

Sunart Fields Project, Derbyshire

Biodiversity net gain land management

Biodiversity net gain (BNG) offers landowners a new way to fund nature recovery on their land, alongside providing an alternative income stream to complement other business activities. Smaller landholdings can still prove a great option for off-site BNG.

BNG on smaller land parcels

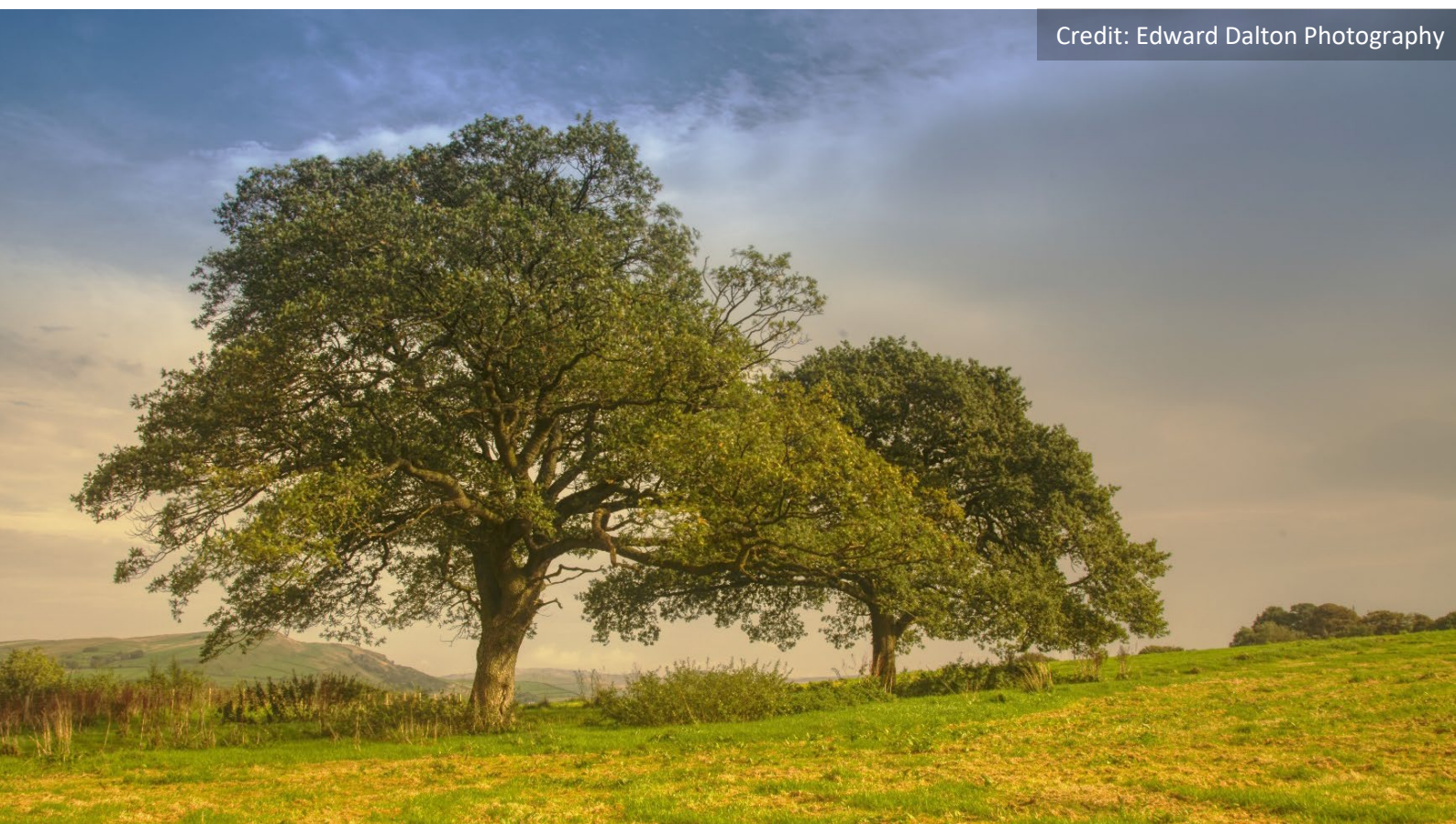
The aspiration of the [Sunart Fields](#) project in the Peak District is to increase biodiversity value in combination with improved carbon capture and soil health.

Comprising around 50ha bounded by dry stone walls, lines of trees and hedgerows, the land had a varied past. Much of the land was previously wooded and was felled in the early nineteenth century. From 1874 the land was extensively mined for coal, and more recently, it was dairy pasture.

Now, Rachel and Geoff Evatt have bought Sunart Fields with the aim to restore it to a state prior to its industrial and agricultural past. The land now features small pockets of woodland, scrub, lowland acid grassland, lowland heathland, and wetland areas with a heavily modified freshwater stream.

In 2020, a 34ha portion of Sunart Fields was selected to be one of Natural England's statutory biodiversity credits pilots, in preparation for mandatory BNG. Monies from sale of statutory biodiversity credits will be invested in habitat delivery in England. Together with Defra, Natural England is investigating the potential projects in which the Secretary of State may choose to invest in future.

Credit: Edward Dalton Photography



Small site approach to BNG

The first thing to do when considering BNG for a smaller site is to take a baseline. “Taking a full baseline is a cost as the metric requires a competent person, which currently needs to be an ecologist,” says Rachel Evatt, one of the project leads. “For small sites like ours, taking a rough baseline yourself can be enough to start thinking about BNG as an opportunity. Knowing the habitat types already on the land helps to work out what habitat delivery is likely to be compatible, and whether it is worthwhile.

Some people might be surprised they can do hay meadows. Others might find they can carry on farming, just less intensively. Neither of these were options for us, but it was good to explore all the possibilities.”

It is important to consider BNG as a serious commitment as any BNG agreement will be 30-years.



Credit: Edward Dalton Photography

Rachel Evatt continues, “the BNG commitments are generally the same, regardless of size. This means that realistically, there is a minimum hectareage to be viable for BNG. For us, that is around 30hectares, so we’re looking at our full site, or slightly less.”

This wasn’t the original expectation though, as to start, the idea was to have perhaps five or ten hectares of BNG. “Looking at the economics, it became clear our business plan had to shift,” Rachel Evatt continues. “We don’t feel like a smallholding, but we’re small enough to not be able to sustain a portfolio of incomes. We need to go all in and make it work.”

Geoff Evatt, the other project lead, adds, “projects of any size will want to minimise risk, but where the site is smaller, risk becomes the dominating factor. We don’t have the option of trying something out and having it flop, because this is all the land we have.”

Managing risk

The risk-conscious mindset helped Rachel and Geoff Evatt decide where to be boldest with their habitat delivery. They considered which pockets of land were at risk of invasive species, which would have most impact on their neighbours (and be most impacted by activities undertaken by the same neighbours), as well as access requirements for initial capital works and ongoing maintenance.

“Himalayan Balsam is one of our ongoing challenges,” acknowledges Geoff Evatt. “It keeps cropping up so we’ve had to seriously consider which habitats we would fail to deliver with presence of this invasive species.”

The other consideration for Sunart Fields is securing management for the 30-year commitment. “We bought this land recently, so it is not a family inheritance. While we have children and would love them to consider taking on the management if they wanted to, we also want to plan for alternative management further down the line. One way we’ve done this is plan habitat to reflect ease of access and management.”



Credit: Edward Dalton Photography

Delivering BNG on a small site

“The desire is to sit down and work it all out on paper and then go and deliver the whole BNG project, but that doesn’t really work. Instead, our approach has been to test and learn, like any product, and then go from there,” explains Rachel Evatt. “It is vital to work with the land, and doing that means taking the time to fully understand it and how it will respond.”

Geoff Evatt’s reflections on delivery are similar. “The temptation is to look for the highest possible uplift of biodiversity nits, but this is too much of a gamble when it comes to committing to delivering for 30 years. We’d rather make sure we’re doing the right thing for the wider connected landscape.

“We’ve always looked to do the right thing environmentally, economically, practically. This last factor will look different for everyone as the circumstances will be individual. Nevertheless, you need to be mindful of all three things to be able to actually deliver.”

Even if delivering and managing the off-site BNG directly may not be feasible for some small landowners, there are still other ways to adopt off-site BNG as an income stream. For example, working with a habitat bank operator. They would lease the land and provide a guaranteed income to the landowner while also shouldering the risk of selling and maintaining the habitat. There are some private operators already running, with NGOs and local authorities also partnering with landowners to deliver habitat banks.



Small but strategic

BNG is one of a variety of ways to help deliver enhanced habitat for nature. It is part of the Environment Act 2021, and aims to deliver the Lawton principles of more, bigger, better, and more joined up. Smaller sites are just as capable of pulling their weight to deliver areas for wildlife and nature conservation. The [biodiversity metric 4.0](#) includes a strategic significance multiplier which incentivises delivering habitat which can connect to other recognised strategic habitats, regardless of size.

Sunart Fields is recognised for its strategic significance because it links to eighteen Local Wildlife Sites and is currently located to contribute to the Derbyshire & High Peak Green Infrastructure strategy. Going forward, projects will have to engage closely with the Local Nature Recovery Strategies, which, when published, will be the method of awarding strategic significance.

Considering different income streams from the land

Rachel and Geoff Evatt considered a wide variety of funding schemes for Sunart Fields. “We looked at lots of options where the economics don’t make sense on this scale, which left us with BNG and SFI as possible routes,” says Rachel Evatt. “It is a question of balancing the degree of payment with the degree of commitment, and associated risk.”

As one of the statutory biodiversity credit pilots, Sunart Fields hopes it might be possible to provide habitat for investment of monies from the sale of statutory biodiversity credits. Geoff Evatt explains that “our business model completely changed. We’re doing so much better financially than if we were farming, but we still need to consider how we sell the habitat provided and minimise the cost of having lots of transactions.” Working with a habitat bank could be another solution.

Where bigger sites diversify income, Rachel and Geoff are clear that this does not work for a project the size of Sunart Fields. Having tried a huge variety of complementary activities, from dry-stone-wall training, to floristry, they’ve found that there is neither the demand nor capacity for these to be revenue streams.

“We plan to continue with these activities, particularly the school visits, but we can’t consider these a way of making money,” Rachel Evatt notes. “You get to levels where if you want to scale up, you’d need additional investment, and we just don’t have the carrying capacity. Similarly, tourism isn’t viable for us because we’d need a big capital investment for a small pay back given we’re such a small site.”

Sunart Fields has found that the value of these additional activities is not just financial. Once the expectation that they’d become self-funding was dropped, Rachel and Geoff found their enjoyment in delivering this outreach increased. They also saw what great opportunities activities like these were for bringing the local community along with them.

Working with local partners

Sunart Fields has had early engagement from the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust which has identified that the project will contribute to the Peak District Biodiversity Action Plan to enhance and expand native broad-leaved woodland in addition to contributing to the Wild Peak Project which aims to create a large pre-agreed, strategic offset site that will be designed to meet the potential demand of forthcoming development within the authority. By creating habitats at a landscape scale, the best gains for biodiversity can be delivered in the most cost-effective and efficient way.

While Rachel and Geoff Evatt have established great relationships with many local partners including the local Parish Council which has passed a motion to rewild recreational land which adjoins Sunart Fields.

Credit: Edward Dalton Photography



Public access

Sunart Fields has an unusually high ratio of public access to hectareage, so Rachel and Geoff Evatt have been considering how to factor in public interaction to their habitat plans. “It has been great to see how people use the land,” Geoff Evatt reflects. “In the covid-19 pandemic we had a large number of volunteers who helped us with socially distanced outdoor planting, which provided a great starting point for local connection to the project.”

As people have returned to the office, the number of volunteers has dwindled somewhat, but many remain.

The large number of dog walkers also provides an effective informal route to update the community on the project. While there is a Sunart Fields Instagram account, Geoff Evatt explains that they’ve found the best way of communicating project updates has been via word of mouth from speaking to those walking through the site. “This also enables a face-to-face discussion, something we find preferable to a faceless mailing. It is something we’re able to do so well because of our small size.”



Legacy

Both Rachel and Geoff Evatt are agreed that the legacy of Sunart Fields is of the utmost importance. “There is a lot still to work out,” says Rachel Evatt, “but this is a positive policy with great potential for us and much more broadly. We know it won’t be perfect on day one, but we’re proud to have helped developed the policy as part of the statutory biodiversity credits pilot scheme, and even more excited to see where we go next.”

Geoff Evatt agrees that they are optimistic about the potential but is careful to reflect that we’re too early in the process to congratulate success. “It is great to walk around Sunart Fields and already see the difference.”

Natural England seeks to achieve thriving Nature for people and planet by building partnerships for Nature’s recovery.

Biodiversity net gain is part of the government’s Environment Act 2021. Natural England is working closely with and advising Defra on the design and development of BNG.
www.gov.uk/natural-england