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Don't cut the countryside!

England's conservation organisations have joined forces to paint a grim picture of a countryside starved of money by budget cuts.

On the 30th anniversary of the Wildlife and Countryside Link, its members have issued an unprecedented warning about what the future would hold should the Government slash spending on conservation, wildlife-friendly farming and public recreation.

The organisation will share its concerns with MPs at a parliamentary reception this evening (Wednesday), held to mark 30 years of working together for the natural environment.

Paul de Zylva, Chair of Wildlife and Countryside Link, said: "We all know the new Government will have a hard job making difficult and far-reaching decisions about where the axe should fall on public spending.

"There may be a temptation to see cuts in conservation and recreation as an easy win, but in reality ministers need to think very hard before making cuts that could have profound and perhaps irreversible consequences for England's wildlife, landscapes and people.

"We want to make clear that in the case of conservation, slashing budgets would be a false economy – short term savings would translate into huge long term costs for our economy and our national well-being."

Link fears an austerity countryside, where the loss of public money for protected sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) has left the country's best wildlife sites sadly degraded.

Reedbeds are dry and clogged with brambles; heathlands have vanished as scrub begins to take over. Wetlands have dwindled and rivers and canals have become clogged by invasive plants which threaten native species.

The loss of money for wildlife-friendly farming has seen farmland birds resume their slide into extinction. Bat populations are clinging onto survival in isolated pockets, facing starvation due to the dwindling insect populations, while the country's flower meadows have all but vanished.

England's uplands have become degraded; their wildlife is in decline, and their ability to lock away carbon and provide clean drinking water for millions sadly reduced.

On the coasts, cuts have undone years of work to manage remaining and newly created coastal habitats such as saltmarsh and saline lagoons, impacting wildlife and flood protection.

At sea, less management and enforcement has seen a further decline in wildlife-rich reefs and seagrass beds that shelter species like seahorses and pipefish. Illegal fishing has increased, putting even more pressure on fish numbers.

There are fewer people too. Without cash to keep paths and bridleways open, huge swathes of the English countryside and coast are effectively closed to millions.

Locked up in towns and cities, unable to enjoy the country's breathing spaces, people are less healthy, costing the National Health Service millions of extra pounds each year.

In turn, the rural economy is denied the large sums of money visitors to the countryside spend each year.

Paul de Zylva said: "Such a picture is not an exaggeration, but nor is it an inevitability. Ministers will need to make difficult choices about which areas of public spending offer the best value for money.

"Defra and its agencies like Natural England spend just 0.5 per cent of the Government's budget, yet their investment in the countryside brings huge benefits in wildlife, clean air and water, flood alleviation, carbon sequestration and pollination. A healthy natural environment is not a luxury but fundamental to our existence."

He added: "The Deputy Prime Minister has said it would be morally wrong to leave our children and grandchildren with huge debts. It would be just as immoral to bequeath them an impoverished environment and an England that is in many ways diminished."

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Notes to editors:

1. In a statement sent to Defra ahead of the cuts, Link has listed five "red lines" – areas of spend that must be protected to safeguard the natural environment.

These are:

- i. Identifying, protecting, managing and monitoring protected areas and species on land and at sea, including action to halt and reverse the decline of threatened species and habitats (including National Parks, AONBs, SPAs, SACs, SSSIs, MCZs, European protected species and UK BAP listed species and habitats).
- ii. Higher level agri-environment schemes and other land management grants which help land managers to delivering public goods such as an attractive, accessible countryside rich in wildlife.

- iii. Gathering evidence about the state of the countryside and our marine environment. Research and monitoring ensures money is properly spent and not wasted on ineffective approaches.
- iv. Rights of way and access to the countryside including establishment of a coastal trail.
- v. Nature conservation in UK Overseas Territories and in developing countries, not least tropical forests.

2. Species and habitats under threat:

Birds:

Without money from Government conservation agencies like Natural England, **corncrakes** are likely to become extinct in England within a decade. The loss of agri-environment payments could doom **twite**, **cirl bunting** and **turtle dove** to a similar fate, while the numbers of **bittern**, **black grouse** and **black-tailed godwit** would fall to dangerously low levels.

Bats:

Without Defra support woodlands will be vulnerable to commercial exploitation. Large areas will be cleared and veteran trees lost, taking with them populations of Europe's rarest bats, the **Barbastelle** and **Bechstein's bat**.

Reptiles:

Loss of the Higher Level Scheme (HLS) would remove the only source of funding for England's beleaguered heaths. In the past 200 years, more than 80 per cent of England's heaths have been lost. The surviving fragments still account for 20 per cent of the world's lowland and are home to a host of specialist species including the threatened **sand lizard** and **smooth snake**. If England's heaths are lost, they too will disappear.

Insects:

While **bumblebees** and other pollinating insects are rapidly disappearing, agri-environment payments have slowed the decline of a small number of bee species. Even this small gain could be lost if those payments were cut. The countryside would lose its buzz, wildflowers and £440 million pounds worth of pollination of British crops.

Butterflies are at an all time low but some threatened species are showing signs of a fragile recovery thanks to recent efforts. However, if Higher Level Stewardship and the species Recovery Programme are cut this could lead to a catastrophic decline that we have not seen since the 1950s. Some species could even become extinct, including the **Duke of Burgundy** and **High Brown Fritillary** as well as the globally endangered **Large Blue** which has recently been re-established to several sites in England. The wildlife-rich grasslands it loves have all but disappeared since the Second World War. Most of those left are within SSSIs, while the rest benefits from agri-environment spending. Stopping these payments would have a devastating effect on the fragile recovery in the state of wildlife-rich grasslands

in SSSIs, and the brake currently on the decline in grasslands outside protected areas would be completely removed.

Plants:

Most of England's **wild flowers** are in good part reliant on HLS and would decline drastically without it. Plantlife has calculated that in the South West of England, without HLS we could lose 73% (234 out of 319) rare and threatened species through lack of funding for appropriate management, and these figures are likely to be repeated across the whole of England. Some of the hundreds of species that could be pushed to the brink include meadow flowers like the **Green-winged Orchid** and **Snake's-head Fritillary**, heathland species like the **Pale Heath-violet**, **Lesser Butterfly Orchid** and **Field Gentian** and the **Burnt-tip Orchid** and **Field Fleawort**, both found on chalk grassland.

At sea:

A lack of funding to establish and manage Marine Protected Areas would see further declines in habitats such as now scarce eelgrass beds that are home to **seahorses** and **pipefish** and of coastal wetlands that are nursery grounds for many species like sea bass, herring, flounder, plaice and sole, important in commercial fisheries. Less than 0.003% of our seas are currently fully protected, and for some species such as the harbour porpoise, no protected areas have been declared for them. Only eight fish stocks of a total of 47 found around the British Isles are known to be in a healthy state and 22 UK marine species are facing global extinction.

Freshwater:

The **freshwater pearl mussel** is hanging on in the face of poor water quality, climate change, pearl thieves and river channel management. It will go extinct if the Environment Agency's efforts to combat these problems stop. If spending to tackle non-native invasive species is cut, efforts to eradicate creeping water primrose could be undermined. If allowed to grow unchecked, it is likely to displace native plants in wetlands and other water bodies, increase flood risk and reduce amenity and navigation in rivers and canals - as has happened in France.

Access:

Cuts at Natural England could see huge swathes of the English Coast remain indefinitely inaccessible to the public, as the Coastal Access scheme is starved at birth through lack of funds. Staff cuts at Defra could also derail plans to speed up the recording of historic footpaths and bridleways. Local councils currently face backlogs of at least 10 years on routes waiting to be included on the 'Definitive Maps' and, with a 2026 cut-off-date for recording paths, the fear is many ancient rights of way will be lost for ever.

3. Wildlife and Countryside Link celebrates its 30th anniversary next week with a Parliamentary reception. Link is an umbrella body, whose purpose is to bring together voluntary organisations in the UK to protect and enhance wildlife, landscape and the marine environment, and to further the quiet enjoyment and appreciation of the countryside. We currently have 33 members who collectively employ over 10,000

full-time staff, have the help of 170,000 volunteers and the support of over 8 million people in the UK. Our members are united by their common interest in the conservation and enjoyment of the natural and historic environment. For more information, visit www.wcl.org.uk

This press release is supported by the following 25 organisations;

- Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
- Badger Trust
- Bat Conservation Trust
- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign for National Parks
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Campaign Whale
- Environmental Investigation Agency
- Friends of the Earth England
- The Grasslands Trust
- Hawk and Owl Trust
- International Fund for Animal Welfare
- The Mammal Society
- Marine Conservation Society
- Open Spaces Society
- Plantlife International
- Pond Conservation
- Ramblers
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society
- Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust