

UK Biodiversity Indicators 2019

This document supports
A2 Taking action for nature: volunteer time spent in
conservation

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A2. Taking action for nature: volunteer time spent in conservation

Type: Response Indicator

Summary

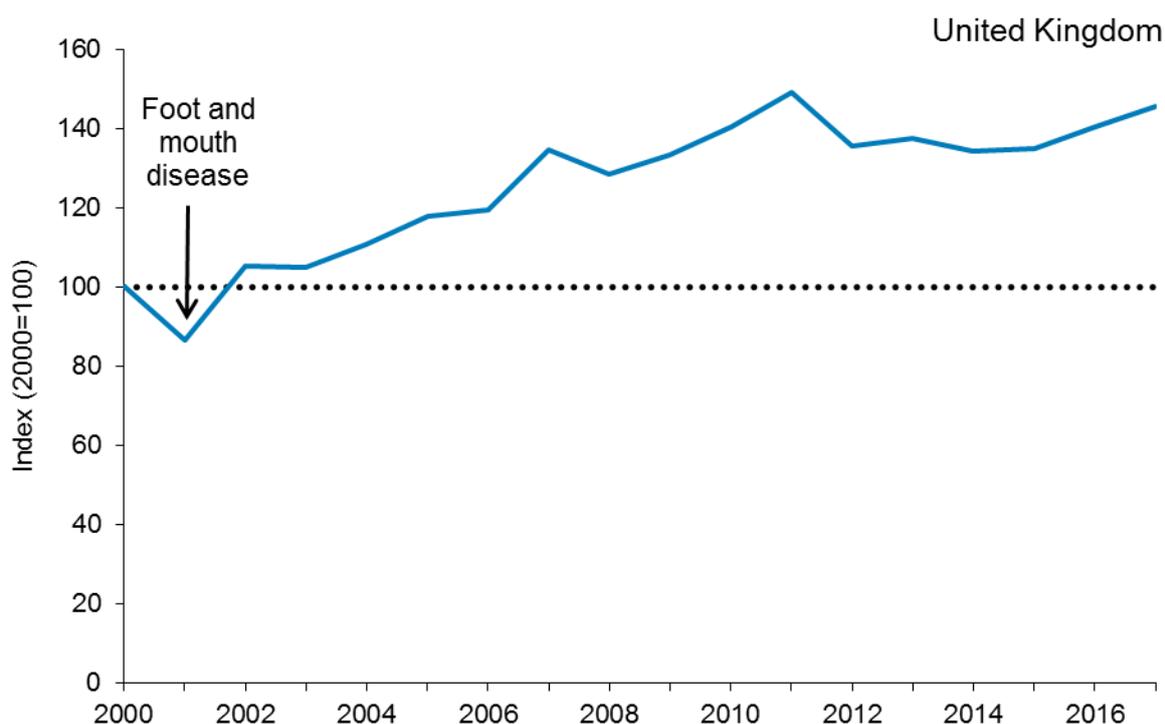
The amount of time people spend volunteering to assist with conservation in part reflects society's interest in and commitment to biodiversity.

Between 2000 and 2017, the amount of time volunteers contributed to conservation activities in the UK has increased by 46%. It also increased by 7% in the 5 years to 2017 and by 4% in the most recent year available.

Indicator Description

This indicator presents an index of the number of hours worked by volunteers for 14 UK conservation charities and public bodies (including National Parks England which represents all National Parks in England – see background section for a full list). Conservation volunteering includes any voluntary activity for an organisation or community undertaken to: further the understanding, protection or enjoyment of the natural environment, including wildlife recording and surveying; practical countryside management; providing education, training and guided walks; and administration or other office support.

Figure A2i. Index of volunteer time spent on conservation activities with selected environmental organisations in the UK, 2000 to 2017.



Notes:

1. The index is calculated using a non-weighted aggregation across organisations. It is therefore strongly dependent on the trends reported by the organisations recording large amounts for total volunteer hours.
2. Historical data were not available for all organisations in all years. To make best use of available data and to allow a combined index to be compiled, interpolation estimates have been used to fill gaps. Further details are given in the background section.
3. Data provided by the Canal & River Trust (formerly British Waterways), The Conservation Volunteers, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority, National Parks England, Natural England, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, RSPB and The Wildlife

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Trusts were for financial years rather than calendar years. Financial year data have been assigned to the first calendar year (e.g. 2017/18 data were allocated to 2017).

- The data series was revised in 2018 due to some organisations, most notably The Wildlife Trusts, providing updated figures for previous years (see background section for further details). The methodology used to calculate the interpolated estimates was also revised in 2018. This chart is therefore not comparable to those presented in publications prior to 2018.

Source: Bat Conservation Trust, Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (formerly Botanical Society of the British Isles), British Trust for Ornithology, Butterfly Conservation, Canal & River Trust (formerly British Waterways), The Conservation Volunteers, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority, Natural England, National Parks England, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, Plantlife, RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts, Woodland Trust.

Assessment of change in volunteer time spent in conservation			
	Long term	Short term	Latest year
Conservation volunteering	 2000–2017	 2012–2017	Increased (2017)

Note: Long and short-term assessments are based on a 3% rule of thumb. Where possible, the base years for these assessments use a 3-year average. See [Assessing Indicators](#).

Indicator description

A decrease in time spent volunteering between 2000 and 2001 can be attributed to a decline in all conservation activity due to controls on countryside access during the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak. The small peak in volunteer time in 2007 was largely driven by an increase in volunteer numbers at The Conservation Volunteers which initiated a number of large youth programmes in that year. The 2011 high point, however, was driven by increases in the volunteer hours reported by 9 of the 14 organisations in the indicator and the subsequent decrease in 2012 was due to a drop in the number of volunteers across 7 of the organisations, most notably: the British Trust for Ornithology, The Wildlife Trusts, The Conservation Volunteers and the RSPB. These changes reflect: (i) the cyclical nature of some projects undertaken, such as tree planting and work on specific nature reserves and (ii) the revised methodologies used to survey and record the number of volunteer hours.

More recently, the indicator remained relatively stable between 2012 and 2015 and showed a gradual increase in 2016 and 2017. Although the indicator has increased by a little over 7% in the 5 years since 2012, trends reported by individual organisations vary considerably. The Canal & River Trust (formerly known as British Waterways) reported an increase in volunteer hours of more than 120%, whereas the Woodland Trust reported a decrease of over 50%. Increased volunteering with the Canal & River Trust is likely due to the organisation's policy to actively recruit additional volunteers (in place since 2011); decreased volunteering with the Woodland Trust is due to higher than average figures for tree planting in 2012 and 2013 rather than lower than average figures in 2017, again reflecting the cyclical nature of these types of projects.

Relevance

Volunteer time is one way of assessing the level of public engagement with biodiversity. Volunteering for conservation charities is critical to the successful delivery of many of the objectives of the country biodiversity and environment strategies – for example, volunteers collect much of the data used for monitoring the status of species and also undertake practical work to manage threatened habitats.

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Background

The indicator is based on data on volunteer hours supplied by 14 conservation charities and public bodies operating in the UK:

- Bat Conservation Trust
- Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (formerly Botanical Society of the British Isles)
- British Trust for Ornithology
- Butterfly Conservation
- Canal & River Trust (formerly British Waterways)
- The Conservation Volunteers
- Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority
- National Parks England¹
- Natural England
- Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority
- Plantlife
- RSPB
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust

Table A2i provides information on whether the organisations contributing to the indicator provided data for the whole or part of the United Kingdom or Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales).

Table A2i. Organisations contributing data to the indicator

Providing UK- or GB-wide data	Providing data for part of the UK
Bat Conservation Trust	Canal & River Trust (formerly British Waterways)
Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (formerly Botanical Society of the British Isles)	Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority
British Trust for Ornithology	National Parks England
Butterfly Conservation	Natural England
The Conservation Volunteers	Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority
Plantlife	
RSPB	
The Wildlife Trusts	
Woodland Trust	

Some organisations were able to provide accurate figures for the number of hours worked; others provided estimates based on the number of volunteers and an estimate of average days worked by their volunteers each year.

¹ National Park data for England are now collected through the National Parks England Head Office, rather than by contacting individual National Parks directly.

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Data are not available for all organisations in all years. For the current indicator, missing values have been estimated by Defra statisticians. In the historical dataset estimates have been used in the index calculations for the Canal & River Trust (formerly British Waterways) (2000 to 2009), Butterfly Conservation (2000 to 2002), The Conservation Volunteers (2000 to 2005), Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority (2000, 2001 and 2003), National Parks England (2000 to 2008), Natural England (2000 and 2002), Plantlife (2000 to 2006), The Wildlife Trusts (2000 to 2003 and 2006), and the Woodland Trust (2000 and 2001). The estimates were based on (a) the trend in the data provided by the organisation, and (b) the trend in the data provided by other organisations for the missing years. The number of volunteer hours has been converted to an index (set to 2000 = 100).

The methodology used by conservation charities can change from year to year. This can cause fluctuations in the data, particularly where there are revised methods used by charities that have previously recorded large amounts for total volunteer hours. In 2014, The Wildlife Trusts improved their methodology to more accurately record volunteer hours and to only report activities undertaken by registered volunteers, rather than those undertaken by registered and casual volunteers. This resulted in a 40% drop in recorded hours for that year. As The Wildlife Trusts accounted for 20% of the total number of volunteer hours in 2014, this change had a noticeable effect on the overall trend and it was largely responsible for the significant fall in the indicator from 2013 to 2014 that has been reported in previous publications. It also had a negative impact on the short-term assessments of this indicator reported in 2016 and 2017. Rather than continuing to allow this methodological change to adversely affect the results, when the actual fall in volunteer hours was much smaller than that previously reported, Defra statisticians obtained additional information from The Wildlife Trusts. This information has been used to scale the data from 2000 to 2013 in such a way that it now provides estimates for volunteering that are broadly equivalent to those provided under the new methodology. While the chart, values and accompanying [datasheet](#) are therefore not comparable to those in previous publications, they do present a clearer trend for conservation volunteering in the UK since 2000.

In broad terms, the type of work undertaken by volunteers falls into 4 categories:

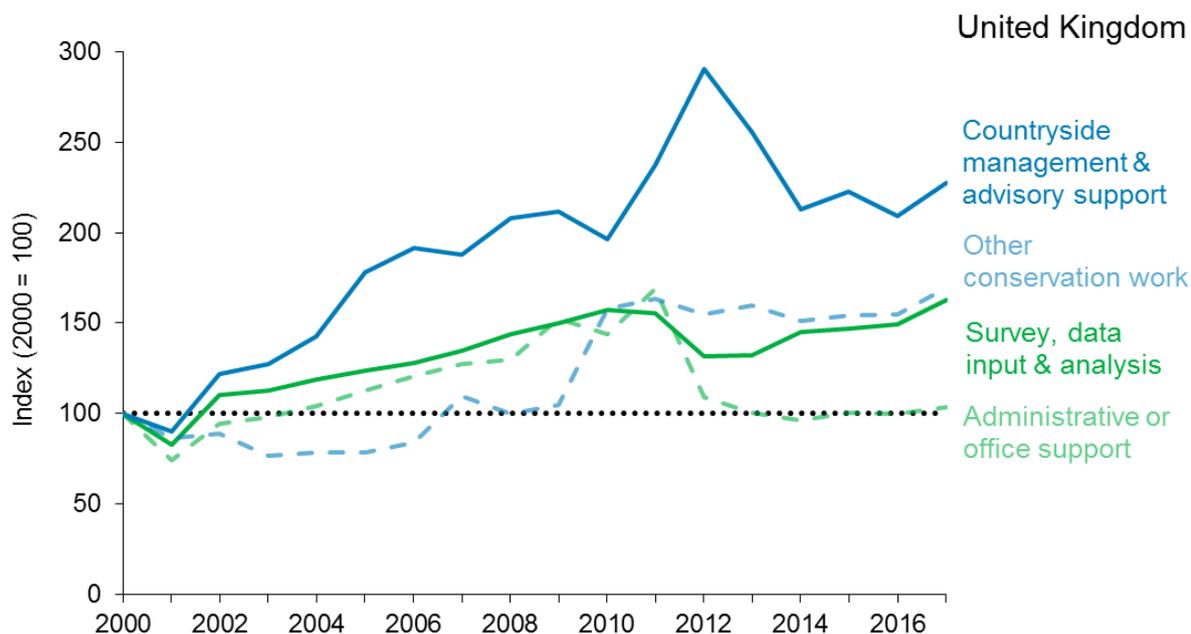
- Countryside management & advisory support;
- Surveys, data input & analysis;
- Administrative or office support; and
- 'Other conservation work', which includes activities such as fundraising, training and educational events.

Not every organisation provides the breakdown of volunteering hours shown in Figure A2ii, and therefore the trends shown in this figure are different from the overall assessment in Figure A2i.

Volunteer hours relating to 'countryside management & advisory support'; 'surveys, data input & analysis'; and 'other conservation work' have all increased in 2017 whereas hours relating to 'administrative or office support' have remained similar between 2016 and 2017 (Figure A2ii). The 2011 to 2013 peak in 'countryside management & advisory support' was driven by several organisations, most notably the RSPB and the Woodland Trust reporting a higher than average number of volunteer hours for this category. The sharp rise in hours relating to 'other conservation work' in 2010 was driven by the RSPB and the sharp fall in hours relating to 'administrative or office support' by the British Trust for Ornithology, the latter reporting an end to the 'Bird Atlas Project' as a reason for the decrease. Historically, organisations have reported that changes are due to shifts in strategic focus that result in significant adjustments to projects such as tree planting. They have also cited the need to consider changes to volunteer numbers in order to comply with health and safety regulations.

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Figure A2ii. Index of volunteer time spent on conservation activities with selected environmental organisations in the UK, by category of work, 2000 to 2017.



Notes:

1. Interpolated estimates have been used to fill missing years for Butterfly Conservation (2000 to 2002), Natural England (2000 and 2002), Plantlife (2000 to 2006) and the Woodland Trust (2000, 2001 and 2017).
2. The data series was revised in 2018 due to some organisations, most notably The Wildlife Trusts, providing updated figures for previous years (see background section for further details). The methodology used to calculate the interpolated estimates was also revised in 2018. This chart is therefore not comparable to those presented in publications prior to 2018.

Source: Bat Conservation Trust, Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (formerly Botanical Society of the British Isles), British Trust for Ornithology, Butterfly Conservation, Natural England, Plantlife, RSPB, Woodland Trust.

Goals and targets

Aichi Targets for which this is a primary indicator

Strategic Goal A. Address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss by mainstreaming biodiversity across government and society.



Target 1: By 2020, at the latest, people are aware of the values of biodiversity and the steps they can take to conserve and use it sustainably.

Aichi Targets for which this is a relevant indicator

Strategic Goal A. Address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss by mainstreaming biodiversity across government and society.



Target 2: By 2020, at the latest, biodiversity values have been integrated into national and local development and poverty reduction strategies and planning processes

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and are being incorporated into national accounting, as appropriate, and reporting systems.



Target 4: By 2020, at the latest, Governments, business and stakeholders at all levels have taken steps to achieve or have implemented plans for sustainable production and consumption and have kept the impacts of use of natural resources well within safe ecological limits.

Web links for further information

Reference	Title	Website
Association of Inland Navigation Authorities	Quantifying the extent and value of volunteering in relation to inland waterways	https://www.aina.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AINA-Volunteering-Report-Apr11.pdf (PDF, 508 kb)
Bat Conservation Trust	Home page	http://www.bats.org.uk/
Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland	Home page	https://bsbi.org/
British Trust for Ornithology	Home page	http://www.bto.org/
Butterfly Conservation	Home page	http://butterfly-conservation.org/
Canal & River Trust	Home page	http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/
The Conservation Volunteers	Home Page	http://www.tcv.org.uk/
Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority	Home page	http://www.lochlomond-trossachs.org/
Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority	Home page	https://www.pembrokeshirecoast.wales/Default.asp?PID=4
Plantlife	Home page	http://www.plantlife.org.uk/
National Parks England	Home page	http://www.nationalparksengland.org.uk/
Natural England	Home page	https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england
RSPB	Home page	http://www.rspb.org.uk/
The Wildlife Trusts	Home page	http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/
Woodland Trust	Home page	http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/

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Full details of this indicator, including a datasheet, are available at: jncc.gov.uk/ukbi-A2

Last updated: September 2019

Latest data available: 2017 (and financial year 2017/18)