



Marco Lambertini on the global goal for nature /

INTERVIEW

Brands can't thrive on a dying planet – the convener of the Nature Positive Initiative explains why nature loss is a business risk

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Nature is in crisis, and our whole existence depends on it.

Until a few years ago, biodiversity was deprioritised, seen as a cost to business and treated as a footnote in climate conversations. But with higher awareness of the link between nature loss and climate change (the more we deplete natural carbon sinks like rainforests and peatlands, the less nature can mitigate climate change) and the estimate by the World Economic Forum that roughly half of the world's total GDP (about \$44trn) depends on nature, governments and the business and finance sectors are paying greater attention to biodiversity.

The need to act on nature loss has never been stronger. To find out more about what is required to be 'nature positive' (biodiversity's equivalent to targets like 'net zero'), we spoke to Marco Lambertini, convener of the Nature Positive Initiative (NPI), an alliance of environmental NGOs, sustainable business platforms, academia, and indigenous and local governments networks.

Formed in 2023, the NPI exists to promote the integrity and implementation of the Nature Positive Global Goal: to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030 on a 2020 baseline, and achieve full recovery by 2050. Lambertini caught us up on the progress so far, why we're at a tipping point, and the crucial role of businesses in the move to be nature positive.

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1. Businesses need to demonstrate they have more nature in their operations than in 2020 as a minimum
2. The next 10-15 years are critical to the trajectory of humans
3. Business is one big piece of the puzzle – regulation and consumer behaviour are the others
4. A combination of cultural change, technological innovation and finance redirection can crack both the climate and the nature crisis

5. Given overpopulation, poverty and inequality, it is vital that the connection between nature and our quality of life is made clear – nature is a solution to those problems



Give us the overview of 'nature positive'. How did it start?

The whole thing started in Paris when the climate agreement was sealed. At that point, the nature community felt that it was necessary to have a similar clarity of direction, a global goal that unites and incentivises efforts and brings together different players around nature and biodiversity. Paris gave [us] confidence that it was possible to bring the world around such an ambitious global goal. And at the same time, it highlighted the fact that we didn't have a global goal for nature, affecting our ability to address the biodiversity crisis.

We had a lot of previous global agreements under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and other parallel conventions, but they were more inspirational and aspirational than measurable. So we felt that this was the moment to build on the success of Paris and agree on a global goal for nature that raises the ambitions, is science-based and drives action at scale.

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Marco Lambertini, Nature Positive Initiative

I was at WWF at the time and I raised the need for a Paris-style agreement for nature, something comprehensive. We called it the New Deal for Nature and People. We started promoting that concept and got a lot of traction. The next obvious step was defining what that new deal for nature was about.

In my position as WWF Director General, I wrote to all my peers and convened a meeting where we concluded that we had an unmissable chance with the next 10-year biodiversity plan about to be approved by the UN CBD in 2020. Then Covid-19 struck. So the negotiation process was delayed two years. For climate we had 'carbon neutral', '1.5°', 'net zero emissions' – what is the equivalent for nature? The science was clear. Nature had declined so much that a net zero outcome was not good enough. We should halt, but also reverse nature loss and support restoration, so the goal was 'net positive for nature'.

For the first time, we had something measurable and ambitious for nature at a time when the role of nature in mitigating climate [change] was becoming more evident

Marco Lambertini, Nature Positive Initiative

'Nature positive' was chosen as the more communicable version of net positive biodiversity, and the definition of nature positive is to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 on a 2020 baseline. This makes the goal measurable, because you start measuring on the baseline of 2020 and drive a net positive outcome by 2030. So 'halt/reverse' is the equivalent to '1.5°' and 'net positive biodiversity' is the equivalent of 'net zero emissions' for climate.

We managed, incredibly, to advocate successfully so that in December 2022, the landmark agreement adopted at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) used the language of nature positive in defining its overall mission: halt/reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. For the first time, we had something measurable and ambitious for nature at a time when the role of nature in mitigating climate [change] was becoming more evident. The two things became connected and seen as fundamental goals for building a sustainable future.

The action that we take in the next 10-15 years is going to make a big difference on the trajectory of humanity's development

Marco Lambertini, Nature Positive Initiative



Where is the initiative at today?

We're at a point where 'nature positive' is widely used, sometimes as a slogan, not so much as a measurable goal. It's not a fluffy word, it's not 'I plant a tree, I'm nature positive'. No, to credibly contribute to a nature positive world, you need to demonstrate you have more nature in your operations, in your company, in your value chain, in your investment portfolio, than in 2020, as a minimum. It's ambitious, but it's necessary, because nature is in free fall right now, and we know that it's exacerbating climate change and affecting economic development and social security.

Last year, for the first time in millions of years, the forests of the world were not a net-sink of carbon but instead a net-emitter of CO2. It's because of deforestation, wildfires and climate change, that we're now beginning to see nature's essential services like carbon sequestration begin to shrink.

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So halting and reversing nature loss is critical to maintain nature's vitality, dynamism and ecological services, for tons of reasons. Climate is one, water security is another, food security is the third one, health, wellbeing – you name it. Almost every single Sustainable Development Goal depends directly or indirectly on nature, and for the past 200 years, we've been growing our economic wealth globally – not equally distributed, obviously – while exhausting natural resources and natural capital.

That can't continue. It's obvious that if we continue that way, we will soon pay a price, which is local destabilisation, droughts, floods... We have an incredible opportunity to change course, because we are right in the middle of this fork – the action that we take in the next 10-15 years is going to make a big difference to the trajectory of humanity's development and the planet, that influences our future prospect of development.

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOsy-J3RvUk>

We're halfway between 2020-2030 – how would you describe the progress so far

Progress is not great. Nature loss continues unabated, in fact accelerating. The 'half-full glass' is that awareness has never been greater of the importance of biodiversity, particularly in the business sector. I've never seen so much attention from businesses and financial institutions. That is, potentially, a seed for change. There are also a lot of local beautiful examples of regeneration or conservation, but they're not mainstream or scaled. The bigger picture is still not good, and progress needs to massively accelerate.

Business is one big piece of the puzzle. Regulation is the second, and consumers are the third

Marco Lambertini, Nature Positive Initiative



It's encouraging that business interest and investment has never been higher. Lots of brands are quieter about their climate commitments these days.

It's interesting. On one hand, people are realising that achieving 1.5° requires a number of big changes and also some sacrifices, particularly in the most developed countries and economies. The ways we are used to living over the last 50 years can't continue, and that requires behavioural change and regulation – and some people react negatively to that. But on the other hand, it's also true that climate is having such a direct negative impact on our lives. It's true that some businesses are a bit more reticent to talk about it, and I think it has to do with the rolling back of regulation but also with the fear of being accused of greenwashing.

Businesses can't claim to be nature positive if they plant a tree or save a bird – that's nice, but it's not nature positive

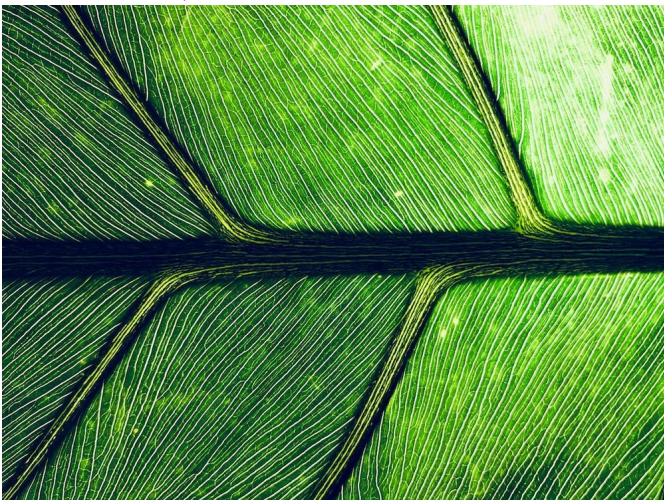
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I am a strong critic of business behaviours because they've been and still are the source of the majority of the negative footprint on nature. Business action has contributed to some progress, but businesses have also continued to generate huge externalities. So I'm a strong critic, but I'm also sympathetic to the difficulties businesses are facing, with the need to embrace complex transitions paralleled by the lack of regulation that creates a level playing field and the lack of consumer demand that incentivises, prioritises and rewards good business behaviour.

We have so many people on the planet, so many needs, so many entrenched behaviours and expectations, and changing that system of consumption and production requires everybody's effort – not just business. Business is one big piece of the puzzle. Regulation is the second, and consumers are the third. At the moment, there is a surge in interest in nature. That was clear at COP16 in Cali [Colombia], where we had record-breaking participation of businesses. We now need to convert this new awareness and engagement of nature into effective nature positive transitions.

I don't think, in most cases, the misuses of 'nature positive' are intentional. I think it's just because companies have not understood fully what nature positive means and what's required

Marco Lambertini, Nature Positive Initiative



What are some of the more egregious misuses of 'nature positive' and why has it been so readily co-opted by the corporate world?

Businesses can't claim to be nature positive if they plant a tree or save a bird – that's nice, but it's not nature positive. Nature positive is embracing a new ambition, a new paradigm, a clear goal to be measured against. Until now, if someone did something for nature, we clapped. From now on, is not enough to do 'something' for nature, but it is necessary to demonstrate a net positive outcome.

Becoming nature positive as a business is very challenging because it requires a deep transformation that depends on the nature of the business. A small farm can claim a net positive outcome more easily than a big company with complex value chains and large operations. It is important to connect the action of a company to the outcome, because otherwise there is no accountability and also no incentive. But often the outcome can be better assessed at a landscape level where several companies operate.

We're at the point where the word 'feasible' needs to be replaced with the word 'necessary'

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So, what a company can do first, is assess their impact. Respond and mitigate and reduce those impacts, second. Measure the outcome of the impact reduction and mitigation in terms of the state of nature, third, and then they demonstrate that outcome. That's how companies can demonstrate and contribute to the journey to become a nature positive society.

I don't think, in most cases, the misuses of 'nature positive' are intentional. I think it's just because companies have not understood fully what nature positive means and what's required. So sometimes they're using it lightly, as an equivalent to 'eco-friendly'. For the Nature Positive Initiative (NPI) [convened in 2023], one of the key objectives is to preserve the integrity of the use of 'nature positive' and the definition of the goal. We're monitoring and clarifying this as much as we can.

We are at the fork in the road, at a time of great risk, great threat, but also great opportunity

Marco Lambertini, Nature Positive Initiative



Do you think it's feasible for most businesses to meet the rigorous standards that you've described?

We're at the point where the word 'feasible' needs to be replaced with the word 'necessary'. Because unless we decarbonise to carbon neutral/net zero, and unless we halt and reverse nature loss, business will be hit like anybody else in society. Combatting nature loss is not only a moral duty, but also a security issue for our economy and society. This is a cultural shift that probably needs to happen before anything else. Understand, we are at the fork in the road, at a time of great risk, great threat, but also great opportunity to avoid that risk and to build a better, safer future, because we still have time – but the window of opportunity is narrowing by the day.

A combination of cultural change, technological innovation and finance redirection – these are the three elements that can crack both the climate and the nature crisis. We have the money, it's just a question of [where to] redirect it. We have the technology, it's just a question of incentivising it and scaling it up. And the cultural dimension is perhaps the most important. We need to want to do it, to actually be able to do it, because we can do it. These crises are entirely of our own making. We can fix it, just as we created it.

Without preserving nature's carbon storage function, we would not be able, even if we met net zero emissions, to achieve the 1.5° target

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What did you make of the outcomes of Cop29 last year? Was the NPI present?

We didn't go. And to be honest, I don't particularly regret it. The climate and biodiversity conventions are still treated separately as two different efforts. However, they're increasingly integrating, which is positive. One of the positive things that started at the Glasgow climate convention [Cop26 in 2021], and moved on at Dubai [Cop28, 2023], and then in Baku in Azerbaijan [Cop29, 2024] was the recognition that the nature dimension is fundamental to meet our climate objectives. The two agendas are increasingly coordinated, not as much as necessary, but at least we're recognising the role of nature.

People tend to point the finger at the powerful corporations, but actually we're part of the system as much as them, and that change needs to happen also in our own lives in terms of sustainable food, energy and water waste, and the way we vote

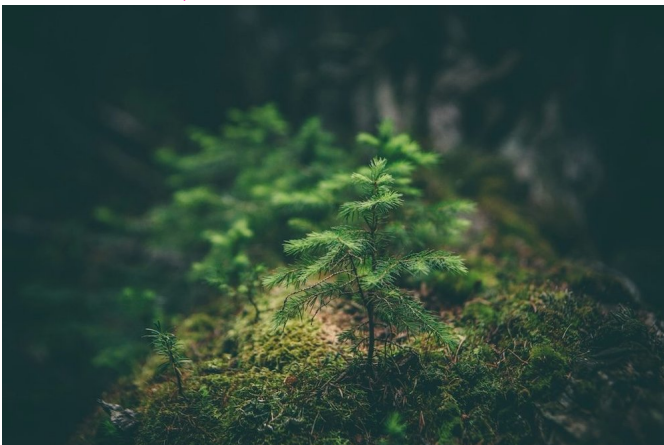
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Without preserving nature's carbon storage function, we would not be able, even if we met net zero emissions, to achieve the 1.5° target. [At Cop16] there was some progress but it was really more of a moment to keep the momentum. The funding issue is a problem – like for climate, there's still a shortage of direct funding for biodiversity conservation.

But on the other hand, the huge presence of business and financial institutions at Cop16 is an indication that the financial sector is paying attention. And if there's one dimension of our economy that could accelerate a nature positive and carbon neutral future, it's the redirection of financial flows. Unless that happens at scale, little will change.

In a society with so many people, so much poverty, still so much inequality, we need to make the connection between nature and our quality of life, and our children's quality of life

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How does the initiative promote awareness of itself and distinguish itself from other environmental causes?

Increasingly, connecting nature to people's most pressing challenges and needs – climate, water, food, health, wellbeing, happiness – things that nature gives us for free, [means it] is more of a priority. Connecting the dots so that nature conservation is not just a moral, ethical issue. The intrinsic value of nature is not enough. When people are struggling for water, for jobs, for

food, and other priorities, nature is de-prioritised – unless you understand nature as a solution to those proponents. And that's the communication strategy. Don't get me wrong, it's not a manipulation. It's the truth.

But for too long, the conservation movement has only focused on the need to prevent extinction, eg it's terrible that a species will go extinct, which is still very valid for so many people. But at the end of the day, in a society with so many people, so much poverty, still so much inequality, we need to make the connection between nature and our quality of life, and our children's quality of life. The NPI is not an organisation, it is a coalition of many organisations that have come together to align, which doesn't happen very often.

The nature positive goal is positive, is necessary, and requires everybody's effort. Companies, governments, consumers – sometimes people tend to point the finger only at the powerful corporations, but actually, we are all part of the same system, and that change needs to happen also in our own lives in terms of sustainable food, energy and water and the way we vote, supporting environmentally progressive political programmes.



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