



People and the Natural Environment – a critical partnership

The health, wellbeing and prosperity of nature and people are inextricable. The current crises our world faces—rising global temperatures, declining biodiversity, increasing disease and mental illness burden, and significant social, health, and economic inequalities—are all interconnected.¹

While the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated and exacerbated these crises, it also highlighted the interdependence of people and nature. The emergence of pandemics is linked to land use changes, the expansion and intensification of agriculture, and unsustainable production and consumption.² These same human activities drive climate change and biodiversity loss.

This environmental degradation occurs disproportionately in or around low-income areas and where a higher percentage of ethnically diverse people live, both globally and within the UK.^{3,4} Existing health disparities for deprived communities and ethnically diverse communities in the UK,⁵ driven by factors including lack of access to high quality green and blue spaces^{6,7,8} and disproportionate exposure to air pollution,^{9,10} have been compounded by the economic, health, and social impacts of the pandemic.^{11,12} As harms from biodiversity loss and climate change increase, people with lower incomes, ethnically diverse people,¹³ women, older people, and other groups with protected characteristics¹⁴ will be

¹ The Government has also recognised the intersections between nature, climate, health and social inclusion in the [25 Year Environment Plan](#)

² [IPBES 2020 Pandemics Report](#)

³ [White-Newsome 2016](#)

⁴ [‘UK waste incinerators three times more likely to be in poorer areas’ UnEarthed 2019](#)

⁵ [‘Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On’ 2020](#)

⁶ [‘What are health inequalities?’ The King’s Fund 2020](#)

⁷ [‘State of the environment: health, people and the environment’ Environment Agency 2020](#)

⁸ [‘England’s Green Space Gap’ Friends of the Earth 2020](#)

⁹ [‘London’s black communities disproportionately exposed to air pollution – study’ The Guardian 2016](#)

¹⁰ [Fecht et al. 2015](#)

¹¹ [‘Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19’ Public Health England 2020](#)

¹² [‘Air pollution linked to far higher COVID-10 death rates, study finds’ The Guardian 2020](#)

¹³ The Link Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Group has discussed and agreed for now to employ the term ‘ethnically diverse people’ to recognise the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation and climate change on some groups of people in the UK. We acknowledge there are problems with the term ‘ethnically diverse people and other umbrella terms that present different ethnicities as homogenous group. Link will use specific singular terms whenever possible and be specific about the inequalities facing different groups. Link recognises the importance of language and will continue to take direction from the Link EDI Group on how to engage with and talk about people who are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change. The Link EDI Group will continue to discuss the terminology and invites any feedback on the terminology we use.

¹⁴ While Link uses the umbrella term ‘protected characteristics’ to highlight the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation and climate change on certain groups of people, we recognize that people within that description will be affected in different ways, have different needs and addressing those needs will require distinct action and solutions.



most at risk, both globally and within countries, including the UK.^{15, 16, 17, 18} Greater inequalities of power and wealth lead to more environmental degradation.¹⁹ A healthy natural environment, access to nature, and connection with nature are vital for people's health and wellbeing, but there are significant inequalities in access to the benefits that nature provides. We must act now to address the climate, biodiversity, health, and equity crises together.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is a coalition of 78 environmental organisations in England committed to protecting the natural environment. Link recognises that people are at the core of our work: all people should have the right to a healthy natural environment, all people must have access to nature (e.g., high-quality accessible green and blue spaces nearby, public rights of way), and all people must be empowered to connect with nature and play a meaningful role in restoring and protecting the environment around them to address the ecological and climate crises.

Of course, nature has boundless intrinsic value and we have a moral duty to protect and enhance our natural world regardless of its utility for people. We recognise that in some cases people's access to sensitive natural environments must be carefully managed or restricted to ensure that vulnerable habitats and species and wild places can thrive.

Nevertheless, environmental action should have people at its heart. In addition to the moral imperative to include people and communities who have been historically excluded and are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change, and the extensive social, health and economic co-benefits for people from action to ensure a high-quality natural environment, especially in relation to physical health and mental wellbeing,^{20, 21} an inclusive environmental movement is a stronger one. We cannot address the crises without people from all backgrounds being involved.

Environmental policies informed by people and communities are more effective. Engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders leads to more information and perspectives to better inform policies. Stakeholder and public trust in policymakers and policies improves, leading to higher buy-in and better delivery for policy effectiveness.²² There should be an important role for public consultation, such as the People's Assembly for Nature.²³, in nature policy-making.

The quality of people's relationship with and connectivity to nature is key to protecting it: when people have access to nature, are connected to nature, and are empowered to take environmental action, they are more likely to protect and advocate for nature.²⁴

¹⁵ [Paavola 2017](#)

¹⁶ ['Health effects of climate change in the UK' Department of Health 2001](#)

¹⁷ [Levy and Patz 2015](#)

¹⁸ ['Human Health: Impacts, Adaptation, and Co-benefits' IPCC 2014](#)

¹⁹ [Boyce et al. 1999](#)

²⁰ [White et al. 2019](#)

²¹ [Richardson et al. 2021](#)

²² [Terwel et al. 2010a](#) and [Terwel et al. 2010b](#)

²³ <https://peoplesplanfornature.org/peoples-assembly-nature>

²⁴ [Richardson et al. 2020](#)



Wildlife and Countryside Link recognises that:

- People are essential to nature’s future: so we must make our movement and our policies more inclusive and representative in order to deliver effective environmental policy for nature, for all.²⁵
- Nature is essential to all people’s future: so we must ensure that our policy recommendations aim to ensure a thriving natural environment, access to its benefits (e.g., green and blue spaces, public rights of way), and connection to nature for all.

The Link Nature and Wellbeing Strategy Group commits to integrating people in the environmental policy agenda by making proactive contributions to the natural environment and wellbeing agenda and, where appropriate, collaborating with and providing input to other Link working groups on particular policy areas. The priorities for this work are:

- Reverse the decline of nature to ensure a healthy natural and accessible environment for all people to benefit from, access, and connect with.
 - Advocate for the robust design, integrating people considerations, and effective implementation of nature policies such as 30x30, the species abundance target, the Environmental Improvement Plan, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRs), Environmental Land Management (ELM), Green Infrastructure Standards and more.
- Integrate the nature-people nexus into other policy areas, such as access, engagement, health and wellbeing, education, transport, and other related policy areas.
 - Advocate to Government for greater and more equitable access to high quality natural green and blue spaces, for example, through planning reform, improved public access to protected landscapes, integrating access considerations in environmental land management and LNRs, protecting and improving the public rights of way network, and expanding public rights to responsibly access and enjoy green and blue spaces.
 - Promote environmental responsibility and connection with nature, including through promoting the Countryside Code and Marine and Coastal Wildlife Code.
 - Embed nature and outdoor learning at all levels and settings within the education system.

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²⁵ For more information and detail on Link’s ongoing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion work to ensure great a more inclusive organisation and environmental sector, see our [website](#).



This statement is supported by the following Link members:

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