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Restoring iconic British species and landscapes through improved protections for nature



The UK is among the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Successive generations have overseen a deterioration of our natural inheritance and biodiversity indicators are still going in the wrong direction. The most recent State of Nature report found that populations of key species have declined by 19% since 1970 and one in six species is threatened with extinction.⁶⁷ Despite this, pockets of globally significant wildlife and habitats remain across our wild isles, such as our puffin population and our chalk streams, and we have some notable conservation success stories like the red kite. This should give us hope we can turn things around. Brexit has repatriated many of the key levers to protect and restore nature such as environmental regulation, fishing quotas, and farm payments. Despite some major initiatives in the last parliament, further action is urgently needed in this parliament to halt the decline in biodiversity and safeguard our nature for future generations.



HIGHLIGHTING THE POSITIVE CONSERVATIVE RECORD

Three highly protected marine areas were created in English waters; and a new biodiversity net gain obligation came into force, to ensure all new planned developments deliver at least a 10% uplift on biodiversity levels.

CELEBRATING CEN CAMPAIGN WINS

Legal protections for hedgerows from inappropriate cutting during bird nesting season were renewed; and agricultural property relief on inheritance tax was extended to farmland that has entered into a government-backed nature recovery scheme, removing a financial barrier to farmers entering new schemes.

Help threatened British wildlife and habitats recover by controlling invasive species, working closely with farmers to support the careful reintroduction of certain native species, and taking a tougher stance on wildlife crime.

- **License reintroductions of certain native species, like pine martens and beavers:** restoring native wildlife to our landscapes helps us not only recover essential parts of our natural inheritance but also provides a cost-effective way to tackle environmental threats like invasive species and climate change. Reintroductions of pine marten could play a major role in controlling invasive and destructive grey squirrel populations, while licensing wild beaver releases would mitigate flooding and drought. Reintroductions should be given funding from a renewal of the Species Recovery Fund. The risk assessment process should not be too bureaucratic, while post-Brexit red tape impeding animal transfers from the EU, which adds significant extra cost and complexity to reintroduction projects, should be simplified. In return for this support and streamlining of the paperwork, projects should be required to put in place management plans to mitigate any negative impacts of reintroductions. Farmers should also be rewarded through the new Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) for creating habitat for these reintroduced species on their land.
- **Reward farmers for tackling invasive species:** invasive species cost the UK economy £2 billion per year and are one of the leading threats to our native wildlife.⁶⁸ Farmers should be incentivised through ELMs to control them on their land. Tackling invasive species will be essential for halting the decline in nature this decade. Grey squirrel contraception schemes can enable the red squirrel to bounce back. Removing *rhododendron*

ponticum will enable natural regeneration of our woodlands and temperate rainforests. Setting mink traps in relevant areas of the country will support recovery of the water vole population. And controlling wild deer populations is essential for afforestation.

- **Fund wild venison processing facilities:** the deer population in the UK is at its highest level in 1000 years, with numbers thought to exceed 2 million.⁶⁹ Deer grazing is a big threat to woodland creation and to farmers' crops. Supporting the wild venison industry through grants to establish venison processing facilities could encourage more deer management and thereby reduce deer numbers. A lower deer population would enable woodlands to become established more easily, and to naturally regenerate. Wild venison could also make a contribution to efforts to boost domestic food production. Caterers in the public sector should be encouraged through new guidance in the Government Buying Standard for Food to use more venison, which is a low-cost, nutritious form of protein.
- **Improve data collection on wildlife crime and issue sentencing guidelines:** wildlife crimes such as hare coursing or raptor persecution blight our rural communities, causing significant harm to native wildlife and damaging important rural industries such as farming and tourism. The government should make wildlife crime a notifiable offence, so that the data is collected centrally by the Home Office.⁷⁰ Better data will enable police forces to more readily track repeat offenders and improve prosecution rates. Similarly, the lack of sentencing guidelines for wildlife crimes, which often leads to more lenient sentences being handed out, should be addressed.

Position the City of London as the world leader in a new asset class of natural capital, helping to grow private sector investment into restoring the natural world and relieving pressure on the public finances to achieve our biodiversity goals.

- **Establish a market framework for nature credits:** in the last parliament, the government published a draft market framework for trading privately funded nature credits, with the aim of leveraging an additional £1 billion of private money into the natural environment.⁷¹ These proposals should be implemented as soon as possible, with standards for nature credits from a range of habitat types and rules for the stacking of credits confirmed. The proposal could be further strengthened by designating private sector bodies to accredit projects and award compliance credits, thereby speeding up the process and reducing regulatory uncertainty, and to regulate the nascent market.⁷² Seagrass, saltmarsh, and kelp carbon codes should be created to boost investment in blue carbon, providing a new funding source for coastal communities around the UK.
- **Extend agricultural property relief to land where nature is being restored through private markets for nature:** the last government deserves significant credit for extending agricultural property relief to farmland in ELMs.⁷³ This removed a financial disincentive for farmers to enter into ELMs for fear of losing their inheritance tax breaks and increasing their tax liability. In this parliament, the relief should be maintained and extended to include farmland which is covered by a privately funded nature credits. This would remove an incentive for landowners to favour public over private schemes and remove another

financial barrier to farmers thinking about restoring nature on agricultural land via a private market.

- **Unlock more private sector funding for nature:** even with a framework in place for accrediting and trading nature credits, and even with the launch of biodiversity net gain, we need to expand the number of potential buyers of nature credits and therefore the amount of private funding for nature, if we are to reverse nature's decline. Demand for credits could be stimulated, for instance, by mandating the task force on nature-related financial disclosure's reporting guidelines and nature strategies for listed companies, to encourage companies to monitor and address any harms to biodiversity in their operations. Another potential demand driver could be expanding the environmental net gain principle for planned developments and major infrastructure projects to include other types of natural capital besides biodiversity, in line with the advice of the Natural Capital Committee.⁷⁴ Finally, plans to expand biodiversity net gain to the marine environment should be confirmed, to mitigate impacts of fossil fuel and offshore wind projects on marine habitats.⁷⁵

Complete the green Brexit reforms to environmental protections, taking advantage of our regulatory freedoms to tailor environmental rules to our own national context, accelerating environmental improvements inside protected sites, and simplifying processes for businesses.

- **Reform designations for protected biodiversity sites:** we have a lot of different nature designations, some of which derive from EU law. Outcomes for nature inside protected areas are poor, with only 38% of SSSIs in a favourable condition in 2023.⁷⁶ A considered reform of the legislation is needed to clarify the

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purpose of the designations, improve outcomes inside them, ensure we hit our international commitment to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030, and enable us to protect unique UK habitats and species properly like chalk streams. By improving certainty and speed for businesses and enabling strategic compensation of environmental harms, more private funding can be directed at nature outcomes rather than consultancy and legal fees. All protected sites should have strategies in place to restore their biodiversity, improve the habitat condition, and mitigate any negative impacts from development. Designation reform should be closely linked to the completion of farm payment reforms, so that farmers inside designated areas are rewarded fairly for their work restoring nature and guarding these unique and rare habitats. This is particularly important for upland farmers in designated landscapes, whose Higher Level Stewardship agreements are expiring and who need the higher tier Countryside Stewardship scheme to be developed rapidly, if this land is to deliver better outcomes for nature.

- **Continue the sensitive expansion of the network of highly protected marine areas in England:** UK seas contain some of the richest and most diverse sea life in the world, including over 8,000 species of fish and invertebrates. To protect the most precious elements of our marine biodiversity from extractive activities and allow unique marine habitats to recover, the rollout of the highly protected marine area network should be continued, as recommended by CEN peer Lord Benyon in a government review.⁷⁷ A further five sites should be designated in this parliament, building on the three already designated and following careful consultation with local communities.

- **Reform farm regulations and enforcement:** with the delinking and phasing out of legacy direct payments from the land ending the EU-derived regulatory system of cross-compliance, a new approach to farming regulation is needed to ensure a level playing field for farmers across the countryside. The new framework should balance maintaining strong overall protections for the natural environment, with a reduction in rules-based prescription, a preference for advice and incentives, and fines and other penalties being a last resort. We should trust farmers and help them do the right thing, but have a clear regulatory backstop so that farmers who do the right thing are not undermined and undercut by those who lower their cost of production through illegal activity. Breaches in regulation should be tackled for the benefit of the law-abiding majority of farmers, as well as rural communities. This is especially important for addressing the public's concern about poor water quality, where agricultural runoff contributes more to the problem than sewage.⁷⁸ The government should respond to Dame Glenys Stacey's review in 2018 into the future farming regulation and inspection regime.⁷⁹
- **Cut red tape for marine restoration projects:** kelp, seagrass, and oyster bed restoration projects have significant benefits for water quality, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration. Yet perversely, they face the same lengthy and costly permitting process as some environmentally-harmful extractive practices in our seas. The licensing process involving the Crown Estate and Marine Management Organisation should be streamlined, with projects able to apply for a licence prior to receiving a Crown Estate lease. There should be a one-stop-shop regulator for projects to save them having to engage and provide information to multiple different government bodies.

- **Stop large fishing vessels from damaging our marine environment and wildlife:** free from the EU's Common Fisheries Policy, we have the power to prevent damaging fishing activity from taking place in offshore marine protected areas (MPAs). This power has already been deployed in a number of MPAs around England, but harmful practices, like bottom trawling, are still allowed to take place in most. However, just 6% of this suspected bottom trawling activity is carried out by UK vessels, whilst over a quarter of this damaging activity is suspected to be done by EU vessels.⁸⁰ This is often harmful to the commercial interests of smaller-scale British inshore fishers. The EU legal challenges over the existing bottom trawling restrictions and the closure of the sandeel fisheries should be faced down. Further to that, the ban on mostly EU-registered bottom trawlers operating in all protected waters should be completed, and vessels of all sizes restricted from fishing forage species that local wildlife depend on.⁸¹ This will also have significant benefits for climate action, with evidence showing global emissions from bottom trawling contribute roughly the same emissions as the aviation sector.⁸²
- **Secure a sustainable supply of fish for our coastal economies:** MPAs create space for depleted fish stocks to recover, meaning a greater volume and diversity of fish spill over into the neighbouring, unprotected areas to then be fished. The government should use its post-Brexit freedoms to support UK vessels to end the use of bottom-towed gear inside MPAs altogether, as well as setting sustainable quotas in line with current scientific recommendations. This will ensure our coastal communities have a sustainable supply of fish to catch, now and in the future.