

NATURE



There is a growing political and public demand to restore nature, but not enough action to achieve it.

Last year, the UK signed an international deal to halt and reverse the decline of wildlife by 2030. In England, that promise is underpinned by a legal duty in the Environment Act 2021 to stop the decline of species abundance, and a commitment to properly manage 30% of the land and sea for nature.

We have just 7 years to turn pledges into reality. However, as the Office for Environmental Protection has concluded, 'the current pace and scale of action will not deliver the changes necessary to significantly improve the environment'. Polling shows that only around 1 in 10 Brits think Government is performing well in key environmental areas. For wildlife, this will mean loss of fragile habitats and risk extinction for some species. For people and businesses, continued degradation of air, water and wildlife will harm health and prosperity. For the climate, there is no hope of meeting net zero without restoring nature.

On behalf of over 70 environmental charities, we present five policy proposals needed to turn around the ongoing and unacceptable decline in the state of nature. We propose:



Doubling the budget for nature friendly farming

Why? Farmed landscapes cover over 70% of the UK, but farmland wildlife is dwindling. It will be impossible to halt nature's decline without more hospitable conditions for wild plants and animals across these landscapes. With low incomes in many parts of the agricultural sector, generous rewards for environmental improvement are needed to enable a wholesale switch to nature-friendly farming.

How? The budget for nature-friendly land management should be increased to £6 billion a year to fund more ambitious agroecological improvements in farming and major landscape recovery projects. The Environmental Land Management system created a new way to pay for environmental improvements, but more investment is needed to reward rapid, wide-ranging change. Farmers, foresters and land managers must be confident that, in return for meeting ambitious new standards for nature-friendly land management, they will see increases in profitability, alongside the benefits of a better environment.

Impact: Farmers and land managers will be rewarded well for working with nature, reducing use of intensive practices and chemicals, and incorporating more nature across the landscape. The recovery of wildlife across our countryside will bring substantial benefits for water and air quality and people's access to nature. Land will switch from being a net greenhouse gas emitter, to locking away carbon.

A Nature Recovery Obligation for the private sector

Why? Major economic sectors, including finance, retail and energy, all contribute to nature's decline. Polluters should pay, and responsible sectors should be required to contribute to nature recovery. This will ensure the private sector plays its part in filling the estimated £4bn annual funding gap for nature.

How? Key sectors would be compelled to disclose their impacts on nature and publish Nature Positive Plans, integrated with 1.5°C-aligned climate transition planning, setting out how operations will make a positive contribution to nature's recovery, without relying on offsetting. After avoiding and reducing harm, the new Nature Recovery Obligation would require companies to fund nature's recovery.

Impact: Direct threats to wild species from economic activity will reduce. Private sector funding will increase the resources available for protecting and restoring habitats, with regulatory requirements supporting new jobs and wider investment in nature's recovery.

A 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project

Why? We protect too few places for nature. Those that are protected are often in poor condition. Others lie stranded, fragmented, or cut off from wider ecosystems. Just 3% of the land and 8% of English waters are currently properly protected for nature—a small fraction of Government's commitment to 30%.

How? A 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project should include new incentives and obligations for landowners to manage protected sites better for nature (along with the designation of new sites), new powers to recover nature in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and a new "Public Nature Estate" duty on public bodies to restore habitats on land they own (and sea they manage). Public bodies would be encouraged to consider expanding the land they own and manage for nature's recovery.

Impact: Scientists think that an "ecological network" of 30% of the land and sea is needed to support well-functioning ecosystems, resilient to climate change, and critical for wildlife. Rapid delivery of the 30 by 30 network will be fundamental to species recovery, as well as a healthier economy.

A National Nature Service

Why? Halting nature's decline requires large-scale habitat restoration and targeted species recovery. This needs funding to pay for projects and people with the right skills. Both are currently in short supply, with major skills shortages in ecology, planning, nature-friendly farming, and parks management.

How? The next Government should establish a new fund to pay for habitat restoration at scale and a National Nature Service, providing a paid work and training programme to equip people with habitat restoration skills. Public bodies, charities and other groups receiving grants from the new fund should be required to host National Nature Service participants, to grow the pool of people with nature restoration skills.

Impact: The provision of new funding for habitat restoration, complemented by training to ensure that there are sufficient skilled people to carry out this scale of work, will help more wild spaces to thrive. The targeting of NNS opportunities at marginalised communities will help people in need of employment support into fulfilling careers.

A Right to a Healthy Environment

Why? The deterioration of our environment has significant public health consequences, especially for marginalised and vulnerable communities. Lives are shortened by air pollution, people fall ill from poor water quality, and community wellbeing declines as accessible natural spaces reduce in number.

How? An Environmental Rights Bill should be introduced to establish a human right to a healthy environment. This Bill would require public bodies to act in accordance with that right in their decision making and give people legal tools to challenge public bodies that fail to do this. A new Natural Health Fund should support Local Authorities to make environmental improvements to boost public health.

Impact: An enforceable human right to a healthy environment will result in public bodies making more positive decisions for nature. This will reduce air and water pollution and increase access to high quality natural spaces, saving billions for the NHS and social care, and improving health outcomes for millions.