



Nature and the built environment

KPMG ESG Voices podcast

Featuring Janet Greenwood, Global Lead for Sustainable Infrastructure at KPMG International, leading the discussion, she will be joined by Ruth Voight, Environmental Sustainability Leader for Europe at Laing O'Rourke, and Mair Brooks, Partner of Infrastructure Advisory at KPMG in New Zealand.

Host

Hello and welcome to KPMG's ESG voices podcast, the series that takes a deep dive into the opportunities and challenges of ESG and what it means for businesses and communities through interviews with specialists from KPMG and beyond. Throughout the series, we will discuss a broad range of issues around sustainability and regeneration, aiming to support businesses and communities in creating an equitable and prosperous future for all.

Today's episode is another edition in a series of special episodes focusing on infrastructure and the built environment. As we know, a society cannot function without water transport and energy networks, nor can it function without the buildings we live and work in. Today specifically, we'll be touching on the link between nature and the built environment, exploring the alignment between societal needs and the needs of nature, and the opportunities that arise as a result. With Janet Greenwood, Global Lead for Sustainable Infrastructure at KPMG International, leading the discussion, she will be joined by Ruth Voight, Environmental Sustainability Leader for Europe at Laing O'Rourke, and Mair Brooks, Partner of Infrastructure Advisory at KPMG in New Zealand.

So, without further ado, Janet, over to you.

Janet Greenwood

We know that we are using the equivalent of 1.6 Earths to maintain our current way of life, and that our ecosystems cannot keep up with our demands. A million of the world's estimated 8 million species of plants and animals are threatened with extinction. We need to do things differently. So today's episode is all about nature.

And I'm delighted to say that I'm joined by two global experts in this place, Ruth Voight of Laing O'Rourke and Mair Brooks of KPMG.

So Ruth and Mair, I would really like to explore first of all, what does a flourishing future look like for you? Ruth, if I can turn to you first.

Ruth Voight

I think that for me, it's the future that allows both people and our planet to thrive but not just survive. And I think it's moving beyond where we currently sit in just, do the bare minimum, and actually really think about the opportunities that nature can bring us.

Janet Greenwood

Yeah, I wholeheartedly agree. And Mair, I suspect you would also be agreeing, but I'd be interested in your vision of what a flourishing future looks like.

Mair Brooks

Yeah, I think I absolutely echo that, but I think it's also that resilience. But I think it's the intergenerational wellbeing to think about as well. And I think some of the decisions and the vision we need to have is to have that, multi-generation thinking, you know, this is I think change of the mindset as you think that way and the trade-offs that we have to make.

Janet Greenwood

Yes. That seven generations, that sort of indigenous wisdom approach. And where does the built environment sit within that vision, Mair?

Mair Brooks

I think there's a necessary of what we need to live with now, but what we then need to make adaptive changes moving forward and have that view of we can change networks over time, we can influence quite substantial change over time, you know, and, you see in our own lifetimes of the regeneration that we've seen and, you know, it's making those calls. So for me, we know we've got to deliver services — so infrastructure is about delivering services to the people, to the citizens, the businesses, communities, but then what steps can we adapt and change to that? And what I'm seeing is when our clients are putting sustainability in front of mind in the conversation and not at the side, then it's changing some decisions that they're making and some of the built infrastructure that they would previously have done, how to do that differently, whether it's, for example in water, I'm seeing it quite a lot in I'm based in Auckland. And, you know, we had severe floods a few years ago and you're seeing the reaction now. It's where solutions worked and where solutions failed and what we can do differently.

But rather than being in a concrete based, you know, view, it's actually how do we use planting, how do we use natural solutions to evolve and have lateral flow ways for, for the city, you know, in a city that you think would be pretty adapted to if we had to do more changes. So seeing that respond quite quickly has been good.

Janet Greenwood

Yeah. A shift away from that concrete first approach to nature-based solutions. Yes, absolutely. And, Ruth, your work is absolutely at the sharp end of how do we align our societal needs with the needs of nature, which of course supports our very existence. So I'd be interested to learn a little bit more about your role, your work, Ruth, and your views on how built environment can support nature to flourish.

Ruth Voight

Yeah, I think we need to change the way we think about planning infrastructure projects, and I think we need to start taking that landscape-based view. And so like placemaking and kind of really think about regional planning when we start thinking about major infrastructure. And I think in some, so, you know, I started as an environmental management manager in construction and have had the opportunity to sit at leadership level on these major, major projects where we think about all of sustainability. And the real opportunity is I've been again, lucky enough to work on collaborative contracts, which mean that we have worked on projects where we've had the designers alongside the clients and the contractors, and we're thinking end to end, so we're thinking about the design phase and designing for construction and designing for operation and actually thinking what that means. So planning in what systems upgrades do we need for the end state. So for example, if we're going to specify new habitats, are we giving the maintainer of those habitats the opportunity to understand what they need to do? How do they cost that into their regulatory funding cycles? How do they put those people to work? And thinking about that from the outset, rather than just maybe the environmental statement that's going to support the planning application. So really looking at the opportunities, every phase of the project from the outset, and designing for that from the start.

Janet Greenwood

So just to sort of play that back, that's if you are thinking about, be it, a new power supply network or, I don't know, a reservoir or something, at the end of it you're thinking beyond just the simple outputs of the thing you're building. You're also thinking about the adjacent landscape, what that's going to look like and how it will be maintained in the future. Is that a fair way of phrasing?

Ruth Voight

Yeah, absolutely. I think each one of those assets is slightly different. So, for example, the infrastructure manager, may retain the land rights to the habitats and stuff that you might create as part of your development. And especially with the advent of biodiversity net gain. And whilst it's still not mandatory on our Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects at the moment, a lot of them will adopt the same principles of the Town and Country Planning Act. And so therefore there will be a lot of kind of habitat creation. Sometimes that's done on site, sometimes it's done offsite with third party providers, but I think, regardless, it could be that you're working with grantors, for example. So you never take that land permanently and you're looking at those opportunities to build in resilience for them, for food security and maybe regenerative farming opportunities.

Or you might be managing those habitats into the long term, for example, and then you might have your own landscape managers and maintainers that need to really think about that adaptive management program and actually how you maintain the habitats in the best condition.

Janet Greenwood

So you mentioned previously about working sort of collaboratively, but that's about really identifying what your stakeholders are looking for in the long term and trying to work with them side by side so that it is a win win.

Ruth Voight

Absolutely. And there are stakeholders at every stage, different stakeholders. So they could be regulators or kind of like neighbours to the development that you're creating or regulators or the clients themselves. And so you have so many different stakeholders at every phase of the project, understanding their needs, how you can incorporate those, you know, minimizing your impact absolutely. From the outside, applying the mitigation hierarchy, avoiding impacts wherever possible. And yeah, just trying to make the best of it. But you're right, a win win for everyone and they are very different along the project phases.

Janet Greenwood

Ruth you've mentioned there, the mitigation hierarchy. What is that?

Ruth Voight

So the mitigation hierarchy is whereby a hierarchy of choices, where ultimately you avoid the impact first. So how do you create the least impact through what you're doing. So for example, through your routing and siting studies, can you avoid an ancient woodland and not go straight through the middle of it? And then there are a number of steps where you reduce that impact. And you might then mitigate or compensate that impact. And ultimately you might offset for that impact. And so there's a number of steps that you would go in your decision-making process through your design process to minimize the impact you have.

Janet Greenwood

Yeah, I've seen a few different versions, but it's sort of do nothing, avoid reduce, mitigate — those kind of steps. You know, it's every step trying to cause the least harm. And Mair does that resonate? Is that what you also see on the other side of the globe?

Mair Brooks

Yes, absolutely. And I suppose for us, being based in New Zealand, I think it's the, and I worked in Australia heavily as well it's that, you know, First Nations indigenous mindset that you bring into it actually is a way to embrace it. So you see nature as a partner, not as a constraint. And therefore that mindset is how you think about things. So I absolutely agree with Ruth in terms of that avoidance, etc. and it's just a different way of thinking sometimes and embracing that mindset.

And I suppose for ourselves as well, it's actually picturing the scenarios if we don't do that. So I was just referring we launched even today some work for our local governments, and we had 25 councils come together and think about different climate change scenarios and then thinking of how they step through them and what can they do for their future generations. Did they live with it? You know, looking at the scenarios and making them think of the choices and the trade-offs.

So, we find sometimes that scenario thinking gives people options and that optionality then helps them go, building on what Ruth talked about, how you navigate through that and go and what would you take, what are the hierarchy steps you'd take. But the scenario sometimes is useful to picture, these are not binary decisions — they actually build and build on each other. And that's what you need to think about in that decision making and that sort of mindset change.

So for us as well, it's the view of being, in water, for example, I do a lot of work on water. We have the principle called, Te Mana o te Wai, and it's water is life. And it's how we then put that mindset into and, you know, that is in legislation that's been in legislation as well. So it's not only just a way of thinking, it's a way of making sure that organizations, government organizations think about that, local governments, how they start thinking about it. It's a mindset, so it's been really progressive to see that being adopted and embraced.

Janet Greenwood

Mair, I absolutely love that. I do feel that we, particularly in infrastructure in the UK, have got to a point where nature feels a little bit sort of separate and detached, like, something you might go and look at the weekend or a hobby or some gardening, something you might do for fun, as opposed to the fundamental building blocks of our life support system and the fact that we cannot flourish without nature.

And our role in that not as something that is always harmful, but that we can exist in a reciprocal and positive way and take our role, as a species in nature, in a responsible and as I say, reciprocal way.

Just thinking about those principles, Ruth, I don't think we have those same, that same level of embedded, principles in the UK, but we do have some principles. You've mentioned biodiversity net gain, I wonder if you could just speak a little bit about what that is and what other legislative or other requirements there are.

Ruth Voight

So we're talking about nature and I think in professional terms that's quite a new term. And I think, in the UK we have been solely focused on ecology for so long, so that historically has been: ecological survey to understand a baseline status of the land which we are going to affect during our development. And then what can you do to mitigate for the effects that you might cause? And that has been for such a long time, in 25 years, in consultancy and then into construction and that has always been the bread and butter. That's how ecological consultancies exist and things. And I think in probably the last 2 to 3 years, thinking has changed. Probably over the last five years we have started piloting and thinking about biodiversity net gain and on East West Rail rail lines we were really lucky to kind of like pilot that concept on our project. And that now obviously has been legislated and it's mandatory for Town and Country Planning Act and developments and that will develop into hopefully other scenarios as well. And we already see custom and practice on a lot of major infrastructure projects that the same principles are applied. But I think also corporately, there's a lot of other things coming in. So, you know, not necessarily through policy or legislation, but there's that systems-based thinking. So a more sustainability mindset now on kind of like the impacts of say, nature kind of thing, but actually the broader impact. So these could be like you say, designing for nature-based solutions, which historically would have probably sat in the landscape area with an environmental statement or, things like that. And so we're having to bring in all those specialists and all those people together.

And how can we create that matrix of those different specialists pulling together? And so I think that, and then I think also, in not just nature-based solutions, but natural capital as well. So we start thinking about social value and the other economic values that nature can bring to us, be those pollination services or water and carbon sequestration and things like that. And so again, there's this move and shift to a much more system-based thinking approach. And I think we absolutely need a lot of upskilling in that area. And certainly with ecologists already, they're really starting to, they've adapted to biodiversity net gain, they've changed the skill set in the way they go to work and I think that is, everyday, moving forward again.

Then there's one last policy change that's more corporate with the advent of things like, the Task Force for Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD). And also Science-Based Targets for Nature and things like that, which is like looking at a corporate lens and what impacts and dependencies do our businesses have on nature, and how can nature affect that business as a going concern. And again, that's a very different way of considering nature in its broadest sense. So I think there's a lot of change. It's not all written in policy yet. There's a lot of people leading in the area and it's very volatile as to where we might go with those things, but yeah, ever changing and expanding and certainly a much more systems-based way of thinking about nature.

Janet Greenwood

Yes, and just to go back to your point about TNFD, so the Task Force for Nature-based Financial Disclosure, as you mentioned, it's similar to the TCFD Task Force for Climate-based Financial Disclosure — it's a bit of a mouthful. And these are frameworks that allow companies to disclose their dependence on the climate and on nature, as well as the impact of climate and nature on their businesses.

So it's a manner of being able to clearly disclose your vulnerabilities, but also your opportunities, to the changing world in which we live. And so the biodiversity net gain, it's very much about the place where you are building.

I'm also really interested in some work that was done in the UK by Expedition Engineering about, embodied biodiversity, because of course, if we are building with concrete, concrete is made from cement and aggregates. Well, where do you get those aggregates from? Perhaps you scrape them from the sea floor, but if you're scraping them from the sea floor, what does that mean for the biodiversity and the environment on the sea floor? And that to me is something we've yet to really get to grips with. We're very focused on sort of the middle of the process, but the before, where are we getting all of the materials from and the after, where we dispose of all of those materials is often invisible. And I just wondered, either Mair always whether you'd come across much discussion about embodied nature and where you think that might lead.

Ruth Voight

So again, really lucky. At Laing O'Rourke, we have started exploring this. We do not have all the answers, but as a construction company, we looked at a few key commodities, and extracted materials and stuff was one of those and also steel and a lot of the metals we use.

We also looked at our PPE as well. And one of the things that we looked at was, was fuel and a particular lens on our biofuels, because we do utilize HVO and obviously there's potential for lots of impact with use of biofuels, as global demand increases, of actually shifting from waste materials because a lot of HVO at the moment is generated from, waste cooking oils and things like that. But actually, as demand increases, there's a risk that more will be sourced from raw materials and could create a land use change through things like, people reverting to things like, palm oil and stuff like that. So, a lot of potential impacts that obviously we don't want to drive.

So yeah, we did actually really start looking at some of those key commodities and we worked with a consultant that helped us map those embodied ecological impacts, understand the dependencies of those raw materials. So there's a lot of dependencies on water regulation and stuff like that, but also the impacts those processes cause. So it could be greenhouse gas emissions, it could be pollution into watercourses and things like that. And when you start there, it's incredible. And it was really interesting looking at a lot of the raw materials we use, it's really, really, early in that stuff like supply chain mapping and things like that is, is relatively scarce. You're using a lot of central sources for material, but actually the textiles and apparel industry have done a lot of work on this. And actually are kind of a lot more mature when you ask them. We asked our PPE supplier and they actually had done a lot of work already mapping their supply chain, which helped us understand exactly where those impacts might be based, what we could do and where our opportunity for change was. So really early days, and this was to inform us starting to prepare for a TNFD disclosure. But yeah, it's massive. And I think, again, it's that move on from, we start to do this with carbon now and we have environmental product declarations that give the carbon credentials perhaps a material, but there are opportunities to develop that further, and extend it into the more embodied ecological impacts as well.

So, yeah, it's a whole is a massive area, growth area for sure. And we've all got a lot of learning to do on it, but once you start down that journey, it's fascinating. And to be honest, it's really difficult to know where to start and stop.

Mair Brooks

And, I think there's, there's also, you know, in New Zealand sort of side of it or even if I think of Singapore, you also see the by-product of business benefit from these things. You know, if I think of tourism, consumerism, you know, I mean, these are all advantageous because we get in consumers communities wanting to know the supply chain, wanting to know where things come from, how are things sourced? I want, you know, as consumers are asking better questions, then having that supply chain understanding of where things actually come from is, early adopter advantageous sort of side of it as well to embrace. So I think it's not only a, you know, sometimes you can see some of these legislations as an inhibitor. You actually can see this as a way to support and adopt great practices that are already out there. So I think there's also that, gain, you know, I talk about mindset. That's also a thing of going, you know, you're seeing you're seeing that quite differently.

You know if I think of Singapore becoming the garden city in the garden country, do you know what I mean, and how they embrace that, you know, they could have easily kept into the high density housing that they had and the high infrastructure build, but then by adopting those green plant in thousands and hundreds of thousands of trees, adopting different river systems, you just saw the way they shifted the perception, the way the city was operating, but then also the tourism element of it as the garden city, the garden country.

Janet Greenwood

And I fundamentally believe this is about good business. This is about, you know, if you're talking about cities, then you're talking the more nature you get in, the better air quality you get, the better shade you get, the lower temperatures you get, the better water absorption you get in terms of surface water flooding, you know, there are just win, win, wins. Plus, there's the mental health benefits. Everybody likes to sit in a garden, to be in nature. We escape to nature.

So there are so many good reasons for focusing on nature, but also about your business planning and your resilience. You mentioned water previously Mair. We know that, a couple of years ago in the Rhine, the water levels dropped so much that we couldn't get the cargo traffic down the river. I've anecdotally been told about a merger acquisition where the potential purchaser decided not to proceed because the company they were looking at buying couldn't be confident about their water supplies in future.

And so, you know, this is really starting to come home now. This is about good business. It's about good societies and healthy societies. So, I'd like to move on to innovation now and digital tools. And if there are any new approaches, new tools out there that are changing the ways that we engage with nature, we value it, and we plan to preserve and increase it.

Ruth, if I could start with you.

Ruth Voight

Yeah. So I think, on a project level, I think there are tools which aid collaboration and communication. So, for me, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), , are just fundamental. So, that geospatial data and having it visualized is just critical to everything. There's lots of opportunities there. Again, on a previous project I worked with some amazing GIS specialists that were able to develop tools that allowed us to create risk assessments for putting teams to work. So you could query the tool to understand what your constraints might be, what your risks would be, and how you might manage those risks. And you could communicate that to a lot of people over a big geography. So as long as you manage your data and you have a single source of truth and you have a really good assurance process, and plus you have really good...we had to develop something called an incidental find process, which meant that if we found something tomorrow, we had a way of, on an app, recording that and getting it into our GIS system immediately. So it went to an uncontrolled layer, but it was then immediately queried and brought into the risk assessment tool so that the next person that ran that risk assessment knew the latest data. Yes, it would be worst case scenario because it hadn't yet been assured and guaranteed, but it allowed us to make sure that we weren't missing anything.

So you have to really think about the impact of the way utilize those systems and things. But I think being able to communicate and we use that tool, we created different versions of our web maps, so we had one which was targeted at our environmental specialists that had lots of technical information in it.

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We had another version that was a construction map that was very simplified, so it was like, I've got a badger set here, for example, or a watercourse here, and this is the relevant buffer around it. You don't go in there or if you do, there are serious controls you need to take. And so how do you communicate data in a way that's useful to a user. But then equally we created a web map for some of the regulators. And historically you've transacted with the regulators with a map at a certain scale. And actually, when you're working again, over a big geography, it's quite hard to understand, actually end to end, what those impacts are when you've got lots of maps next to each other. And actually what GIS allows you to do is like toggle those layers, turn things on and off kind of thing and say, what's the relationship between this and this? If I scroll out, how, you know, does that look kind of like across the entire spread rather than a small section of it? And so again, it just gives you a lot of flexibility, to do that.

So I think, in a construction lens, that is imperative. And the interaction of that with the other digital models and things like that are amazing. And then there's probably other things that you can do as add on. So we looked at augmented reality versions of that GIS data. So how do you then visualize it in the field. For example I just talked about GIS and it might identify a tree that's got a bat roost in it. So there's some really different tools that you can start using. And also with plant and equipment you can take those same reference points and things and you can program almost, plant to avoid what you've set up, as a buffer zone or something like that. So a restricted area. So again, physically the plant can't go and dig in an area that you don't want it to. So there's lots of potential through lots of tools that already exist. But how do you bring them together and use your data to drive those things? So I think there's lots of opportunity to go further.

Janet Greenwood

And Mair, I'd like to think about wrapping up and think about a call to arms, really, for your clients, particularly those writing policy or those infrastructure owners or planners, what would you like to see being done differently as we move forwards?

Mair Brooks

I think it's embedding nature and equity into infrastructure design. So it's front of mind. I think that would be my first thing. My second thing would be invest in digital capability and cross-sector partnerships around this. So here what we talked about, I chaired an infrastructure innovation task force in Australia for a number of years, and it's really amazing to see how concepts that we had in some of these areas is now becoming more affordable, more accessible to everybody and the speed of it, so that you can visualize things that previously would take so long to understand and communities can see them, so it can help that conversation. And then I think the third thing is, again, building on what Ruth talked about, a collaboration, is looking at procurement models and infrastructure to reward long term value and thinking differently. So thinking more, as you know, we always have the whole of life side of it from an infrastructure perspective. And thinking about that procurement and that value and the models you could encourage in it because, we are talking lifetimes with this infrastructure. So how do we start thinking about it and the trade-offs and the choices? And obviously these obligations you've all been talking about in reporting, but actually how does that become total value, total cost of what we're doing? Otherwise it's normally its just the capital. And it's the investment decision about the one thing you build and not how you preserve it, maintain it and replace it.

You know, if I think about, I always look at my father. My father was in mining in South Wales in the UK, and he had the fore thought to think about rehabilitation. And I go back to those mining areas now that are just beautiful landscapes. And I know in my lifetime it's gone from I couldn't swim in the river because it was black and now it is, you know, country walks. And I've seen that in my own lifetime. And I go, if we think about things differently, what can we do differently? So it's within our gift, to think differently, to act differently.

Janet Greenwood

Yeah, I really echo that, Mair. A couple of months ago I was in Sherwood Forest and there's a mining landscape there that has been rehabilitated. It's a beautiful community asset, there's people of all generations fishing from the lake, lovely country park, we passed large numbers of cyclists across wide ranges of demographics and flourishing nature. So, it absolutely is possible.

Ruth, what would you like to see being done differently?

Ruth Voight

So there's some great pilots. So, the Ox-Cam Arc, which is between Oxford and Cambridge, actually did some pilots on a local natural capital plan, linked in with the local nature recovery strategy. And they did some pilots on, one was called the 'lens approach', and it was looking at basically a landscape enterprise model. And so they were looking at supply and demand for nature assets. So in that pilot, I was working for an infrastructure project and I needed land to create biodiversity net gain offsets on. And there were a number of other parties were part of that and interestingly, everyone has different needs. So, for example, there was a big landowner that had large lakes, and frequently they have to de-silt those lakes and it cost them a lot of money. But actually if up catchment, they could manage and regulate the water quality better, those di-silting activities would be less frequent. And how can they do that? By planting some trees. And they have an abundance of land, so actually that partnership could work really well for other people's needs and dependencies and I think there's a real opportunity to create a market. But in order to do that, we have to look bigger. We have to look at that landscape scale, and we have to find those people to partner together and that, I think, is going to be the biggest challenge. But there's a real opportunity for it not always to be a burden and not always to be an extra, to be part of what we all need and want. And it's amazing how you can find and matchmake, if you like, those opportunities where it's a win-win for everyone. So I think I don't know how we get there, but like if we could start thinking bigger and more joined up, I think that would benefit everybody.

Janet Greenwood

I couldn't agree more. We've spoken a few times about citizen thinking. We've spoken about partnerships. I often use the phrase 'zoom out' — if you just sort of zoom your mind out, just take a step back, see the bigger picture, look at the interfaces and dependencies. I think people can be put off by the words systems-thinking — it can get very technical, but actually at a very simple level, just taking a moment to step back, see the bigger picture can really yield benefits.

I'm going to give a shout out to the Major Projects Associations Sustainability Playbook that we co-authored, it's called 'No Planet B' and it does try to walk people, step by step, through the different lifecycle phases of a project of an infrastructure asset, and what each different role can do at different stages. And always welcome to get feedback on that playbook and keen to do a second version with ideas for improvement.

I think I will end just on the statement that you made, Mair, of nature as a partner and not a constraint. I absolutely love that, and I think that sums up our discussion this moment. If we can look at nature as a partner and not as a constraint or a burden, I think that is the way forward.

So all that's left to me is to thank my guests. So Ruth Voight, Head of Environment and Sustainability at Laing O'Rourke and Mair Brooks, Partner in KPMG's New Zealand practice, thank you both very much.

Mair Brooks

Thank you.

Ruth Voight

Thanks very much.

Host

Janet, Ruth and Mair, thank you for joining us for today's special episode. The intersection of nature and infrastructure is a topic of great importance and one that must be carefully considered as we continue onwards. Join us again next time for more insights from ESG leaders and innovators. You can also find our latest insights covering a range of ESG topics by visiting kpmg.com/ESG.

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