Plantlife press alert
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Plantlife planting plant conservation at the core of COP28 climate talks

Protecting and restoring grassland habitats is crucial to tackling the interlinked climate and biodiversity emergencies, says Plantlife, as it urges world leaders to not shade plants out of discussions at COP28.

A Plantlife report addressing the value and vulnerability of species-rich grasslands (1) highlights how they are crucial carbon stores to rival both forests and peatlands - their more celebrated carbon capture cousins.

Up to 35% of the Earth's land carbon is stored in grassland, with the potential to store billions of tonnes more every year and, as the crunch climate talks gather pace, Plantlife has been in the United Arab Emirates highlighting how healthy grasslands and savannahs are critically important for carbon storage and climate resilience.

Joanne Riggall, Grasslands Advocacy Officer, Plantlife, commented:

"Whilst trees and peatlands are rightly recognised for their role in climate change mitigation and adaptation, species-rich and semi-natural grassland are also sensational and stable carbon stores that are far too often overlooked by policy makers. There's a grassland gap we must fill if we're to tackle the climate crisis head on."

Plantlife is teaming up with WWF (the World Wide Fund for Nature) at COP28 to press for better recognition of grasslands and savannahs, alongside other habitats. The fresh briefing (2) released during COP28, and designed to influence policy makers beyond the conference, argues:

"The importance of grasslands and savannahs for people, agriculture, nature and our climate has been systematically undervalued and overlooked around the world. Every opportunity must be taken by governments to achieve the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) and UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) targets for climate change and biodiversity loss; to achieve this, they cannot afford to ignore grassland and savannah biomes that cover over 50% of the world's land. Therefore, countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) must specifically include targets, actions, and legislation for the protection, sustainable management, and restoration of grasslands and savannahs."

Martina Fleckenstein, Global Head of Policy, Food, WWF said:
"Protecting, sustainably managing and restoring grasslands and savannahs is critical to limiting the impacts of global warming. As biodiverse carbon stores that also produce most of our food, they are landscapes in which the nature, climate and food agendas align. Integrated actions on the ground and in the water in these landscapes provide us some of the best hopes of achieving global nature and climate goals. Countries need to recognise the importance of grasslands and savannahs with dedicated actions in updated NDCs, NAPs and NBSAPs."
Grasslands carbon value is often under-reported: Plantlife argues that the most common carbon sampling methods underestimate grasslands carbon capture power: they often only measure the top 15cm of soil, despite 60% of carbon in grasslands stored below depths of 30 cm.

Healthy grasslands and savannah habitats have some of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world. Indeed, Plantlife's carbon investigation (3) highlights that there can be up to 89 plant species/m2 in upland Argentina and 98 species/10m2 in parts of Romania.

The plant and fungal species richness (or otherwise) of grasslands matters. A diversity of plants boosts carbon storage as the varying root lengths and structures can access more nutrients and draw down carbon deep into fungal networks and the soil. The undisturbed soils of species-rich or semi-natural grasslands lock down more carbon than agriculturally improved (intensively managed) grasslands.

From wildflower meadows to grassy road verges Plantlife campaigns in the UK and globally to highlight the value and vulnerability of all grasslands; a staggering 97% of wildflower meadows and 80% of chalk grasslands have been eradicated since the 1930s in the UK. Of the remaining 3% of meadows, 75% exist in small fragments making them especially vulnerable. Plantlife has recently launched a call for the UK Government to create a Grasslands Action Plan for England to protect and restore English grasslands (4) backed by almost 30 other organisations.

Plantlife is ringing the alarm for grasslands at COP28 and beyond as they are one of the habitats set to be most severely challenged by exposure to climate change in coming years. According to a recent Plantlife and partners report (5), chalk grasslands are the most exposed semi-natural habitat in the UK (as well as the most exposed of all between 2021–2040 and 2061–2080).

Ends

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Dropbox of grasslands images free to use with credit: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/17inx5kbxfbk41pethj8q/h?rlkey=v3ysdreep96qsdyi3zil4z7w3&dl=0

Notes to editors:

1. https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Grasslands-as-a-Carbon-Store.pdf
2. https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Plantlife-WWF-Equilibrium-Research-briefing-grasslands-in-NDCs-NBSAPs-Nov-2023.pdf
3. https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Plantlife-WWF-Equilibrium-Research-briefing-grasslands-in-NDCs-NBSAPs-Nov-2023.pdf
4. Grasslands Action Plan: https://www.plantlife.org.uk/our-work/the-grassland-gap/
5. https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Plantlife-Press-Release-Journal-of-Applied-Ecology-Climate-Impact.pdf