

Farming with Nature

Three key lessons for the adoption of
nature-friendly farming

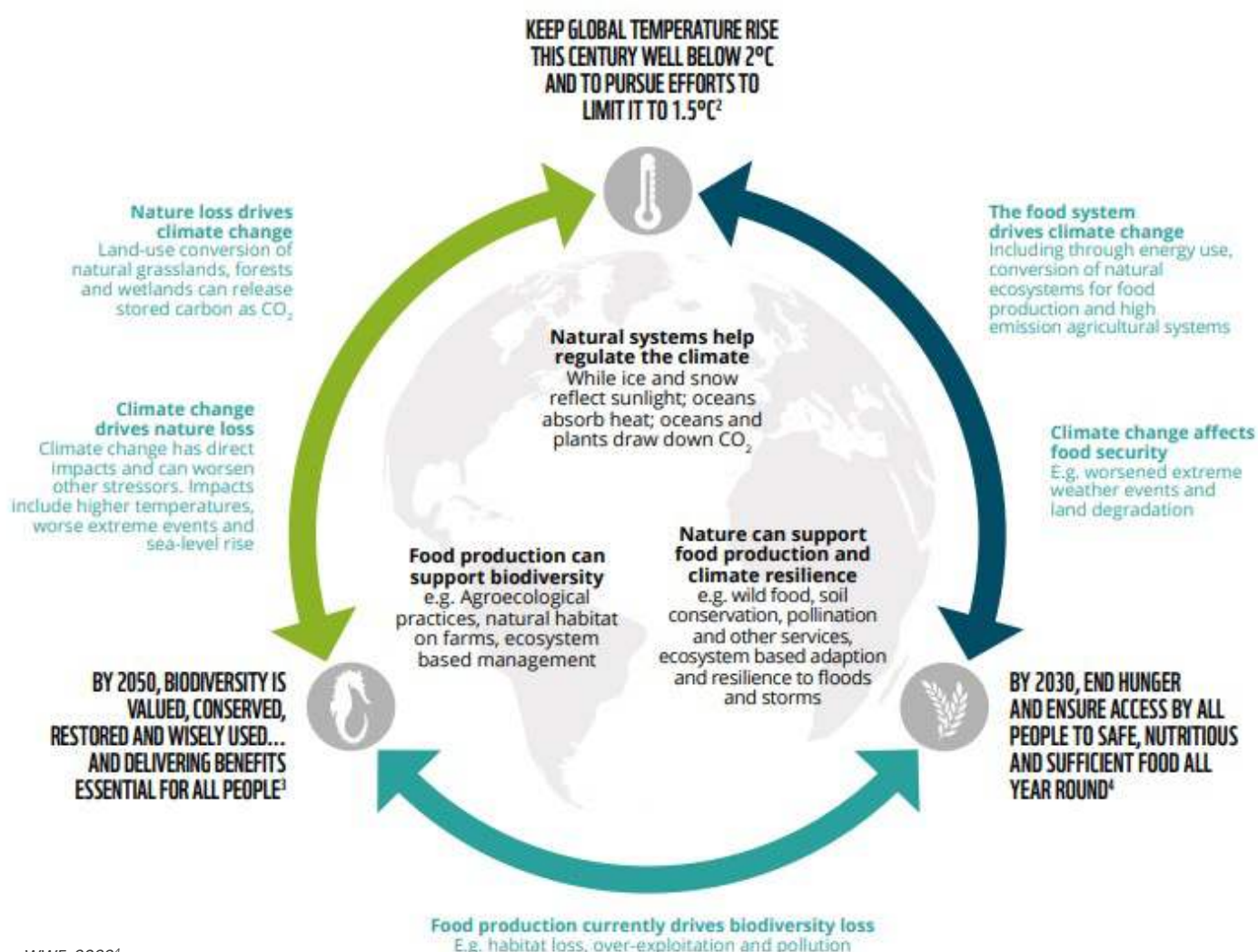
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Introduction

We need a systemic re-think of agriculture, to create a system that allows us to produce food within planetary boundaries¹, embedded in thriving rural communities and fair business models, a system resilient to change, including the impacts of climate change. What does it take to create such a system?

Since the Second World War, farming has had a clear vision and focus: no more hunger. This has led to an extreme focus on maximising production and minimising price. For optimum efficiency, traditional mixed farms were replaced by specialised operations and supply-chains, focussing on intensive, large-scale monocultures. But we are now reaching the limits, as the prevailing model of food production, driven by efficiency and scale, wreaks havoc on our environment and jeopardises global food security, our ability to meet the climate targets of the Paris Agreement² and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, at COP28 in December 2023, we have seen food systems take a central role in climate discussions for the first time.

This unsustainable approach contributes to water shortages, pollution and soil degradation and the decimation of biodiversity, including plants, birds and crucial pollinators like bees. Intensive livestock farming, synthetic fertilisers and long-distance transport in large-scale agriculture also results in alarming carbon emissions, intensifying the climate emergency. Moreover, the focus on efficiency sacrifices resilience and flexibility, leaving food systems vulnerable to unforeseen challenges. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization³, the worldwide food industry is responsible for hidden costs (environmental harm, malnutrition, and disease) totalling \$12 trillion—surpassing its market value of \$10 trillion.



With half of the world's habitable land⁵ being taken up with agriculture, farmers are the most important stewards of our environment and the key to meeting our nature and climate goals. We are at a critical time both for the future of agriculture and the health of the environment.

Earthwatch Europe are an independent science-based organisation made up of skilled conveners, scientists and sustainability experts. Our vision is a future where farmers are empowered to put nature at the heart of farming. Through our Farming with Nature programme we support farmers, agri-businesses and investors to understand and re-imagine the way we produce,

purchase and finance food – driving the transition to a more sustainable and resilient future for farming communities, supply chains and our planet.

In this paper Earthwatch Europe share three key lessons for the adoption of more nature-friendly farming based on our programme activities to date:

- 1. The need for a clear vision and direction towards Farming with Nature**
- 2. The importance of grounding change in farm-scale measurement**
- 3. The value of strong relationships in the supply chain.**



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Three key lessons on Farming with Nature

1) THE NEED FOR A CLEAR VISION AND DIRECTION TOWARDS FARMING WITH NATURE

What is Farming with Nature?

While political opinions – and policies – may fluctuate, ecological realities mean that there is only one feasible future for farming that is truly sustainable – farming in balance with nature.

In an era marked by environmental challenges and a growing demand for food, Farming with Nature prioritises biodiversity as the linchpin of agricultural success, advocating for diverse habitats and crops to enhance resilience – a recommendation core to the FAO roadmap⁶ presented at COP28 in December 2023. The current reliance on a few crops for global food production leaves agriculture vulnerable, and the decline in biodiversity, soil health and soil biodiversity jeopardises crop yields.

A Farming with Nature approach integrates livestock and crop production, utilising waste for natural fertilisation, fostering healthier ecosystems. Emphasising adaptability to local conditions, the approach tailors agricultural practices to specific soil, water, and weather features, fostering resource efficiency and a deeper connection between farmers and their environment. Resilience and flexibility are achieved through diversifying crops and incorporating practices like agroforestry. The protection and regeneration of soils involve agroforestry, no tillage, and crop rotation, promoting healthy soils and long-term economic sustainability. The commitment to minimise chemical inputs aligns with producing healthier foods and reducing environmental impact. Moreover, Farming with Nature aligns with global climate change goals by reducing greenhouse gas emissions through improved soil management as it is estimated that soil can sequester 27% of the global emissions⁷ needed to keep temperature rises below 2°C (although was notably absent⁸ from the final COP28 agreement).

A growing body of scientific research indicates that farming with nature can serve dual purposes: agricultural productivity while also fostering biodiversity

and maintaining ecosystem health.⁹ To achieve a truly sustainable model and food security for all, a farming with nature approach must be implemented alongside additional corrections elsewhere in the system, such as food distribution, food waste, market access and consumer trust.¹⁰

Ultimately, Farming with Nature represents a mindset shift – from seeing nature as a growing medium which we can control, to seeing farming as the creation and maintenance of a healthy ecosystem from which we can harvest profitably.



Creator: Philip Formby. Copyright: WTP/Philip Formby

The Woodland Trust¹¹ profiles David Brass, CEO of The Lakes Free Range Egg Company, who espouses the multiple benefits of tree planting on his family farm. While he paid an upfront cost of £2,000 per hectare to plant trees, he calculated that it took only six months to achieve payback. How is this done? Trees encourage birds to come out of their sheds, which then display more natural behaviours and congregate in safety under the shelter of the trees, leading to lower hen stress and mortality and a 2% increase in Grade A egg count. In addition, trees are thinned and lower quality wood is used as fuel in the farm's biomass boiler; barn owls and red squirrels have returned to the farm; and trees help intercept ammonia emissions from sheds. Such systems not only weather environmental challenges more effectively but also contribute to increased yields and overall farm sustainability.

Setting a vision for Farming with Nature

One of the challenges with transitioning towards a Farming with Nature approach is that, whilst farmers and businesses increasingly recognise the need to change their farming methods, many feel they are trapped by the existing system which does not incentivise or enable them to do this. Agricultural legislation in many countries is still largely aimed at maximising scale and production with agricultural incentives encouraging this. For example, 12 out of 34¹² agricultural subsidy schemes in the Netherlands are likely to have negative impacts on biodiversity and the environment as they incentivise intensification. Lack of access to finance is a significant issue – globally only 4% of climate finance¹³ targets the agriculture, forestry and other land use sector and in the UK the finance gap¹⁴ to secure key nature-related outcomes is estimated to be GBP56 billion over the next 10 years. As a result, farmers struggle to see how they can create an environmentally sustainable AND economically viable business model.

Making changes to farming operations requires long term investment, but farmers and businesses will be reluctant to make these investments unless they have faith that the system will change with them, concerned that the burden and all the risk will fall on their shoulders. Earthwatch have consulted with farmers who report feeling overwhelmed with policy and incentives that sometimes conflict and lack a

clear vision. As one farmer put it: *What we crave is clarity, a dot on the horizon, once it's clear where we are heading, we farmers are entrepreneurial enough to get there. But without that dot we are going in circles.*

To give farmers clarity and confidence in the future it is crucial that governments and businesses are explicit about their direction of travel, commit to this change and back this up with action. Farming with Nature must become the new shared vision and focus.

Governments and businesses don't need to have all the answers or know exactly how to get to their goals, but providing clarity on the direction of travel and offering a commitment to support farmers to transition is key to giving farmers the confidence to take the leap. This kind of clarity and vision for the sector could help attract young people to the farming industry at a time when the percentage of people who work in agriculture has dropped globally from 44% to 26% in 30 years¹⁵.

There are some encouraging activities from some financial institutions and agri-businesses. For example, in December 2023 Rabobank published a 'vision report'¹⁶ that announced a clear change in direction. It is important that these pledges are backed up with action and that more and more organisations pin their colours to the mast.



2) THE IMPORTANCE OF INCORPORATING LOCAL CONTEXT

Adopting a Farming with Nature approach necessitates a paradigm shift across the farming industry.

One of the challenges for farmers in implementing changes is that targets, guidelines and best-practice often make assumptions about local contexts and needs, neglecting the nuanced complexities of local ecosystems and social conditions and sometimes leaving a critical gap between aspiration and reality. *“The problem is that no “one size fits all solution” exists, despite current policy designs often functioning as if this were the case”*¹⁷

Furthermore, through dialogue with farmers, Earthwatch conclude that many need to build new knowledge and experience about how to understand and interpret nature. This ‘ecosystem mindset’ requires ecological skills – knowing how to ‘read’ the landscape, how to understand current conditions, how to work with them.

Earthwatch Europe proposes a shift toward evidence-based solutions that promote farm-scale measurement, analysis and understanding of nature.

Earthwatch’s Farming with Science¹⁸ proposes a citizen science approach that empowers farmers to become active participants in data collection and analysis about the health and importance of nature on and around the farm. Through fresh water, soil health and biodiversity monitoring toolkits (details in the case study at the end of this paper), Earthwatch Europe equips farmers with the tools they need to generate data about the health of nature on the farm and about the impact of interventions to improve this.

Collecting and analysing farm-scale data about nature enables farmers to:

Gather baseline data: gathering data about the ecological health of the farm enables farmers to understand the health of their soils, biodiversity and

water for themselves, to get a sense of how big the problems are on their farm and where they come from. This gives farmers agency and ownership over the challenges.

Make informed decisions: better understanding of the health of the farm ecosystem allows for targeted and informed decision-making on agricultural practices to improve issues like soil health.

Measure the impact of decisions: these data also enable farmers to measure the impact of interventions, contrasting the data before and afterwards and from farm to farm or field to field. This enables new farming practices, technologies or crop varieties to be evaluated for their effectiveness and adjusted to optimise outcomes.

Contribute to landscape scale understanding: Collating this data across allows us to build understanding of the health of natural capital from a local farm level up to larger landscapes, national and international scales.

Evidence achievements: clear measurements of the impact of more nature-friendly farming practices can be used to support funding applications, provide metrics for sustainable farming incentives and add value to buyers. For example, in the UK, as in many other countries, the 2021 Sustainable Farming Incentive¹⁹ requires farmers to provide metrics to evidence the health of nature of their farm and the impact of measures to protect the environment in order to secure funding. One of the incentives requires farmers to assess the soil, produce a soil management plan and test soil organic matter, including measurement of soil type, texture, structure and biology. There is currently no tool recommended for this and Earthwatch’s Soil Health Toolkit could be used towards this.

Drive collaborative ways of working. As more agri-businesses commit to science-based targets and explore new opportunities to improve the sustainability of their operations, being able to demonstrate the potential of more sustainable farming techniques can stimulate better collaborative working, better relationships and increase market opportunity.

3) THE VALUE OF HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN

"Significant shifts in global food systems are necessary to meet the world's demand for food, fuel, and fiber without harming the planet—and innovation at scale is key." McKinsey 2023²⁰

A growing number of investors and supply chain businesses acknowledge the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) risks associated with existing food systems, recognising the imperative to transition toward a more sustainable model. In 2023 research conducted by WTW²¹ amongst senior food and beverage business decision makers globally, 84% said that ESG is a specific selection criteria when selecting new supply chain vendors, while 82% said sustainability was a key goal for their supply chain.

However, the prevailing reliance on sustainability standards, policies and certification frameworks, while valuable in certain respects, will not be sufficient to bring about the sustainable innovation and transformation needed in agricultural supply chains. Regulations frequently lag behind science and innovation and fall short of addressing the macro systemic problems deeply ingrained in our global food supply chains. They are subject to change with successive governments which reduces the confidence of farmers and businesses to take bold and costly actions. Furthermore, a compliance approach can inadvertently create a box-checking mentality, often detached from the on-the-ground challenges of farming or the realities and ambitions of those that finance, supply and purchase within these systems.

To truly unlock the potential for Farming with Nature, we must shift our focus towards fostering conversation, collaboration, trust and robust relationships within agricultural supply chains.

By fostering collaboration between banks and financial institutions, suppliers, growers and agri-food companies we can co-create and co-fund solutions that align with the economic, social and environmental realities of Farming with Nature. A collaborative approach should ensure that effective Farming with Nature initiatives endure in spite of any change to incentives, that risks and rewards of innovation are spread equally across the supply chain, and that farmers have confidence to take decisive action.

A number of agri-businesses, such as Danone²², have developed initiatives that enable them to work collaboratively within their supply chains. Such programmes and their learnings, when open and widely available, could contribute to create change across the sector.

Case study: Danone Farming for Generations

Danone are working to boost large scale adoption of regenerative agricultural practices through their Farming for Generations programme. This programme unites 8 of the world's leading agricultural players with experts from animal health and welfare companies, crop scientists, food researchers and independent NGOs.

Danone involve feed and dairy producers through three communities:

- **The Farming for Generations' board:** The alliance board of farmers involves 7 farmers in the US, the EU and Russia. This board of farmers is invited to annual workshops and work sessions with partners and advisors. They act as a sounding board where Farming for Generations' recommendations and tools will be tested and improved.
- **The pool of demo farms:** the project involves more than 30 farmers with whom Danone develop recommendations and tools (diagnostic, best practices, trainings) and who showcase what they have been working on.
- **The farmers' network:** The extended group of feed and dairy producers collaborate through farmers' meetings, focus groups and local farmers' platforms.

"Great, pioneering concepts have a long journey to travel before they can foster change. The power of partnership—between established businesses and new players—can help industries make that daunting leap from transformative ideas to real-world solutions that drive fast and efficient innovation."

FORBES 2022²³

To develop opportunities for such collaboration for all agri-businesses and their supply chain, Earthwatch Europe is developing the 'Knowledge Exchange' initiative - details in the case study at the end of this report. This programme enables actors within one or more supply chains, i.e. farmers, banks and insurers, suppliers, agri-food companies and other stakeholders and experts, to come together in a neutral environment to engage in open and transparent dialogue to comprehend each other's needs, challenges and aspirations around Farming with Nature. This understanding is essential for dismantling preconceived notions and fostering a more inclusive approach to sustainable agriculture. Through enhanced relationships and understanding, the group will collectively reimagine their food supply chain towards a system that incentivises Farming with Nature.



"Farmers need to be part of a community of peers who are trying similar things and can share learnings. No one organisation can address all of those needs on its own – it will take partnerships and collaboration to deliver the holistic package of support that is needed, but when that happens, we believe that farmers will be more resilient, crops will yield more, and our planet will reap the benefits."

CHIEF SUSTAINABILITY OFFICER OF PEPSICO²⁴

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Conclusion

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Farming with Nature is a necessity, a clarion call to address the profound unsustainability embedded in conventional farming practices and supply chains. Whilst there is a recognition that change is needed towards Farming with Nature, there is still a way to go to ensure we have the clear direction, understanding and collaboration to transform the sector.

To do this we need clarity and a commitment to change across government and industry to provide confidence and incentives for farmers, agri-

businesses and investors to act. Farmers need to develop an ecosystem mindset, including the ability to understand and interpret nature. They need to be able to experiment and transform based on local and accessible data, with support and incentives from across the agricultural supply chain. We must strive for relationship-driven supply chains where understanding, empathy and collaboration among farmers, agri-businesses and investors enables the adoption of farming with nature practices.



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Farming with science

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Earthwatch Europe partners with groups of farmers to create learning networks in which farmers can collectively study their impacts on water quality, soil health and biodiversity. We provide easy to use toolkits to support farmers gather, assess, visualise and interpret data to make it easy to understand:

- Earthwatch Europe's **Soil Health Toolkit**²⁵ is an easy to implement set of measures that allows farmers to assess the health of the soil by analysing soil texture, infiltration, colour, earthworm density and vegetation cover. The Soil Health Toolkit platform is a place to share data, generate new knowledge and increase awareness and action to improve soil health across Europe.
- **FreshWater Watch**²⁶ is a global project run by Earthwatch Europe Using a simple water testing kit and accessing the online platform and database, farmers can assess and document levels of nutrient pollution (phosphates and nitrates) over time (and other parameters as required). The resulting data provides the robust evidence needed to improve water quality.
- Earthwatch Europe, together with the Wageningen University and other partners, are developing a simple-to-use **Biodiversity Monitoring Tool** for farmers, organisations and groups to use. This tool, currently in its pilot phase, will help farmers to easily understand and record a baseline of biodiversity for their farms and to monitor how changes to their farming practices affects biodiversity.

We facilitate discussion and peer-learning and involve stakeholders and experts to investigate what measures could be taken to become more nature inclusive.

For example:

Case study: Measuring water quality in Rijnland

In this project undertaken in the Netherlands, Earthwatch Europe partnered with Wij.land²⁷, and Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland²⁸, the oldest water authority in the Netherlands to create a dynamic learning experience for 10 farmers, including;

- **Co-Creation of Measurement Plan:** Together, we designed a customised monitoring plan tailored to the unique needs of the participating farmers.
- **Materials and Training:** Earthwatch Europe provided materials and training to ensure farmers had the tools and knowledge they needed.
- **Supervised Field Monitoring:** Through a user-friendly app, platform, and WhatsApp support, Earthwatch Europe guided farmers in conducting field measurements effectively.
- **Data Interpretation and Feedback:** Our team analysed the data collected, provided valuable insights, and facilitated regular feedback sessions.

Agribusiness innovation

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Earthwatch Europe support agribusinesses to find innovative ways to work with farmers to reduce their impact on and benefit from nature and natural processes.

Case study: Earthwatch and Tate & Lyle

Tate & Lyle PLC (Tate & Lyle) has partnered with Earthwatch and Nanjing Agricultural University (NJAU) since 2019 to develop a research-based programme supporting stevia growers to reduce their environmental impact and gain greater economic benefit from production of this in-demand sweetener.

Through applied and participative research, including field trials and on the ground monitoring of new farming practices, as well as training and best practice sharing amongst growers, the programme has resulted in promising reductions in all of the nine impact categories measured against the baseline, including a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and an improvement in metrics linked to local water quality.

The engagement with farmers through Earthwatch's developed and tested citizen science monitoring

methods of soil and water quality, has played a key role not only in per farm empirical data collection, but also in informing farmers and increasing their understanding of the potential benefits of more sustainable farming practices.

Outcomes: This agri-business innovation project is helping to;

- Build the evidence base and demonstrate to farmers and buyers the positive environmental, social and economic impacts associated with these farming practices.
- Improve relationships and understanding between farmers and suppliers.
- Support farmers to improve the sustainability of their farm while improving their livelihoods.
- Support Tate & Lyle to meet their sustainability goals including Science Based Targets.





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Knowledge exchange

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Banks and insurers, suppliers, and agri-food companies can play a pivotal role in co-creating solutions that unlock the potential for Farming with Nature. To do this, Earthwatch Europe convene workshops that foster conversation, collaboration, trust and robust relationships within agricultural supply chains to bring about shifts in thinking and in supply chain systems.

Earthwatch Europe bring together businesses within an agricultural supply chain (farmers, suppliers, buyers, investors, policy maker) at an inspirational farmed environment. In a confidential and neutral learning environment, participants seek to understand principles of Farming with Nature. Participants hear from stakeholders about challenges to more sustainable ways of operating and collaborate to resolve these issues, reimagining the supply chain in a way that enables Farming with Nature.

Case study: Earthwatch and PepsiCo

Earthwatch Europe work with PepsiCo with the aim of supporting farmers within their supply chain to adapt their production cycles and improve their soils.

Potatoes, which are a key crop for PepsiCo, are occasionally farmed in a short rotation. This can have negative impacts on soil health and erodes soil fertility and resilience over time.

To create a farming cycle in which soils are regenerated and soil biodiversity is restored, farmers can take a number of measures, including lengthening the rotation cycle to 1-4 or more and include a diverse crop range within the rotation, between potatoes. However, this means setting up relationships with more offtakers, which can be very hard to do for individual farmers.

‘Knowledge Exchanges’ would help buyers, financial institutions and farmers to come together to build understanding of the on-the-ground reality for farmers, and start a conversation about buying combinations of products which would reflect the combination of crops grown by the farmers on nature-friendly farm.

Earthwatch Farming with Nature team

Peter Hoebe

Research Lead

I am Peter Hoebe, research lead for the Farming with Nature programme at Earthwatch Europe. My background is in plant biology and sustainable agriculture.

For my biology studies I have done projects on fresh water and mating systems in plants. Since then, I have worked on sustainable agriculture in the UK looking at arable systems. I mostly focused on optimising crops and crop systems for low input systems but other projects also looked at plant protection, in forestry for example. At Earthwatch Europe I focus on citizen science in the Netherlands and UK, using the fresh water and soil health tool kits and further data analysis and innovation. We work together with groups of farmers to look at water and soil quality and the relation with management and landscape elements.



Michiel van den Bergh

Senior Programme Manager

As a human geographer by training, I am deeply committed to win-win scenarios for environmental conservation and sustainable development, particularly in the farming sector. In fact, my PhD research focussed on farmers' perspective on the environment, conservation and livelihoods in West Africa's Sahel region. More recently, I have worked with WWF on nature-based solutions for, and with, farmers in the Netherlands and abroad. Currently, I am Senior Programme Manager Farming with Nature at Earthwatch, and together we support farmers, agri-businesses and investors to understand and re-imagine the way we produce, purchase and finance food.



Fraukje Steffen

Research Manager

I am Fraukje Steffen, research manager for the Farming with Nature programme at Earthwatch Europe. I have a background in biogeochemistry and environmental soil science.

My main focus is on soil health in combination with nutrient management in sustainable agriculture.

At Earthwatch Europe I train and supervise citizen scientists to use our easy tools for measurements of fresh water and soil health quality. We do this in order to help farmers and citizens to better understand their local environment. Another part of my work is to perform data quality checks next to data analysis and interpretation.



Emma Hooghwinkel

Project Coordinator

I am Emma Hooghwinkel, project coordinator at Earthwatch Europe. My passion for and knowledge of sustainable agriculture comes from volunteering at nature-inclusive farms. Within our Farming with Nature programme, I support the programme managers and researchers in their work. Because of the many partners involved in our projects, good planning, coordination and communication are essential. Our goal is to bring different stakeholders in the sector together, enabling the exchange of knowledge and ideas to improve sustainable farming practices.



Get in touch

Earthwatch are keen to work with farmers and those in the agricultural supply chain to support a transition to a farming with nature approach. If you would like to find out more about Earthwatch's Farming with Nature programme or discuss ways we could work together, please visit our [website](https://www.earthwatch.org.uk), or contact:

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