

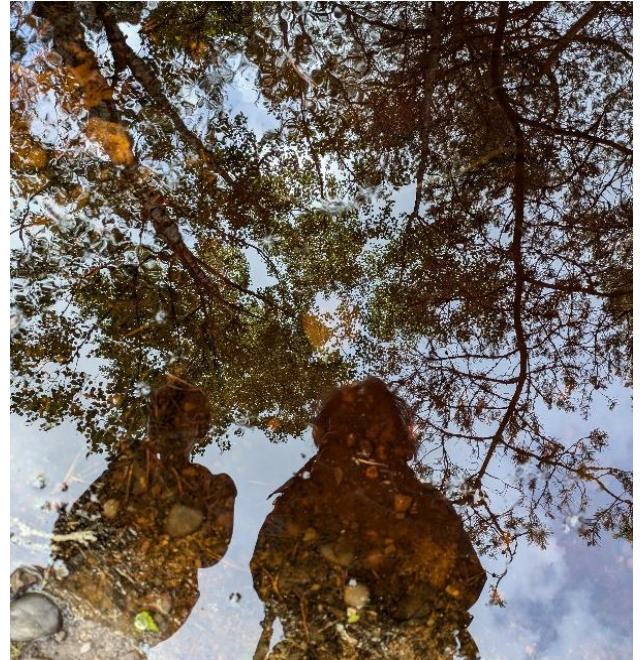
# Event summary: Whisky and nature study

## Overview

Esther Carmen and Rebecca Gray from the James Hutton Institute have been carrying out research to explore if and how whisky companies in Scotland are working with nature to address sustainability concerns and how the sector can be better supported. Prior to the event 16 whisky companies of varying sizes from all across Scotland were interviewed in order to understand the diversity of Nature based Solutions (NbS) being undertaken within the sector.

## Event aims

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2026 an on-line workshop was held to share key early insights with the sector from an ongoing research study examining how the Whisky sector is already working with nature and to identify ideas for increasing such activities in the future.



An interim study report outlining all early insights to date is available [here](#).

The specific aims of the event were;

1. To share early insights from research conversations with whisky producers
2. To further explore what is needed to enable whisky producers across the sector to use Nature-based Solutions more in the future

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For further information about this project please visit our project website <https://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/galvanising-change-natural-capital> or contact [Kerry.Waylen@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:Kerry.Waylen@hutton.ac.uk)

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

### Structure

During this two-hour online event the research team presented on 3 areas of research findings

1. Nature-related interventions, motivations and roles
2. Challenges and opportunities for greater uptake of NbS in the sector
3. Natural capital data and tools

Participants were broadly organised into 4 sub-groups;

- i. Large companies
- ii. Traditional whisky companies
- iii. Smaller whisky companies with a strong focus on working with nature
- iv. Strategic intermediary organisations seeking to support environmental sustainability across the sector.

In parallel discussions each group further explored first the challenges and opportunities for greater uptake of NbS in the sector and second the use of natural capital tools and data to support NbS.

### Participants

All whisky organisations who were previously interviewed were invited to the event. Of the 16 interviewed 9 organisations of varying sizes were able to attend. All organisations play different roles within the sector and were able to offer a diverse range of perspectives. The Scotch Whisky Association was invited to share their insights into the sector more broadly. A select number of Scottish enterprise agencies were also invited to provide a perspective of the natural capital and investments space.

<b>Whisky organisations</b>	<b>Number of individuals</b>
Angus Dundee	1
Arbikie	1
Chivas	1
Diageo	1
Edrington	1
Elixir	1
Glenmorangie	1
Kilchoman	1
Nc'nean	1
<b>Sector Representatives</b>	
Scotch Whisky Association	2
<b>Intermediary organisations</b>	
Highlands and Islands Enterprise Agency	2
Southern Scotland Enterprise Agency	1
Verture (Climate Adaptation NGO)	1
<b>Total number of participants</b>	<b>15</b>

## Key insights and views shared by participants

### *Exploring challenges and opportunities*

Participants from whisky companies emphasised a strong interest in and willingness to enhance environmental sustainability across the sector more generally, and more specifically in terms of working with nature to address a range of challenges and objectives. Furthermore, sector representatives (i.e. the Scottish Whisky Association) consider environmental sustainability as a key dimension of their own activities.

Multiple challenges were explored, including a range of practical constraints, and potential opportunities identified that could help support more widespread uptake of NbS in the future. These included;

**Business risk and resilience:** Taking a risk-based approach was highlighted as beneficial by some more traditional distilleries; with leadership being more open to taking action where a risk to the business could be illustrated. For example, water scarcity issues are increasingly being experienced as an operational challenge by many companies. However it was noted that currently it can be difficult to demonstrate nature as a key asset class (and thus need for investment) to better inform business decisions. Intermediary organisations (e.g. Enterprise Agencies) identified a greater focus on business risk and resilience as a key opportunity to help drive more ambitious action in the sector, particularly for larger companies.

**Company resources:** Smaller whisky producers emphasised the limitations of staff time to act on challenges beyond regulatory compliance and production. Environmental ‘teams’ at smaller companies are often a single member of staff who is often simultaneously working on other areas of the business. Companies of all sizes are feeling financial constraints; for smaller companies lack of money was the most crucial barrier limiting further action. It was felt that the greatest barrier to large scale investment in NbS was the inability to illustrate the return on investment; particularly when considering the way other sectors may benefit from the action. As a result, catchment scale activities such as river restoration were regarded as aspirational rather than actionable by small companies.

**Working with others:** An important challenge raised was the difficulties in working with neighbouring landowners; whether private or Crown Estate. There are also ‘time burdens’ involved in engaging with landowners to get them on-board in order to progress NbS out with companies own land. One opportunity highlighted was working with/ through catchment partnerships that can help to manage this, for example the Spey Catchment Initiative (SCI) who have relevant expertise to support such engagement. Further, some participants felt there was an opportunity for the public sector (e.g. SEPA and NatureScot) to help better coordinate landscape scale NbS through integrated land use planning processes and practices.

A key general insight emerging from these discussions was the need to recognise the heterogeneity within the sector (in terms of business models and resources) to better understand current challenges and to seize opportunities to enable companies to strengthen how they work with nature in the future.

### *Natural capital data and tools*

Participants emphasised that the importance of collecting data relating to the natural environment was acknowledged across the sector but highlighted how difficult this can be in practice. Single

metrics like water quantity or quality were seen as much easier to understand and thus collect and use to inform decisions than biodiversity data. Many companies collect data to inform compliance, such as water temperatures and for monitoring.

Larger companies tend to collect a broad range of data, often working with consultants and through partnerships. Smaller companies are more constrained in what data they collect and use, often focusing on data to help access resources (i.e. funding proposals), and action may be taken in absence of clear data (e.g. wildflower planting to enhance pollinators).

Publicly available data was highlighted as useful to explore challenges (e.g. related to a changing climate) but may need to be translated to inform place-based activities. Data to assess the effectiveness of interventions was seen as important but often challenging to collect and demonstrate how action was leading to a reduction in business risk. Partnerships with research institutes were identified as helpful for supporting data collection and information sharing.

### Examples of tools and frameworks

Tools and frameworks were seen as useful to help translate data into meaningful information. During the event a number of potentially useful NC tools were identified by participants. A list of these has been provided below. This is not an exhaustive list of tools and is merely what was raised during the group discussions.

- Ecosystems knowledge networks' [Tool Assessor](#): provides information about different methods and tools that show the value of the natural environment in society. This is a good starting point for anyone who is not currently using tools and is looking to be pointed in the right direction.
- Nature Scot's [Natural Capital tool](#): a free decision support tool for land management in Scotland that gives access to relevant NC datasets and evidence. This tool is currently in beta testing but is accessible on request.
- [RethinkCarbon](#): a climate-tech startup building technology that helps landowners make sustainable land use decisions. Offers scenario modelling, natural capital reporting, grant information, and data management and sharing.
- [Zora Ecosystems](#): a platform built to develop NbS projects in collaboration with stakeholders, offering detailed reporting and project management.
- Highland adapts' [Highland Climate Change Risk & Opportunity Assessment \(HCCROA\)](#): provides a regional overview of evidence based climate change risks and opportunities from the present day to the 2080s that can be explored through a number of themes and case studies.
- UK Centre for ecology and hydrology's' [National River Flow Archive](#): is the UK's official record of river flow data, providing access to data from over 1,600 gauging stations all around the UK. This data can be used to assess water availability and the impacts of climate change over time.
- [Chirrup.ai](#): a biodiversity monitoring tool that uses bioacoustics (e.g. bird song)
- The [iNaturalist](#) app: is a social network where users can photograph plants, animals, fungi etc that they encounter. Other users then provide an identification, creating a record of the biodiversity in an area. This then becomes open data that can be used by scientists, conservationists, and researchers. This app could be used by staff and site visitors.

### Next steps

The data we collected during this event will now be analysed. A final report presenting this full study will be prepared and shared with the Scottish Government (who have funded this study) and all study participants in September 2026.