

## Making Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly a UNESCO Biosphere

Dr Tiago de Melo Cartaxo, Exeter Centre for Environmental Law, University of Exeter  
Stephanie Hirtenstein (MA), University of Exeter  
Norah Alkhattaf, University of Exeter

### KEY FACTS

**Policy area:** Local Law & Policy for Sustainability  
**Research question:** Would Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly benefit from a UNESCO Biosphere designation, from a sustainable development perspective?  
**Methods:** Doctrinal research and workshops  
**Research stage:** Completed

### What is UNESCO Biosphere Status?

UNESCO Biosphere Status is an overarching mechanism which enables collaboration between local communities, businesses, third sector organisations and local government, to work together to best manage climate change, biodiversity loss alongside the economic, health and wellbeing of the local community.

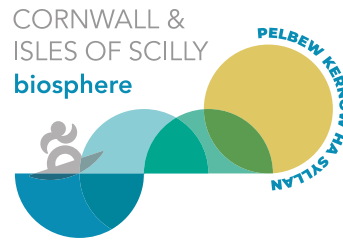
## Executive Summary

The Cornwall & Isles of Scilly region is an ideal UNESCO Biosphere candidate: it already meets much of the criteria for designation in Article 4 of the World Network of Biosphere Reserve (WNBR) Statutory Framework, all other criteria are found to be feasible, and its current sustainability initiatives align with the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>1</sup>. Securing financial and human resources for implementing nature-based solutions and enhancing conservation initiatives is a current challenge which UNESCO Biosphere status could provide the solution for. The nature of being part of the UNESCO Biospheres network opens up funding potential, especially through research collaboration with international UNESCO Biospheres, Businesses and Non-Governmental Organisations.

## Policy Implications and Proposals

- Our research showed widespread support for UNESCO Biosphere designation; therefore, we believe the time is right for Cornwall Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly to start the process of application to UNESCO officially.
- To ensure a collaborative approach, we recommend forming a working group of interested stakeholders to increase collaboration (including local and national governments, businesses, local community organisations in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly), with a core team responsible for acquiring possible funding.
- To produce a body of research supporting the Biosphere and to lay the groundwork for designation, we recommend partnering with local universities for further research and collaborations.

<sup>1</sup> Maureen Gail Reed and Martin F Price (eds), *UNESCO Biosphere Reserves: Supporting Biocultural Diversity, Sustainability and Society* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group/Earthscan from Routledge 2020).



## Context

A State of Nature report produced by Cornwall in 2020 demonstrates the region is experiencing significant biodiversity decline due to land fragmentation, development, and persecution; **half of terrestrial mammals, three-fifths of butterfly species and half of breeding birds are found in fewer places.**<sup>2</sup> Consequently, a 25-year nature recovery plan is being established. Cornwall Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly are implementing the region's Local Nature Recovery Strategy – a statutory commitment that establishes the layout for Nature Recovery Strategy which increases conservation areas and ensures wildlife's prosperity.

The region's unique cultural heritage and biodiversity is recognised through **several statutory designations** which include Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), World Heritage Sites, National and Local Nature Reserves (NNR, LNR), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Marine Conservation Sites (MCS) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC – Habitats) and Special Protection Areas (SPA – Birds). The region's continuing landscape fragmentation and biodiversity degradation calls for collaborative efforts to safeguard the unique ecological and heritage value of the area while boosting sustainable development.

Our research evaluates the **potential impact of the region gaining UNESCO Biosphere status** on local communities, regional economic practitioners, environmental organisations, and policymakers at local, national, and international level, through a mix of doctrinal research on legal principles and precedents and workshops with the local community and potential stakeholders. **The study considered pressing issues** threatening the unique environment and socio-economic situation of the region; **potential implications** including the need for sufficient human and financial resources, legal compliance, and preliminary research; **and benefits** for the region's socio-economic, ecological and heritage sectors including potential funding, enhanced collaboration between stakeholders and creating a body of research.

## What would a Cornwall & Isles of Scilly UNESCO Biosphere look like?

The UNESCO Biosphere designation works as a soft law mechanism which emphasises the intrinsic relationship between people and their environment, highlighting how the socioeconomic development and environmental protection can work towards mutual objectives.<sup>3</sup> Involving local community and businesses throughout the process, openly communicating challenges as much as successes and inviting open dialogue in response, will foster stakeholder engagement and synergy. Working collaboratively will amplify the positive outcomes and best practices for sustainable development and allow the region to be part of a World Network of UNESCO Biospheres.

In alignment with UNESCO's objective for community involvement, governance is collaborative and inclusive of all key stakeholders. All sectors within the region can take part in the working group, vital to ensure the Biosphere's objectives are directed to meet local needs. The working group will be responsible for creating the management plan, the overall Biosphere vision and establishing the core team for the future Cornwall & Isles of Scilly UNESCO Biosphere.

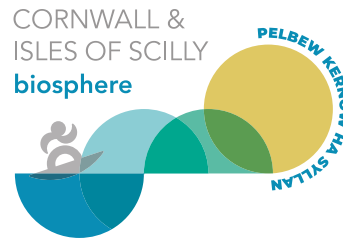
---

<sup>2</sup> Martin Goodall, 'State of Nature Cornwall 2020 Report | Cornwall Wildlife Trust' (2020) <<https://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/state-nature-cornwall-2020-report>> accessed 16 July 2024.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*



University  
of Exeter



## References

Batisse M, *Biosphere Reserves, Compilation 4, October 1986: Programme on Man and the Biosphere (MAB)* ([s.n] 1986) <<http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/44888>> accessed 14 December 2023

Coetzer KL, Witkowski ETF and Erasmus BFN, 'Reviewing Biosphere Reserves Globally: Effective Conservation Action or Bureaucratic Label?' (2014) 89 *Biological Reviews* 82

de Melo Cartaxo T and others, 'Feasibility Study for the Development of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly'  
<<https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/collegeofsocialsciencesandinternationalstudies/lawimages/research/BiosphereFeasibilityStudy.pdf>>

Goodall M, 'State of Nature Cornwall 2020 Report | Cornwall Wildlife Trust' (2020)  
<<https://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/state-nature-cornwall-2020-report>>  
accessed 16 July 2024

Reed MG and Price MF (eds), *UNESCO Biosphere Reserves: Supporting Biocultural Diversity, Sustainability and Society* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group/Earthscan from Routledge 2020)

UNESCO [7637], 'Statutory framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves' (UNESCO 2020) programme and meeting document SC-2019/WS/17

## Acknowledgements

This project was supported by the Research England Policy Support Fund.

## Contact details

Dr Tiago de Melo Cartaxo  
Senior Lecturer in Environmental Law  
University of Exeter Law School, Humanities and Social Sciences Cornwall  
Peter Lanyon Building, Penryn, TR10 9FE  
Email: [t.m.cartaxo@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:t.m.cartaxo@exeter.ac.uk)