	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Woodland Trust (WT) sites	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
UNESCO Biosphere Reserves	Yes		Yes	Yes
UNESCO Global Geoparks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
UNESCO World Heritage Sites (natural or mixed sites only)	Yes	Yes	Yes	

In many cases, although data, relevant to management for instance, were not available in detail at site scale, websites nonetheless provided clear statements of existing processes for the designation. Such general information was used to inform the assessments. Where we found no information to suggest any relevant activities were occurring or planned, we concluded that these processes were lacking. Where future activities were stated to be planned but yet were not yet occurring, we made our assessment on the *status quo* in late 2023 – given the potential for planned processes not to come to fruition.

Where there were significant differences between policy and practices between the four country governments across the UK and their respective statutory nature

conservation bodies, site types were assessed and reported on at a country rather than Great Britain (GB) or UK level. The different geographical occurrence of designation types across the UK is shown in Table 1.

These assessments consider those elements of the Target 3 definition that require sites to be “effectively conserved and managed”. It has not been possible, at this stage, to consider whether the individual site types are either “ecologically representative”, “well-connected” and/or are “equitably governed”. We note for connectivity, that whilst some site types have been selected on a network basis (for example Special Protection Areas), others – such as World Heritage Sites – are selected individually, making connectivity per se of lesser significance in the context of the individual site type.

**Table 2.** Summary findings for potential types of protected area in 2023 in respect to IUCN definitions and effectiveness of management. All assessments at UK scale.

Type of designation	Statement of compliance no.	Does the site type meet IUCN's definition of a Protected Area (PA)?	If not PA, does site type warrant case-by-case consideration against OECM criteria?	Is this network of sites being managed effectively?
Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)	9	No	Yes	Partly
Butterfly Conservation's (BC) Nature Reserves	17	No	Yes	Partly
Heritage Coasts	11	No	Yes	Unknown
John Muir Trust (JMT) properties	18	No	Yes	Partly
Local Nature Reserves (LNR)	7	No	Yes	Unknown
Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)	23	No	Partly	Partly
Marine Protected Area (MPA) designations <sup>3</sup>	5	Yes	n/a	Partly
National Nature Reserves (NNR)	6	No	Yes	Partly
National Parks (including The Broads)	8	No	Yes	Partly
National Scenic Areas (NSAs)	10	No	No	No
National Trust (NT) and National Trust for Scotland (NTS) properties	16	Partly	Yes	Partly
Plantlife Nature Reserves	19	No	Yes	Partly
Ramsar Sites	4	Yes	n/a	Partly
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Nature Reserves	15	No	Yes	Partly
The Wildlife Trusts' Nature Reserves	20	No	Yes	Partly
Sites and Areas of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI and ASSI)	1	Yes	n/a	Partly
Special Area of Conservation (SAC; part of the National Site Network)	3	Yes	n/a	Partly
Special Protection Areas (SPA; part of the National Site Network)	2	Yes	n/a	Partly
Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust's (WWT) sites	22	No	Yes	Partly
Woodland Trust (WT) sites	21	No	Yes	Partly
UNESCO Biosphere Reserves	12	No	Yes	Partly
UNESCO Global Geoparks	13	No	Yes	Unknown
UNESCO World Heritage Sites (natural or mixed sites only)	14	No	Yes	Partly

## RESULTS

A high-level summary of assessment findings is given in Table 2. The evidence identified that five types of site designation are considered to fully comply with IUCN's definition of a 'protected area': Sites/Areas of Special Scientific Interest; marine protected area designations; Ramsar Sites; Special Protection Areas; and Special Areas of Conservation.

Eighteen other designation types are not considered as 'protected areas' in their own right (although many will contain areas of land or sea that do meet that definition) (Table 2 and Supplementary Table 1).

Sixteen of these types of sites should be assessed on a site-by-site basis with respect to their potential status as OECMs (Supplementary Table 2).



Sycamore Gap, on Hadrian's Wall lies within Northumberland National Park, England © D.A. Stroud

For no site type, as a whole, was there sufficient evidence of effective management (Supplementary Table 3) although individual sites do demonstrate effective management. In most cases, management was, at best, either partly delivered and/or partly effective, whilst for three site types (Heritage Coasts, Local Nature Reserves and UNESCO Global Geoparks) management effectiveness was entirely unknown.

We found many data gaps, especially with respect to management effectiveness and condition of sites. These are highlighted in the detailed individual designation type assessments reported by us in IUCN National Committee for the UK Protected Areas Working Group (2023).

## DISCUSSION

### Changes since the previous assessment

Compared to the 2014 assessment, there have been some notable changes in the factors affecting the assessment of different designation types as protected areas as defined by IUCN. The most important have been: the advent of new publicly available data; progress (or lack of) in clarifying qualifying criteria since the last assessment; the option of identifying OECMs rather than protected areas as a method of classifying sites qualifying for the 30x30 target; and a more rigorous assessment against the criteria.

Of those designation types that qualified as protected areas in the last assessment, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (to be promoted generally in the vernacular in GB – although not Northern Ireland – as 'National Landscapes' from November 2023), National Nature Reserves, National Parks, most NGO land, UNESCO Biosphere and World Heritage Sites, no longer qualify as protected areas in their entirety, in the estimation of PAWG. The exceptions are those parts of these areas which are also covered by qualifying designations (e.g. Areas/Sites of Special Scientific Interest). However, elements of the remaining areas



The Paps of Jura (within Jura National Scenic Area, Scotland) seen from Islay, with a RSPB nature reserve, Site of Special Scientific Interest, Ramsar Site and Special Protection Area in the foreground indicating the complexity of designation types in the UK © D.A. Stroud

could be included in the 30 per cent target as OECMs but would need assessment on a case-by-case basis. The inclusion of all marine protected area designations as qualifying protected areas develops the proposal put forward in the 2014 assessment (Crofts et al., 2014).

### Standards for inclusion in UK's delivery of the 30x30 target

The findings have relevance to the UK's implementation of Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework, in particular the expressed intention by government to establish a network of protected areas and OECMs that, by 2030, will cover 30 per cent of the UK land area and 30 per cent of its marine area (the 30x30 target) – a deadline that is now only six years away. The assessment is offered as a contribution to the UK Government's obligation to identify and ensure the effective management of protected areas and OECMs across 30 per cent of land and seas in the UK.

The assessments, which supersede Statements of Compliance published in 2014 and recorded at the time on the World Database of Protected Areas, provide guidance to government and its agencies on which types of sites should be incorporated within those 30 per cent totals.

To meet the required standards for GBF Target 3, sites must meet the conditions of its definitions. These assessments address the elements of a) protection and b) effective management. We have not addressed the additional definitional elements of c) ecological representation, d) connectedness and e) equitable governance and we recommend that such assessments are undertaken.

PAWG recommends that the UK Government and the devolved administrations invest urgently in improving the management effectiveness of all sites considered in this assessment to ensure that they can all effectively



Eilean na Muice Dubh/Duich Moss, Islay, Scotland is a Ramsar Site designated for its international importance for Greenland White-fronted Geese *Anser albifrons flavirostris* as well as for its peatland habitats © D.A. Stroud

contribute to the 30x30 target, noting that to meet the required standards, sites must be both protected and demonstrate that they are being effectively and equitably managed. We understand that NGOs rely on charitable resources to manage their sites effectively. We consider that public money should be made available to support their efforts.

We believe that the target can be met with renewed efforts from government and non-government bodies to manage existing sites effectively whilst governments also implement the findings of reviews that show that existing networks of protected areas are not yet complete (e.g. Galbraith & Stroud, 2022; RSPB, 2020; Stroud, 2023; Stroud et al., 2016).

Other sites, such as those in private or state ownership, not considered in this review, which have primary objectives potentially compatible with delivering nature conservation outcomes at least equivalent to those of protected areas, could have the potential to be a component of the 30x30 target for the UK following case-by-case assessment of such sites against OECM criteria. However, in line with the international definition of the GBF Target 3, such sites clearly exclude multiple use areas as well as those where their primary objectives are not compatible with delivery of nature conservation outcomes equivalent to those provided by protected areas.

We note that the effectiveness of managing many protected areas and other designation types considered here is constrained, sometimes significantly, through the impact of both on-site and especially off-site factors outside the control of organisations responsible for the sites. We recommend conservation NGOs be funded to audit their reserves to identify those external influences negatively impacting sites. This will enable the identification of strategic actions and policies that would



The Garvellachs SSSI islands in Argyll, Scotland notified for both their geological and botanical importance © D.A. Stroud

help to enhance management effectiveness. PAWG will seek to report on these in our next assessment.

### Future assessments

PAWG intends to update annually these Statements of Compliance assessments, reflecting anticipated changes in policy and practice in relation to the designation types assessed, and we have invited comments on our assessments and the submission of data and evidence to inform subsequent revisions.

Limitation of resources means that this review has not yet been extended to UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, but initial work is planned in 2024 with some territories.

This assessment and its 2014 predecessor have considerably advanced the understanding of protected areas and OECMs in the UK. We strongly recommend such a process elsewhere, whether nationally or at other scales, not least to identify future strategic needs such as, for example, focused adaptive management and monitoring.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## SUPPLEMENTARY ONLINE MATERIAL

1. Supplementary Tables 1–3

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**James A. Robinson** is a conservationist with over 25 years of experience working in the UK and internationally. He Chairs PAWG and is Chief Operating Officer at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Europe's largest nature conservation charity. <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8510-5288>.

**David A. Stroud** is Emeritus Senior Advisor to the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) for whom he co-ordinated three reviews of the UK network of Species Protection Areas. He has long involvement with the Ramsar Convention, previously chairing their Scientific and Technical Review Panel, and is an independent member of PAWG. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2967-0046>.

**Kate Jennings** is Head of Site Conservation and Species Policy for the RSPB and has been engaged with UK protected areas in multiple capacities. She is a member of PAWG.

**Stephen Grady** is Senior Advisor to the UK JNCC in which role he is responsible for co-ordinating work on several protected area types. He was previously EU Policy Advisor. He chairs the IUCN National Committee for the UK and is a member of PAWG.

**Chris Mahon** is Chief Executive at the IUCN National Committee UK (<https://iucn-nc.uk/>) and a member of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas. He was a co-author of the IUCN NCUK Putting Nature on the Map [UK national handbook](#) and [report](#) published in 2014 and is a member of PAWG.

**Katherine Hawkins** is Nature Policy Manager for the Wildlife Trusts, a federation of 46 independent wildlife conservation charities covering the whole of the UK. She is a member of PAWG.

**Pamela Abbott**, an independent member of PAWG, is Director of Programmes at the UN Environment World Conservation Monitoring Centre overseeing WCMC's conservation projects. Prior to this as Natural England's Area Manager for Norfolk and Suffolk, she managed delivery of marine and terrestrial biodiversity conservation advice with responsibility for managing 15 NNRs and implementing the England Coast Path.

**Ben McCarthy** is Head of Nature Conservation and Restoration Ecology at the National Trust, before which he worked with Plantlife International and Natural England in a variety of roles. He is a member of PAWG.

**Mike W. Pienkowski** is Chair of the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum and was formerly Head of Ornithology at the UK Nature Conservancy Council and later first Director of its successor body the JNCC. He is a member of PAWG.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> IUCN define 'long-term' as "Protected areas should be managed in perpetuity and not as a short-term or temporary management strategy" (Dudley 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The assessment is aiming to establish whether site designation types that have historically been considered to be protected areas across the UK should still be considered as such, based on accepted international definitions (CBD and IUCN). Therefore, some site designation types formerly recognised and reported as protected areas may now be more correctly considered as OECMs, either in their totality, or in part. This could be true at the site designation type level, or on a case-by-case basis of individual sites within a site designation type.

<sup>3</sup> Including Marine Conservation Zones in England, Northern Ireland and Wales; Nature Conservation Marine Protected Areas in Scotland; and Highly Protected Marine Areas which can apply in all four countries.

<sup>4</sup> Marine Conservation Zones in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, Nature Conservation Marine Protected Areas in Scotland and Highly Protected Marine Areas in England.

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Many National Trust properties have significant biodiversity values, including through habitat restoration and management, such as the recreation of the medieval orchard set in hay meadows at Lynden New Bield, Northamptonshire, England © D.A. Stroud

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## RESUMEN

El Grupo de Trabajo de Áreas Protegidas del Comité Nacional de la UICN para el Reino Unido evaluó 23 tipos de designación de tierras y mares para la conservación de la biodiversidad en relación con las definiciones de la UICN de "área protegida" y "otras medidas eficaces de conservación basadas en áreas". Esta evaluación reemplaza las Declaraciones de Cumplimiento publicadas en 2014, reasignando varias categorías sobre la base de nueva información y comprensión, y proporciona orientación a los gobiernos del Reino Unido y descentralizados, y sus agencias, sobre qué tipos de sitios deben incorporarse dentro del total de la Meta 3 del Marco Global de Biodiversidad. Es necesario invertir urgentemente en la mejora de la eficacia de la gestión de todos los sitios considerados para garantizar que todos ellos puedan contribuir eficazmente a la consecución de la meta 30x30 del Reino Unido.

## RÉSUMÉ

Le groupe de travail sur les zones protégées du Comité national de l'UICN pour le Royaume-Uni a évalué 23 types de désignation de terres et de mers pour la conservation de la biodiversité par rapport aux définitions de l'UICN de "zone protégée" et "d'autres mesures de conservation efficaces basées sur les zones". Cette évaluation remplace les déclarations de conformité publiées en 2014, en réassignant plusieurs catégories sur la base de nouvelles informations et d'une meilleure compréhension, et fournit des orientations aux gouvernements britanniques et décentralisés, ainsi qu'à leurs agences, sur les types de sites qui devraient être incorporés dans le total de l'objectif 3 du cadre mondial pour la biodiversité. Il est urgent d'investir dans l'amélioration de l'efficacité de la gestion de tous les sites considérés afin qu'ils puissent tous contribuer efficacement à la réalisation de l'objectif 30x30 du Royaume-Uni.