

# Seascapes: Restoring the UK marine environment

20 October 2025

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# From Decline to Revival: Restoring the UK Marine Environment

20 October 2025

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# A Critical Juncture

Centuries of degradation have left the UK's coastal and marine ecosystems in a state of decline.

- native oyster populations reduced by 95%,
- saltmarshes in England diminished by 85%,
- nearly half of the UK's seagrass meadows lost since the 1930s,
- biodiversity loss,
- impacts on seabirds.

These losses are not isolated; they reflect broader systemic pressures: pollution, overexploitation, habitat fragmentation, and climate change.

The consequences are ecological, economic, and social – affecting biodiversity, carbon sequestration, fisheries, flood resilience, and the wellbeing of coastal communities.

# Why Marine Ecosystem Recovery Matters

Marine restoration is not just about reversing ecological decline — it is about building a future in which nature and people thrive together.

Healthy marine ecosystems provide essential services: they store carbon, buffer coastlines against storms, support fisheries, and offer cultural and recreational value.

Marine recovery offers a unique opportunity to empower communities. Successful projects are locally led, rooted in place, and driven by people with deep connections to the sea.

Supporting these efforts requires not only funding, but flexibility, and long-term commitment.



# From Decline to Revival: Restoring the UK Marine Environment

A report for Esmée Fairbairn Foundation



# Purpose and Scope

The report aims to support funders in designing effective funding strategies that catalyse long-term, systemic change.

It provides insights and acts as a resource for practitioners, attempting to be relevant to the full range of funders and practitioners.

Considers policy advocacy, sector convening, capacity building, active restoration, conservation initiatives, and the integration of marine, freshwater, and terrestrial ecosystems.

2024 data from the Environmental Funders Network noted that the 'coastal and marine ecosystems' theme made up just 2.4% of the total giving.

# Key Findings and Opportunities

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## Key Findings & Opportunities

### *Taking a systems view:*

Crucially, the report emphasises that funders can play a pivotal role by enabling collaboration and convening key players to address and overcome the systemic barriers that hinder marine ecosystem recovery.

### *Community-Led:*

Locally embedded projects are powerful but under-supported.



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## Key Findings & Opportunities

### *Funding:*

Marine restoration funding is fragmented and short-term. Long-term, coordinated investment is needed across the funding realm.

### *Climate-Smart Design:*

Projects must assess climate risks and design for adaptation; however, this research found few projects currently truly consider the impacts of climate change on their outcomes, often feeling the challenge is “too big to address”.



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## Key Findings & Opportunities

*A 'Whole-Seascape' approach to marine ecosystem recovery:*

Conservation and Restoration must address both habitat loss and pressures such as pollution, overfishing, and climate change.

A seascape-scale approach and a 'wholescape' philosophy is essential to reconnect fragmented ecosystems and build resilience, with "upstream" pressures targeted.

*Advocacy:*

Advocating for the policy and legal changes necessary for marine ecosystem recovery is essential but underfunded.



# Strategic Recommendations

## Funding and Grant Design

Provide multi-year grants (5–20 years) with stage-gate models to manage risk and track progress.

Ensure development phases – where relevant – of at least two years.

Consider flexibility for smaller and community-led organisations.

Promote blended finance models.

Support discovery phases for early-stage idea development.



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# Community Leadership

Connect or support collaborations of community-led projects to achieve seascape-scale impact.

Support and encourage local communities that want to lead marine recovery projects.

Support training, peer-to-peer learning, and shared resources for community empowerment.

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## Taking a Systems View

Fund policy and advocacy initiatives that address barriers and that aim to reduce pressures and influence policy decisions.

Encourage projects that integrate restoration with policy change and pressure alleviation.

Direct more funding towards projects that adopt a comprehensive, catchment-wide or 'whole-scape' approach.

Promote cross-ecosystem collaboration (land-freshwater-marine) for 'wholescape' recovery.

More diverse funders and increased funding is needed for influencing systemic changes.



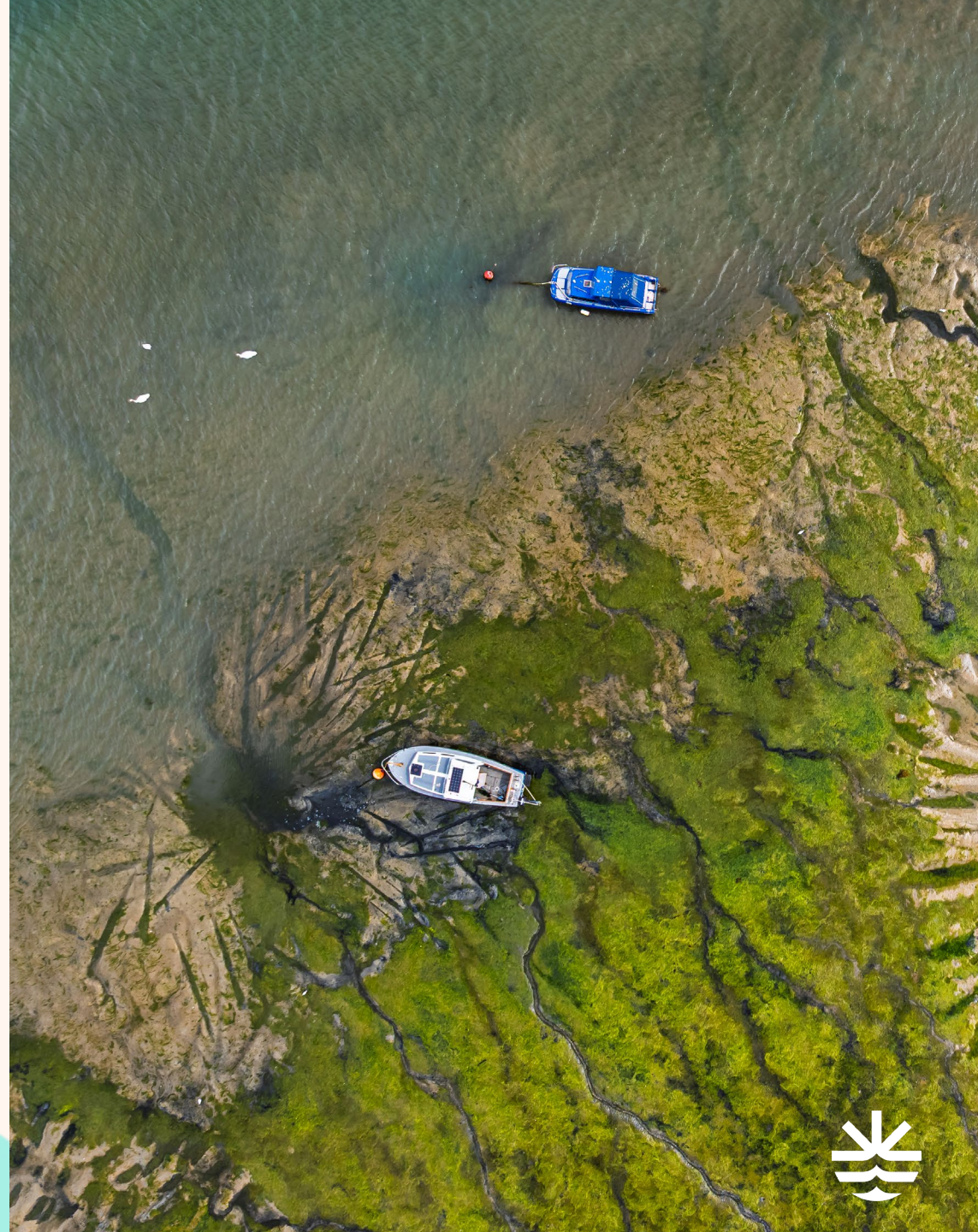
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## Planning and Licensing

Improve access to strategic restoration data and support robust site selection.  
Provide training and guidance on marine licensing processes.

Support capacity building for new entrants and community groups in ecological and socioeconomic planning.

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## Climate Smart

Recognise blue carbon benefits as co-benefits, not sole drivers.

Promote restoration of climate-resilient habitats and species.

Encourage applicants to assess climate risks and design for adaptation.



## Coordination of Funding

Establish a UK-wide marine funders network including trusts, foundations, government, and corporates.

Promote information sharing between funders to align priorities and avoid duplication.

Match and align capital and revenue funders to support full project lifecycles.



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# Sustainable Funding

Promote blended funding models to maximise efficiency and impact.

Provide training for practitioners on innovative finance mechanisms (e.g., blue carbon credits, ESG investment).

Ensure long-term funding for marine recovery, including community capacity building.

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## Collaboration

Encourage cross-sector and cross-ecosystem collaboration, especially between land, freshwater, and marine actors.

Avoid requiring “novelty for novelty’s sake” in partnerships; focus on strategic rationale.

Provide funds and allow time for relationship building through discovery/development phases.



## Exit Strategy and Legacy

Embed exit strategies early in project design to ensure long-term sustainability.

Plan for community ownership and stewardship post-project.

Consider maintenance awards to support ongoing monitoring, advocacy, and engagement after project completion.



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## Capacity Building

Support webinars, training, and informal learning routes.

Facilitate peer-to-peer learning across diverse practitioners.

Provide access to expertise and resources that are otherwise hard to reach.



# Hope and Momentum

A powerful movement for recovery is gaining momentum.

There is growing momentum for recovery through conservation, restoration, advocacy, and community-led action.

Pioneering efforts to restore marine habitats, advocate for better protection, and reimagine the relationship between people and the sea.

Efforts signal a shift toward integrated, place-based, and collaborative approaches to marine recovery.

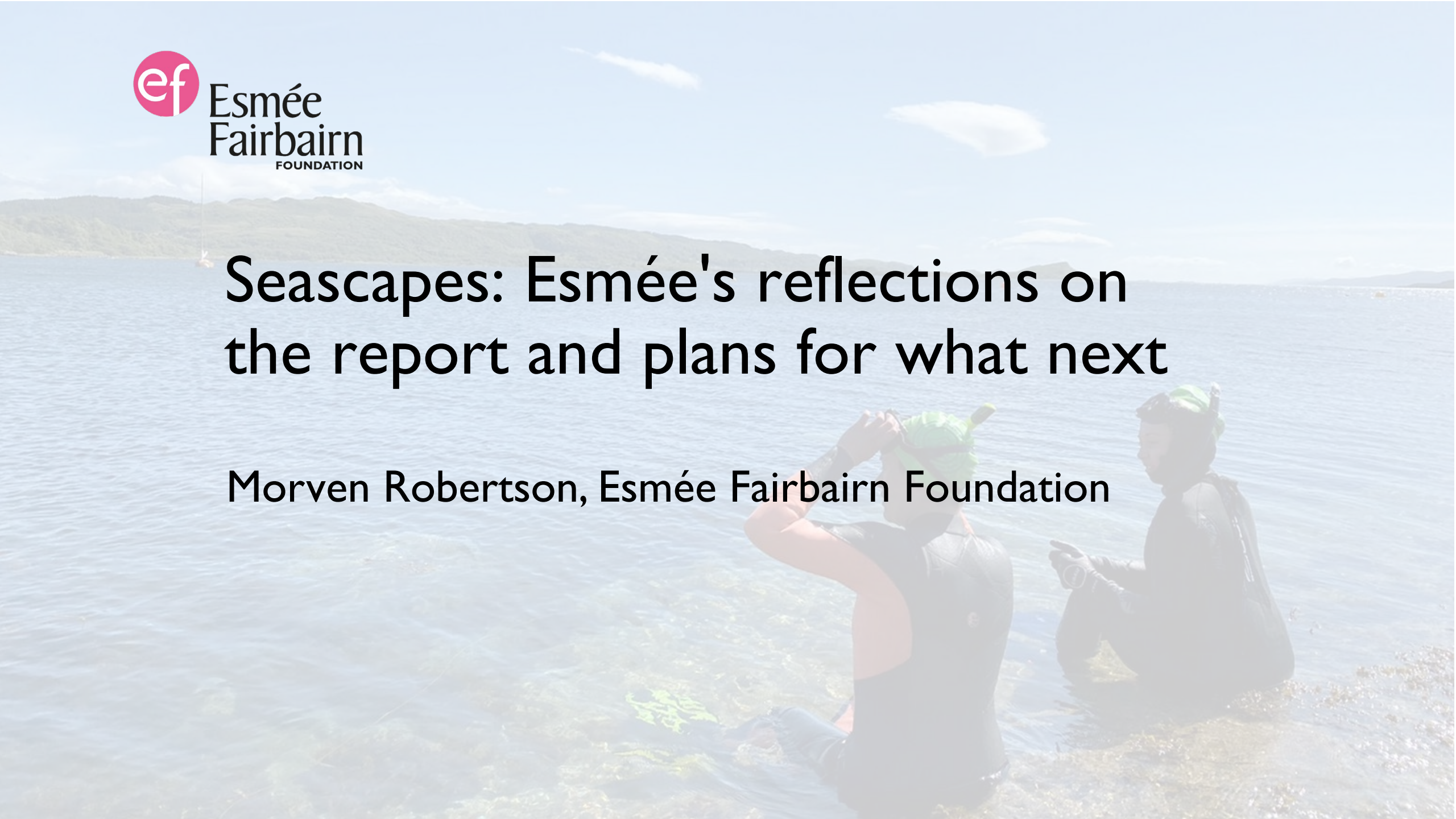
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# Seascapes: Esmée's reflections on the report and plans for what next




Morven Robertson, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation





# Our Natural World

## Priorities to the end of 2027

Peat	
Space for nature	
Freshwater	
Nature-friendly farming	
Fishing in tandem with nature	

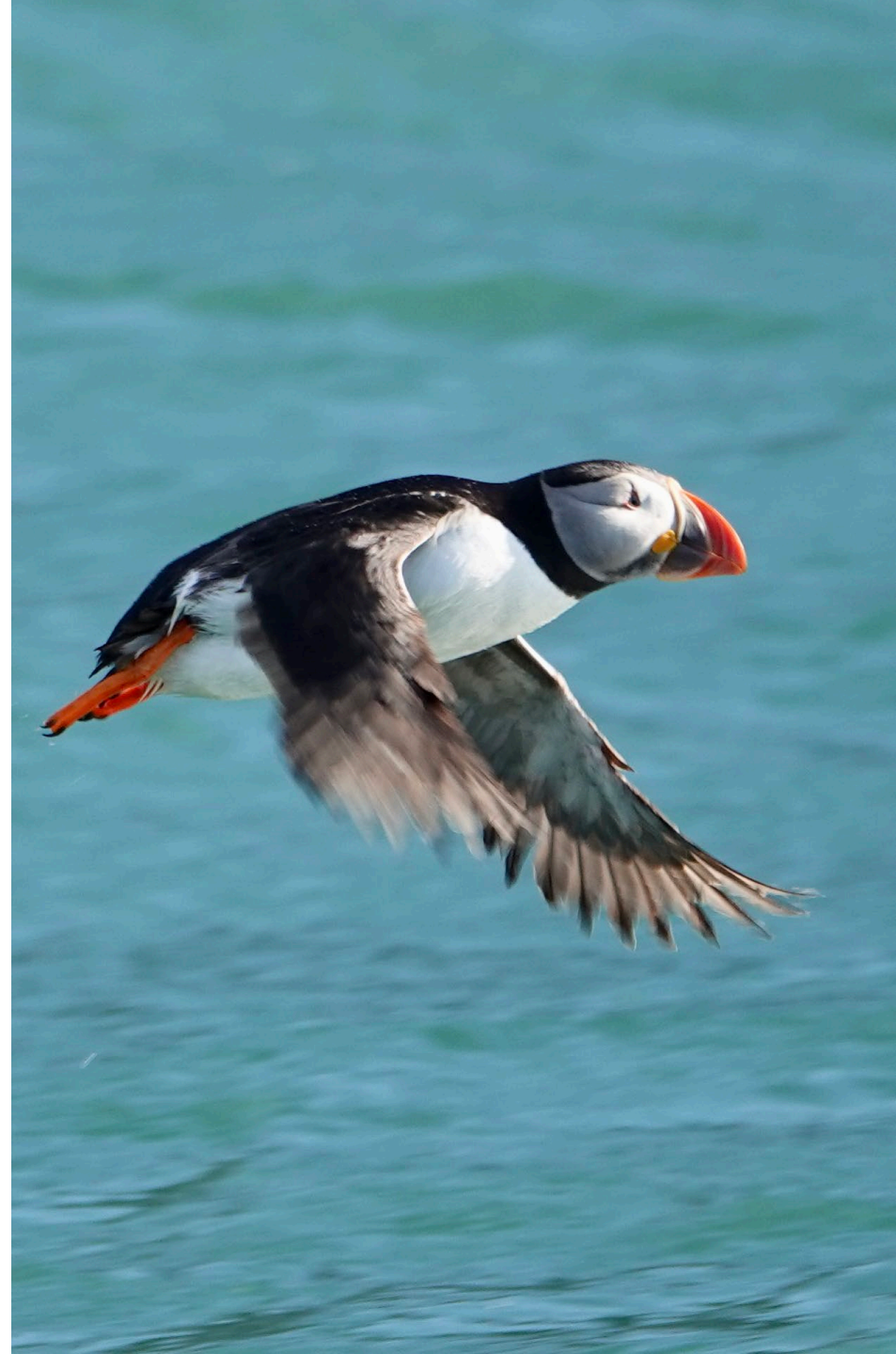
## Long-term outcomes

- Peat is no longer a component of horticultural products.
- Degraded peatland sites are restored for nature and for people.
- Space for nature, and biodiversity, is restored at scale on land and at sea.
- More nature rich spaces for people to access and enjoy, particularly those facing barriers to doing so.
- Freshwater supports a resilient economy and thriving natural environment.
- Freshwater-dependent wildlife and habitats have been restored.
- Soil health is restored.
- A fairer food system that improves outcomes for nature and communities.
- Farmers are supported to lead the transition to nature friendly farming at scale.
- Fisheries in the UK are well and equitably managed, using low impact methods.
- Coastal communities benefit from and have an active role in managing marine resources.

[Learn more about our strategy](#)

# Esmée's marine work

- Two ocean-focused priorities:
  - [Space for nature](#)
  - [Fishing in tandem with nature](#)
- Since 2020, we've supported £14.5m.
- Seascapes identified as a key theme to deliver our strategy
- Commissioned this work to provide learning for the practitioners and funders, understand our role and how best to support



# Our approach and process

- Applications will follow standard Esmée process and eligibility criteria
- We are an open funder
- Focus on core, revenue costs
- We don't fund capital costs or research
- Impact measured through outcomes and indicators



# Key Esmée reflections

- Need for greater funder collaboration
- Fund focus and design
- We need both action on the ground and wider support
- Clear capacity and skills gap on policy and legislation
- Lack of join up between land and sea
- Building climate resilience into projects
- Community leadership and inclusion



# What next for Esmée?

Three areas of work:

- 1. Building sector capacity and tackling systemic barriers**
- 2. Place-based seascape restoration**
- 3. Strengthening the role of coastal communities**

We are considering all our options and want feedback to further shape our thinking.



# I. Building sector capacity and tackling systemic barriers

- Funding core costs that grow long-term capacity
- Address the policy and advocacy skills gap
- Explore the creation of a seascape network and community of practice
- Shared training, resourcing and collaborative initiatives
- Removing silos and enabling better integration of marine restoration and conservation into spatial planning
- Pooled resource to support a joint role for multiple projects facing the same issue i.e. licensing, water quality



## 2. Place-based seascape restoration

### Focus on joining land and sea initiatives:

- Projects that are demonstrating systems thinking i.e. how improved agricultural practices can reduce marine pollution
- Open to existing projects, new partnerships and ideas
- Considering value of discovery phase
- Developing a set of criteria to assess projects



## 2. Place-based seascape restoration

### Criteria:

- Joining land and sea
- Diverse Partnerships
- Inclusive and Community-Led
- New voices
- Climate Change Resilience
- Leveraging New Funding
- Creates long-term, sustainable



### 3. Strengthening the role of coastal communities

- Enabling community-led action directly
- Convene communities and wider practitioners, policy experts, academics and government to identify priorities and find solutions
- Partner with organisations or other funders to support communities i.e. Coastal Communities Network
- Fund pooled resources to provide training and capacity building
- Explore ways to group community-led projects to maximise benefits i.e. ecosystem services and potential access to nature markets



# Let us know what you think

**Are the focus areas the right ones? What do we need to consider?**

Reach out to us: [morven.robertson@esmefairbairn.org.uk](mailto:morven.robertson@esmefairbairn.org.uk)

We also want to hear from you:

- If you're a funder interested in this work and want to work together
- If you're a practitioner or regulator we want to understand how we can work in partnership with you