

Nature 2030

Essay collection



Wildlife and
Countryside



NATURE



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Nature 2030 Essay collection

There is hardly a politician out there these days who doesn't want to be seen as green. You'd be pressed to find a candidate who doesn't decry sewage pollution and profess undying admiration for David Attenborough. Some know that improving the environment is morally right, and essential for our future prosperity. It is the foundation of a successful economy and a healthy society. Others just know that the environment remains a key political priority, consistently ranked highly as an issue of concern.

Yet somehow, that's where the conversation ends. Political debate rarely goes beyond platitudes – easy one – upmanship on who can plant the most trees. There's a world of difference between a politician who says

they want environmental improvement but continues to support business as usual and those few who are willing to work for nature's recovery.

The result? Time and again, nature targets are made and missed. We've had promises to clean up our rivers, our seas, our air; pledges to bring back wildlife and restore lost habitats. Failure all round. And still with just under a year until one of the most important elections for nature and climate and people from all walks of life calling for change, there is no sign that the major political parties have a credible plan to halt environmental decline.

We know that time is running out for those changes to be made if the UK has any hope



of saving the nature we love and depend on. This collection of essays brings together conservationists, farmers, policy makers and campaigners to present a bold vision of what the UK could look like in 2030. From empowering communities to give them a voice on environmental rights, to providing new opportunities for our young people to be part of the green revolution, supporting farmers so that they are no longer forced down a path of intensification at the expense of nature to making polluters pay their fair share for environmental restoration.

From the Dasgupta review to the National Food Strategy, evidence of the all-economy-encompassing benefits of nature-restoration is clear. Any government wanting to reduce

ill-health and strengthen the NHS, increase productivity, food security and support a resilient economy must prioritise meeting the 2030 target to halt nature's decline. The essays in this collection set out some inspiring new ideas to achieve change and we are hugely grateful for each contribution.

So far, over 100 organisations have joined the Nature 2030 campaign for action to halt nature's decline, bringing together ambitious ideas and demanding that ahead of election day our leaders take note. We hope these essays will motivate and inspire our political leaders to take bold action for nature.

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The need for a pay rise for nature



When I started my own agroecological journey 37 years ago on my tenanted farm on the Wiltshire Downs, the notion of farming with nature and worrying about soil health seemed well outside the mainstream. “Going organic” was viewed as a slightly crazy route to take. Some of my fellow farmers privately – sometimes not so privately – thought I was mad, and environmental NGOs seemed mostly focused on creating nature reserves and seeing if the environmental impacts of industrial farming could be ameliorated a bit.

Attending this year’s Groundswell regenerative farming festival, I realised how far the world has changed – farmers, conservationists and the wider public alike were talking about restoring soils, recovering biodiversity, bringing trees back into farmland, cutting out pesticides, improving the quality of diets and making the countryside beautiful. Wildlife and Countryside Link’s manifesto proposal to double farming funding to support a wholesale shift in the farming system is another mark of how far things have come. As a farmer, I am heartened to see so many environmental charities championing change that will benefit agriculture and nature together.



Helen Browning
OBE DL

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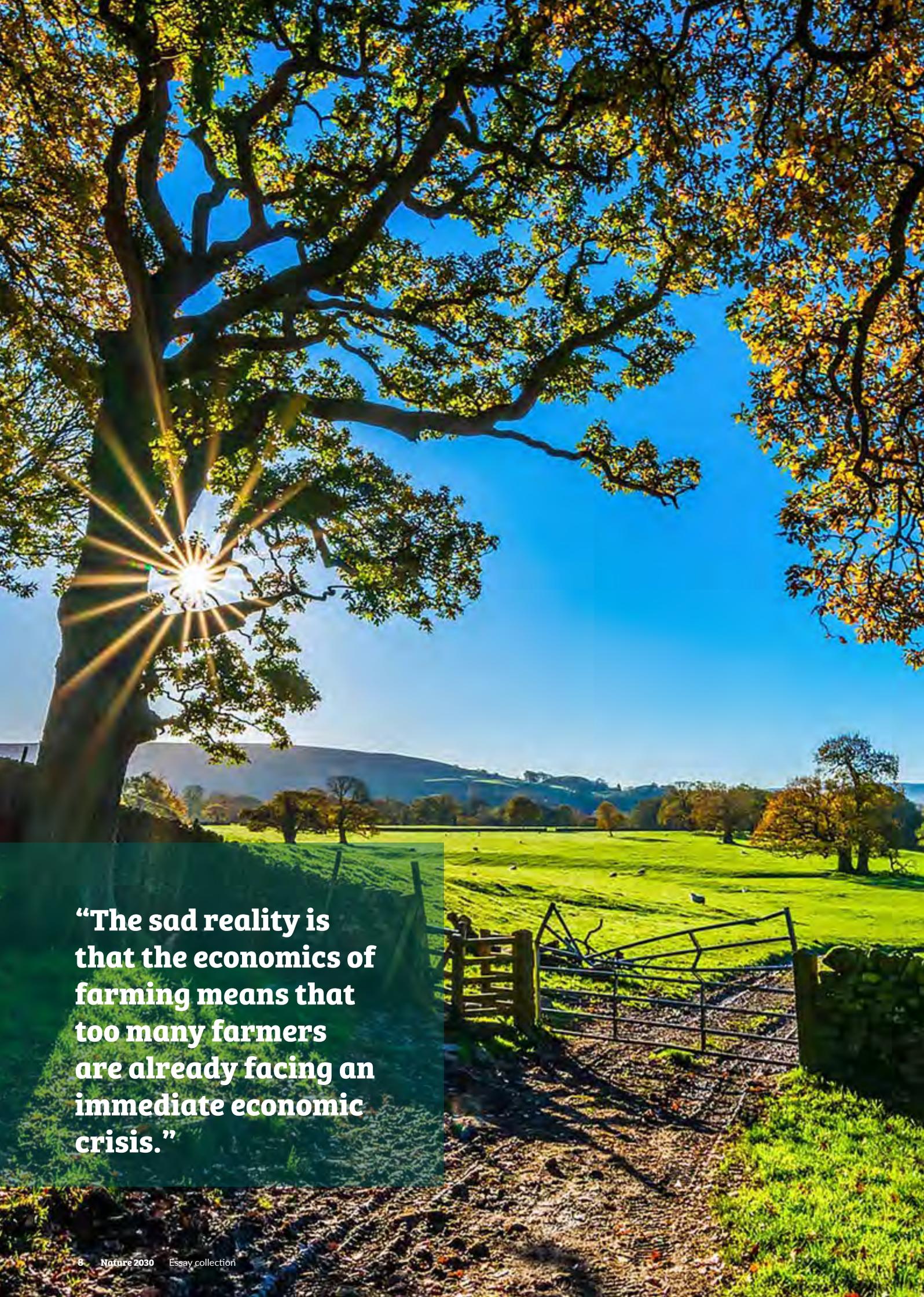
Helen is an organic farmer based in Wiltshire and is currently Chief Executive of the Soil Association. Helen has held a number of roles in agropolitics throughout her career and was awarded an OBE in 1998 for her services to organic farming.



We are asking a lot from a lot of farmers if the change in how they farm is going to be fast enough to address the crises in climate, nature and health. We are not talking about marginal change here. Overall, agriculture still takes a toll on nature – it is responsible for a growing proportion of carbon emissions, for over a third of river pollution, and for the ongoing decline of many wild species. Changes across whole farms are needed and quickly, and it is far from easy to turn round the business practices and production methods of such a huge and varied sector of the economy.

This is why it is so important that our politicians commit to supporting the change, by developing a shared vision of the future of productive and nature-

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“The sad reality is that the economics of farming means that too many farmers are already facing an immediate economic crisis.”

friendly farming, designing policies to support a rapid transition, and backing that with hard cash. The UK government committed to do just that in 2018, with its “Health and Harmony” proposal to pay public money for public goods. Unfortunately, it’s taken ages to turn that vision into viable schemes, and this loss of momentum alongside tumultuous market conditions and treacherous trade deals has undermined farmer confidence; many are considering their future.

Crazy economics

Of course, if economics worked like it should, we wouldn’t need to make the ask. If the externalities of farming were properly costed (the bees killed by pesticides, the rivers choked with nutrients, the growing crisis of antibiotic resistance) then we’d all be farming agroecologically already. But the sad reality is that the economics of farming means that too many farmers are already facing an immediate economic crisis which pressures them to respond in ways that often take them in another direction – and at increasing cost to their mental health. It is vital that political parties commit to changing the policy landscape so more and more farmers can do what they know is right.

In my view, the economics of farming incentives have been crazy too. For a long time, environmental payments under the Common Agricultural Policy were based on a model of “income foregone plus costs”. In other words, the payments that farmers received for taking conservation action were limited to their expenses. That model has been carried over to the new Environmental Land Management system.

I think this is the wrong approach for two reasons. First, I don’t think the model is really very good at reflecting costs. Yes, it might cover the price of a new planting regime, yes it might cover the lost revenue from a crop. But it is not very good at pricing in the costs of change, especially for small farming businesses. Shifting production methods, planning new approaches, learning how to farm in a different way—all these things entail costs and effort that weigh the scale negatively when farmers consider environmental change.

Second, this method of structuring payments completely underestimates the urgency of action. Uptake of environmental measures in the first flush of Environmental Land Management has been slow. I suspect this is a combination of business inertia (“we’ve always done things this way”), financial uncertainty (“market prices are erratic, this is not time to change”) and low rewards in the new system (“it’s just not worth our while”). At the current rate of uptake, it will take decades to begin to shift the dial.



No time for half measures

If governments are serious about halting the decline of nature by 2030 they simply can't do that without farmers, and they simply can't effect the farming changes needed with half measures. So what would it take to encourage wide-ranging change?

The RSPB, National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts recently completed some economic analysis of the scale of investment needed to pay for environmental success in the farmed environment. They concluded that £4.4 billion was likely to “significantly underestimate” the resources required to meet environmental targets. That's before you even begin to factor in the need to fund improvements in animal welfare or access to nature, or better provision of expert advice to support businesses to adapt.

I believe the ambition should be bigger and the rewards should be greater. Farmer response to Defra's Sustainable Farming Incentive has been cautious so far, but alongside approaches that allow farmers to dip their toes in the water and get engaged, we should focus on aiming much higher and offer greater motivation and support to ensure wholehearted change.

Take soils for example. Intensive farming and other pressures have caused widespread soil degradation, leading to carbon emissions, erosion and



compaction, contamination and poor productivity. The potential for better soil management to sequester carbon, support biodiversity, reduce flooding and underpin more sustainable business is huge. The Defra soils standard will pay £5.80 per hectare for farmers to have a soil management plan and testing in place. This is a good start, but the potential for better soil management is so much greater.

How much more could we achieve by offering whole-farm standards, where farmers are rewarded for shifting production methods across the whole farm, such as organic producers do.

As well as cover cropping and leys, an integrated approach to better soils would cover responsible tillage, reducing the use of synthetic inputs, and restoring plant ecosystems. The benefits of adopting these approaches as a package would be so much more than the tentative approaches suggested so far. And the payments for uptake should ensure that nature, soil and climate-friendly farming is financially compelling.

Most sustainable farmers are subsidising food production through diversification, off-farm income or discounting their family labour. This is not tenable and cannot continue.

Some of this is about scale. The biggest prize of all would be in changing production methods across whole landscapes, with farmers working together to support restoration of whole ecosystems.

Think of farmers working together along the length of a river to reduce inputs and bring it back to healthy condition or uniting to support the survival of a species. As it stands, the money available under Environmental Land Management is enough to plan or trial a few big schemes, but far from enough to support long-term projects across the UK. Many worthwhile proposals are already being rejected.

Analysis the Soil Association undertook found that financial support for agroecology would achieve great value for the taxpayer if full cost accounting was applied, suggesting that more resources should be targeted at this kind of systemic change. But at the farm level, the actual economic scenario for many farm businesses was preventing rather than encouraging change. We need to

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move from piecemeal, apologetic and slow reform to investment in collaboration, peer-to-peer learning, dynamic procurement, landscape-level intervention, and supply chain development.

The bigger picture

Public spending will be vital, but I do also see a role for the private sector. Ensuring that companies play their role in supporting sustainable farming is vital – the lending decisions of banks, the purchasing decisions of supermarkets, and the investment decisions of pension funds all need to be aligned to support farmers in working towards climate stability, nature recovery and sustainable food production.

If we get this right, and quickly, then the potential for growth in green jobs is considerable. Working the land in a way that works with nature requires the kind



of skills development and labour on the land that we have not seen for some time, as well as all the marvels that modern technology can bring. CPRE reckon that hedgerow creation and management alone could support 25,000 jobs. A National Nature Service would be a good way

to ensure that we have the skills and trained workforce to embrace the surge in interest we see from young people eager to embark on a career in agroecology, to work on organic and regenerative farms and to help the public enjoy the nature and good food that these farms produce.

Please join the dots...

If I've learned anything in my 37 years of farming, it's that none of these challenges can be addressed in isolation – they are all interlinked. The sobering recent research involving RSPB research scientists highlighting the key link between excessive pesticide and synthetic fertiliser use on farmland and the drastic decline in wildlife makes that clearer than ever.

The whole way we view farming, climate, diets and the natural world requires bold systemic change, and I urge the political parties to respond with visionary policies to this manifesto challenge from the Wildlife and Countryside Link partnership.



“If we get this right, and quickly, then the potential for growth in green jobs is considerable.”

A Nature Recovery Obligation

A person wearing a full-body grey hazmat suit, a respirator mask with a clear visor, and white gloves is crouching outdoors. They are holding a pipette in their right hand and a test tube containing a green liquid in their left hand. The background shows a natural setting with a large tree trunk and some green foliage. The overall scene suggests environmental monitoring or research in a potentially hazardous or sensitive area.

“Nature is commodified as if it were just another good to trade away, all while projecting an image of environmental action.”

Dr Richard Benwell

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Richard is CEO of Wildlife and Countryside Link. Previously he has been policy adviser to the Secretary of State at Defra, worked on policy and advocacy at WWT and RSPB, and served as a director of Westmill Solar Cooperative and a clerk in the House of Commons Commission.



Discussions about the role of the private sector in nature recovery can easily become polarised. On the one hand, some proselytise that private finance can fix the world. We are promised a tsunami of private capital, waiting to be unleashed in service of nature's recovery. The government's Green Finance Strategy aimed to "harness the delivery capacity of the market economy – and in particular to mobilise the enormous resources of our capital markets through Green Finance".

On the other hand, others recognise that private environmental markets can go horribly wrong. In the worst cases, offsetting schemes can perpetuate harm, or even lead to an increase in polluting activities. Nature is commodified as if it were just another good to trade away, all while projecting an image of environmental action. Witness the trees planted on peat in pursuit of carbon credits, or ongoing industrial emissions justified by fictional forestry projects.

There is truth and exaggeration in both accounts. But one thing is surely for certain: corporate activities take a huge toll on our natural world. From habitat destruction to pollution, the pressures on nature caused by industry are often utterly unsustainable. Corporate Social Responsibility green funding scarcely touches the edges when it comes to compensating for the harm caused to nature by industrial activities.

The answer is not to retreat from the role of the private sector in nature recovery. There is a £4.4 billion annual gap in funding needed to restore the natural environment in England, which will surely require a combination of public and private funding to fill. Nor is the answer to casually trust in the market to properly account for the risks of environmental decline and the rewards of investment in nature.

The answer is a regulatory leap. The law can play a huge role in requiring

businesses to be better. The government should impose a Nature Recovery Obligation on major polluting industries. It should oblige them to account for the harm they cause to nature; plan for a rapid transition to nature-positive practices; and pay a “Nature Recovery Obligation levy”— not some scant offsetting effort, but a requirement to pay to restore nature, scaled according to each business’s environmental footprint.

The obligation should cover all the major sectors of the economy: infrastructure, finance, retail, utilities and more, and it should create a liability on bad polluting practices that makes every business Board open their eyes to environmental need, as well as raising billions of pounds for nature restoration.

Private markets barely scratch the surface

It’s a hugely complicated task to try to understand the full range of business impacts on nature.

For individual issues within individual sectors, we have some good knowledge. Greenhouse gas emissions from energy are now well-established in most cases, thanks to 15 years of the Climate Change Act, and the habitat impacts of housing are becoming clearer thanks to biodiversity net gain metrics. Yet even in these areas, there are huge bounds of uncertainty. Think of emissions from biomass, for example, where calculations are confounded by uncertainties around the sources of fuel.

At the aggregate level, there is even more uncertainty. The global footprint metric gives a sense of scale for the overshoot in the exploitation of our natural world (the UK uses about 2.4 Earths’ worth of stuff), and the ongoing declines in biodiversity show that the scales remain tipped against nature, but the detail of the drivers of destruction remains blurred.

“The government should impose a Nature Recovery Obligation on major polluting industries. It should oblige them to account for the harm they cause to nature.”

In most sectors, most of the time, we have an extremely partial view of damage, and we remain amazingly ignorant of the effects of business on biodiversity.

It’s extraordinary that even in the UK we have no accurate record of the amount of habitat destruction that goes on each year, and that we are only just beginning to glimpse the horrific extent of sewage pollution, as the public pry information from closed corporate records.



In the language of economics, this damage leads to “externalities” – environmental costs caused by industry that are borne by the environment and by the public. Attempts by business and government to require businesses to make good on that damage (“internalise” the costs) are even more partial.

In just a few cases, where the risk of irretrievable damage to ecosystems is high, the government has begun to require businesses to offset the damage they cause. The main efforts in the UK are carbon offset schemes, biodiversity net gain (designed to reduce damage from development), species licensing (to provide habitats for protected species like great crested newts) and nutrient neutrality (to offset damage from development to protected rivers). Even added up, the revenues from these schemes are only likely to contribute a few hundred million pounds of investment in nature.

The government’s Green Finance Strategy aims to attract over £1 billion in private finance for nature each year by 2030. Yet beyond these few statutory markets, Defra’s approach has been to play a “market making” role, facilitating private sector efforts through voluntary markets. Without a statutory stick to drive demand for investment, voluntary contributions are likely to remain marginal, focused on easy and low-cost options.

Beyond offsetting

The important point is that the money from these statutory markets (including for environmental net gain) is only likely to offset the additional harm caused by those activities. It will go no way to restoring nature. What's more, it will only cover a small portion of the impacts of regulated activities. Biodiversity net gain, for example, does nothing to compensate for many of the environmental impacts of development: resource extraction, energy use, water use, or effects on air quality.

Yet biodiversity in England languishes in a hugely degraded state. By 2021, the index of relative abundance of priority species in the UK had declined to 37% of its 1970 baseline. Just 37% of England's most important wildlife sites (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) are in good condition. We can't turn around these losses simply by compensating for part of the ongoing damage.

When private markets are "just break even" in the way the current schemes are designed, it arguably amplifies the risks. If the sum of private investment in nature is limited to compensating for harm, and if market schemes allow damaging projects or processes to go ahead that would otherwise have been refused, then any failures of delivery really matter. If a dodgy tree-planting scheme enables the destruction of an established woodland, then the environment is losing out.

Rather than give in to the risks and retreat from private sector nature obligations, a better approach would be to supercharge regulatory requirements on big businesses. Instead of just paying to offset, polluting industries should be required to pay for nature's restoration.



If a moral justification is necessary, think of it as historical responsibility: some polluting industries have enjoyed the "free rider" profits of exploiting nature for decades or even centuries. Surely industry now should play a role in recovery.

How would a Nature Recovery Obligation be structured?

A Nature Recovery Obligation should be structured to (1) create a financial incentive for businesses to reduce their environmental footprint; and (2) generate a large annual revenue for nature's recovery. It should be designed in a way that is predictable for years to come to facilitate business planning, and it should be set out in law to reduce uncertainty.

The Nature Recovery Obligation should assess environmental impacts at the sector scale and individual business scale, giving the greatest obligations to the most polluting sectors and businesses. The precise parameters of a Nature Recovery Obligation could vary by sector. For example, for the food retail sector, the Nature Recovery Obligation could be scaled according to the provenance of produce sold. The more work a retailer does to source goods from low-impact producers (such as organic farms, or those in higher-tier agri-environment schemes), the less that retailer should be obliged to pay per tonne of output. Combined with the added scrutiny from reporting and planning requirements, this would create a powerful incentive for businesses to reduce their impacts on the environment – the first priority, before any talk of compensation.

The simplest way to channel payments would be to require relevant businesses to pay a levy, which should be hypothecated to targeted species programmes and habitat restoration efforts. In some cases, where there are highly reliable market schemes available, direct investment in accredited projects could be an alternative way to discharge a Nature Recovery Obligation, but a large and predictable fund would bring huge benefits for the green economy.



Currently, the “stop and go” experience of nature funding (through schemes such as the Green Recovery Challenge Fund) creates a boom and bust cycle. Many Wildlife & Countryside Link members have found the funds frustrating, with unrealistic application deadlines, and impractical requirements for project completion. Their short cycles mean that a pipeline of investable projects can never develop, and there is too much instability for green jobs and skills to develop.

A long-term and predictable fund would facilitate better projects, with the increased likelihood of additional finance, and allow the green jobs market to mature – especially in combination with a National Nature Service to foster green skills.

An economy that works in harmony with nature

Throughout history, the Earth’s bounty has seemed so infinite that societies have rarely attempted to quantify how much nature is destroyed, despoiled, abstracted or polluted in pursuit of material gain.

In our modern, industrial era, the consequences of that thoughtlessness have

“The answer, though, is not to retreat from the role of the private sector, it is to wrap round our economic activities with intelligent regulations - green rules that provide businesses with certainty and a spur to innovate.”



become too great to tolerate. Continued destruction and the extinctions that would ensue are both morally unacceptable and soon self-defeating in an economy that is founded on natural assets and vulnerable to their losses.

The Global Biodiversity Framework, signed in December 2022, included a target to “progressively reduce negative impacts on biodiversity, increase positive impacts, reduce biodiversity-related risks to business and financial institutions, and promote actions to ensure sustainable patterns of production”.

For that to happen, it will be necessary to take a bold new approach to harness the power of the private sector – both to find new, greener ways to operate, and to fund the recovery of nature.

Too many private sector schemes have descended into brand-burnishing nothings, or laid a veneer of green on top of ongoing environmental destruction. If we take a laissez-faire approach to private sector action for nature, despite a few outstanding examples, the overall result has consistently allowed corporate excesses to continue. The answer, though, is not to retreat from the role of the private sector, it is to wrap round our economic activities with intelligent regulations – green rules that provide businesses with certainty and a spur to innovate, while increasing protections for nature and investment in its restoration.

The ideas in this essay are just part of the answer. A far-sighted government would combine them with trade measures to reduce the UK’s global impacts, and clear natural capital reporting in place of a narrow focus on GDP.

Do nothing, and corporate destruction of nature will surely continue. Get it right, though, and businesses will have a clear path toward a thriving green economy, supported by a strong foundation of natural capital. The results offer opportunities for UK businesses to lead a global race toward greener practices and sustain the natural assets upon which all economic activities are built.



A Nature Recovery Obligation – combining disclosure, nature-positive planning, and a requirement to pay for nature restoration – should establish a tough new convention of corporate environmental action. After all, there is no future for the economy unless we turn round the decline of nature.



The case for a Public Nature Estate

When the next government takes office after the 2024 general election, it will not have long to tackle the nature crisis. There will be just five years left to meet the goal of protecting 30% of the country for nature by 2030 (“30x30”) – and at present, just 3% of England is properly protected and managed for nature.¹ Meanwhile, wildlife in Britain is in freefall: insect populations are collapsing, the number of farmland birds has halved since 1970, and once-common species like hedgehogs and sparrows are increasingly rare.

But when the state steps up, it can turn things around incredibly quickly. The war effort, the formation of the NHS, the elimination of CFCs and acid rain, the phaseout of coal: modern history is replete with examples of rapid government action addressing huge problems. When it comes to the conservation and restoration of nature, however, we seem to be missing certain tools from the policy toolbox.

Over the past six years, civil servants have expended huge amounts of time and effort redesigning farm subsidies post-Brexit – with nearly all policy discussions focused on how best to pay private landowners and farmers to be good stewards. Yet there has been almost no serious discussion alongside this about



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the role of public and community land ownership in restoring nature. Meanwhile, the government's environmental regulators have been starved of funding as a result of austerity, rendering them incapable of carrying out even basic functions, like the regular monitoring of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

A rich history

In the 1940s, it was obvious to the leading ecologists and conservationists of the day that the state had a vital role to play in protecting the natural world. Professor Arthur Tansley, the father of British ecology, called in 1945 for “the formal placing of wildlife under State protection... What is wanted is unequivocal public recognition of nature conservation as a national interest.” This could only come, Tansley argued, from “some sort of national authority”.² The Huxley Report of 1947, commissioned by the postwar Labour government and chaired by the pre-eminent scientist Dr Julian Huxley, concluded that “the government should take a general responsibility ... for the conservation and control of the flora and fauna of this country”.³ In 1949, Clement Attlee's administration created the Nature Conservancy, the forerunner of Natural England, and vested it with powers to purchase land for nature reserves – even via compulsory purchase orders, if deemed necessary.⁴

Over the ensuing years, the Nature Conservancy speedily acquired tens of thousands of acres of land for nature reserves across Britain – often at rock-bottom prices, because the land being bought was agriculturally unproductive. As the historian John Sheail puts it, “the Conservancy was impatient to acquire extensive tracts of countryside and coast as rapidly as possible”.⁵ These sites became the backbone of the country’s network of National Nature Reserves (NNRs), which endure to this day: the “jewels in the crown” of nature sites in Britain.

But more recent history has seen successive governments in thrall to a small-state, deregulatory ideology that has weakened the public sector’s role in nature conservation. The acquisition of new public nature reserves has slowed down to a trickle. Each successor body to the Nature Conservancy – from the NCC to English Nature to its current incarnation, Natural England – has been weaker and less independent than the last. In 2010, David Cameron’s government briefly considered selling off the publicly-owned National Nature Reserves – but amidst the furore generated by the proposed sale of the Forestry Commission’s Public Forest Estate, this lesser-known privatisation attempt was quietly dropped.⁶ Austerity nevertheless resulted in Natural England’s budgets being slashed by almost two-thirds in a decade.⁷ It’s notable that today Natural England still only owns a tiny 0.37% of England.⁸



Doing things differently

The next government should take a different approach. It's time for the public sector to rediscover its central role in protecting and restoring nature in this country, with the creation of a Public Nature Estate. This would be a truly visionary undertaking: the biggest change to nature conservation since the 1940s. At its heart should be a reinvigorated green watchdog. Natural England should have its budget restored so that it can carry out its functions properly, and acquire more land itself where necessary. Ministers should also give the agency back its independence – not least because, when it comes to ecological matters, England has not had enough of experts.

A new Public Nature Estate would encompass the large swathes of other public sector land that could and should be better managed for nature. The Ministry of Defence, Forestry Commission, Local Authorities and other public bodies between them own millions of acres: collectively, the public sector owns around 8.5% of England, making it the biggest single landowner in the country. Some of this land is built on, or used for purposes incompatible with nature conservation; but vast swathes of it comprise moorlands, forests, and farmland – all of which could be doing more to aid nature's recovery. Not all of this land currently contains the wealth of species and habitats that merit designation as National Nature Reserves, or even SSSIs; but far more of it could be devoted to ecological restoration.

Forestry England, for example, owns a 489,000 acre estate, of which around 105,000 acres are Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS).⁹ This means that they used to be ancient woodlands (at least 400 years old), but were cut down in the 20th century for conifer plantations. To their credit, Forestry England have committed to eventually restoring all these PAWS woods, but the pace of change is slow: under 5,000 acres were restored in 2022-23.¹⁰ By bringing Forestry England's landholdings under the ambit of the Public Nature Estate, and updating their legal duties to include nature recovery, this process should be sped up. So too should the work of the "Forest Wilding" team, a recently-formed unit within the organisation,¹¹ which seeks to restore natural processes to publicly-owned forests – like reintroducing pine martens to control grey squirrels, and deploying wild boar and cattle to create useful disturbance in woods.

“Not all of this land currently contains the wealth of species and habitats that merit designation as National Nature Reserves... but far more of it could be devoted to ecological restoration.”

The Ministry of Defence has some incredible sites for wildlife, from the butterfly-rich chalk grasslands of Porton Down and Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, to the rapidly rewilding scrub and heath of the Pirbright Ranges in Surrey. But it also possesses various sites in need of decontamination, such as the former atomic weapons testing sites on the island of Foulness in Essex, whose toxic payloads risk leaching out into the Thames Estuary as sea levels rise. And the Ministry of Defence's land disposals process leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to valuing nature – such as when the old training camp of Lodge Hill in Kent, the UK's premier site for nightingales, was almost sold off for development before an outcry by environmentalists halted it.¹²

English councils, too, own large swathes of land – from the Metropolitan boroughs who bought up green fields in the 1930s in order to protect them from development prior to the creation of Green Belt planning designations, to the many County councils who still possess County Farms. Bringing these landholdings under the aegis of a Public Nature Estate, too, would add some 1.3 million acres of land across England.¹³ Yet much of it is not necessarily managed for nature currently. Brighton council's 10,000 acre Downland Estate, for example, consists of very little species-rich chalk downland: much of it was wrecked during the agricultural intensification of the 1950s and 60s. The Friends of the Brighton Downs, however, have proposed that the council rejuvenate its estate by stitching back together the flower-rich tapestry of the downs, and doing so hand-in-hand with opening up public access to these landholdings.¹⁴



“The unthinking sell-off of public land has seen councils flog off half of the nation’s County Farms Estate since the 1970s.”

Pennine Way



The need to think bigger

But such imagination and hope has been lacking in the management of council landholdings for some time – with local authorities governed instead by a mantra of outsourcing services, cutting budgets and shrinking their asset base. The unthinking sell-off of public land has seen councils flog off half of the nation's County Farms Estate since the late 1970s, depriving first-time farmers who lack capital a vital way into farming.¹⁵ Instead, such farms ought to be beacons of regenerative agriculture, let out on tenancies that encourage the use of agroecological methods. Tired and neglected Country Parks could similarly be revived as pioneers of municipal rewilding – like the London councils currently seeking to reintroduce beavers in the Green Belt.¹⁶

Instead of selling off what Harold Macmillan called “the family silver”, a bold government would actively add to the Public Nature Estate through acquiring more land, when sites in need of restoration come up for sale. At national level, land purchases could be guided by a strategic plan to complete a Nature Recovery Network, or contribute to plans for tree cover and net zero.

At local level, acquisitions by Local Authorities could help to deliver Local Nature Recovery Strategies, improve river quality, or add create new spaces for wildlife-friendly farming and horticulture. After all, there are plenty of English landscapes in dire need of rescuing for the public interest: from the desiccated wastes of the Fens, drained for profit only to have their fertility lost to the sea, to the burned and blasted grouse moors of the North Pennines. If England's peatland – with its vast store of biological carbon and huge potential to soak up more CO₂ – isn't a national asset, then what is?

“Imagine if the residents of a town could buy up a stretch of their local river: the resulting sense of collective ownership could lead to transformational changes.”

Now is the time to empower communities to acquire land for nature, too. In Scotland for the past twenty years, the public have had the power to quite literally “take back control” over their environs through Community Right to Buy laws. This legislation has given democratically-constituted community groups a first right of refusal when local land comes up for sale, and instigates a pause in the normal sales process to give communities the time to raise funds and draw up business plans for the land.



Not every community buyout works, and not all are designed with nature solely in mind: but to see what can be achieved, look at the success of the Langholm Moor Community Buyout, which acquired a former grouse moor from the Duke of Buccleuch, and is now in the process of turning it into the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve.¹⁷

England desperately needs a Community Right to Buy like Scotland's, enabling communities to buy up not only pubs and village halls but also woods, fields and river banks. Doing so would not only bring benefits in terms of public access, but also a much greater public stake in caring for the local environment. Imagine if the residents of a town could buy up a stretch of their local river: the resulting sense of collective ownership could lead to transformational changes in how the surrounding farmland is managed, to ensure that slurry and agricultural chemicals no longer pollute the water that the community swims in. After all, it's river users – kayakers, anglers and swimmers – who've been at the forefront of campaigning to clean up the River Wye and free it from the chickenshit and sewage that currently pollutes it.¹⁸

A Public Nature Estate would be one of the most far-reaching changes in a century of nature conservation. The next government should take inspiration from the far-sighted ecologists and scientists of the 1940s who saw the vital role of the public sector in nature recovery, and reinvigorate that vision for the 21st century. We can now see that simply acquiring a scattered necklace of nature reserves was not enough to reverse nature's decline: that, as the Lawton Review put it in 2010, we need "bigger, better, more and joined up" spaces for nature. That's the rationale that underpins goals like "30x30". Farmers, private landowners and landowning conservation groups all have a crucial role to play in that. But it's now time for the public sector, working closely with communities, to join that fight in earnest: and not a moment too soon.

When I grow up I want to be a... nature recovery worker

Whenever surveys are done looking at the career aspirations of young people it's heartening to see how many mention public service or caring professions. A large-scale study of 13-16 year-olds for BBC Bitesize last year saw teacher, doctor, nurse and police officer all in the top 10.¹⁹ Given well-publicised recruitment challenges in these sectors, we can only assume aspirations change somewhere along the way.

Encouragingly, a smaller poll of a slightly older age group saw “environmental conservation” shoot up the leader board, with as many as 49% of respondents saying they would like a job that involves sustainability and looking after the planet.²⁰ Given the scale of the environmental crises we face, it's incumbent on us all to think about how we harness and channel this desire to do good and avoid a similar drop-off in aspiration.

At the moment, however, labour market policy is failing to deliver the growth in green jobs and skills needed to support rapid transition to a net zero, nature-positive economy – and failing these young people who want to play a part in creating a greener future.

This is a major missed opportunity in an area of potential growth, particularly for the nature-related market which offers the prospect of jobs of all skill levels in every corner of the country. It is also a barrier to aspiration for all those people who want to dedicate their time to building a greener Britain.

A National Nature Service – a paid, in-work skills and training programme, dedicated to nature recovery – could be a catalyst for filling economy-wide ecological skills shortages. It would be a gateway into green work for thousands of people and harness the huge enthusiasm waiting to help halt nature's decline.

Gaps in the environment sector

Although young people want to have an environmental career, many struggle to imagine how they could become part of a green economy. When Groundwork asked groups of young people what the climate and nature emergency meant to them the responses were stark and revealing. Nearly twice as many got their information from social media than school or college, many said they “didn't see young people like them” in the green movement and, although the prospect of contributing to reduced carbon emissions or nature recovery through their



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working lives appealed, most said they wouldn't know where to start looking for relevant jobs.

This feedback is beginning to lead to action in the environmental sector. Initiatives such as the RACE Report are spotlighting a lack of diversity and helping to drive change in recruitment practices.²¹ Work by industry bodies such as LANTRA²² is starting to map out more defined career pathways and the creation of portals such as CIEEM's Green Jobs for Nature²³ are aimed at making these pathways more visible and appealing to a wider audience.

Although there is forward motion, change is slow, and all those involved express a concern about a lack of capacity in the sector to meet existing targets in areas such as tree planting and habitat management, let alone making the fundamental shift in the labour market that will be needed to drive delivery of more ambitious goals around nature recovery, natural solutions, sustainable farming and stewardship of our green and blue infrastructure.

We know the challenges are felt across the sector – big public and voluntary organisations recognise they have an image problem which is hampering recruitment and efforts to broaden engagement in their work, while smaller organisations, which may appear more relevant and accessible, lack capacity and the funds needed to grow.

Work in the wider economy

While we focus on this in the environmental movement, those driving economic policy – and many private businesses – have a parallel set of worries about levels of participation in the labour market, which have tumbled since the pandemic. Whether this is down to “the great resignation”, the effects of a post-pandemic health backlog, the impact of Brexit restrictions – or a combination of all three – the policy spotlight is now trained firmly on ensuring that those who can and want to work are able to, knowing that measures will only succeed if the work on offer is fulfilling and financially viable.

Most policy on this issue is focused on how people who have left the labour market (either through ill health or choice) might be supported or enticed to return, for example by better integrating work and health support or through “returnerships” for the over 50s. What this overlooks is that for years before the current crisis, we were failing adequately to help tens of thousands of people who were already struggling to find work, and that those people are now likely to be further back in the queue for support. As ever, this will have a particular impact on young people who have the added disadvantage of a lack of work experience on their CV and who have had their education disrupted and their mental health affected by the consequences of Covid.

The fact that 1.7 million people who are currently not working say they would like to while government programmes designed to address that gap (including

traineeships, apprenticeships and the Restart scheme) are underspending,²⁴ suggests that we haven't yet found the right response to the supply-side challenge.

Labour market policy

Politicians of all persuasions have a default setting when it comes to labour market policy – driving employment by providing incentives to business and/or funding infrastructure investment – trusting that the market will balance supply and demand. Sometimes, however, when major shifts like the transition to a green economy are underway, more creative solutions are needed.

There have been some strong examples. In times of crisis, governments of all stripes have made bold interventions in the economy. Labour's Future Jobs Fund was designed to ensure young people already out of work weren't scarred by long-term unemployment as their traditional entry-level jobs were taken by older, more experienced workers in the wake of the 2008 crash. Despite it becoming something of a political football in the aftermath, common consensus was that it did a valuable job, bringing benefits for participants, for employers and for communities. The more recent and not dissimilar Kickstart programme was introduced to offset the worst impacts of the pandemic on young people who were more likely to be in insecure work. Both built on the "intermediate labour market" model by subsidising wage costs in recognition of the critical importance of paid work experience as a stepping stone to sustained employment. As is often said ... "the best way of getting a job is to have a job in the first place".



The climate and nature crises are different, but need similarly bold labour market responses, with growing calls for action.²⁵

A net zero transition could and should have a disruptive effect on the economy as we withdraw from damaging industries and jump-start whole new sectors into life. We also need to provide the certainty and support that will enable growth in economic sectors which are not yet mature – where business models are still developing and where customer demand needs subsidy to provide the confidence to take on staff, particularly among SMEs and micro-businesses. Retrofitting our homes, workplaces and public buildings, for example, will require significant change in the construction sector with consequences for plumbers, electricians, roofers, plasterers etc. Retrofitting, adapting and managing the natural environment will require a similar effort and investment.

“A National Nature Service – as part of a wider transition plan for a green economy – can deliver many of the goals we have for regenerating left behind communities.”



The case for a National Nature Service grows ever stronger

Predicting future labour market needs is a perilous affair – made more difficult in sectors comprising diverse organisations ranging from family businesses and small charities to multi-national contracting firms. However, as far as the management of land and nature goes, we can say with certainty that the workforce we have now needs to grow and the skills it contains need to evolve.

We also know that this is not just about renewing an ageing workforce in farming, forestry, ecology or countryside management. It's also about creating new roles in these professions that will help make protecting the environment and connecting with nature relevant to everyone – digital skills to support environmental information and interpretation, community engagement workers to overcome barriers to accessing nature, fundraising and event management to help pay for green spaces.

The transferable skills that can be gained from work experience in the environmental sector will be in increasing demand in a wide range of industries – some of which are well-established and looking to adapt while others are still emerging – and this will be driven further as more companies adopt ESG goals.

Responsible and sustainable management of the natural environment is gradually growing in importance as part of our thinking about other vital infrastructure – rail, roads, water resources and power supplies (from tidal turbines to solar farms). The TUC in Wales has highlighted the significant job creation and job multiplier benefits that could be achieved through investment in green infrastructure – from reforestation schemes to building cycle lanes.²⁶ Alongside this, the need to restore and adapt our landscapes and communities to a changing climate will require new approaches to urban greening and flood and fire resilience. It's telling that one of the big growth industries in the water-stressed south of England is the installation of smart water butts designed to preserve supply and slow the flow of stormwater.

An inclusive and transformative scheme

A National Nature Service – as part of a wider transition plan for a green economy – can deliver many of the goals we have for regenerating left behind communities, “levelling up” for those holding on to that slogan.

Nature-based jobs are not concentrated in economic hotspots – requiring people to uproot themselves and hollow out their communities. A truly sustainable economy means producing food, dealing with waste, generating power and meeting our leisure needs closer to where we live – with sustainable travel routes making them all better connected and more accessible. A fit-for-the-times industrial strategy would see a much greater emphasis on local and social enterprise with the circular economy at its heart, again providing excellent progression prospects for those gaining a first foot on the ladder

“What’s needed is a bold statement of intent, investment in the right infrastructure and a national call to action to capture imaginations.”

through a National Nature Service. Twelve months of paid work and training for thousands of people would help tackle a growing maintenance backlog, support public health objectives and address environmental injustices around flood risk, air pollution and the lack of access to green space for those in disadvantaged places or circumstances.

At the same time, the benefits of a National Nature Service to the environment sector could be transformative. Small organisations

depending on insecure funding struggle with the risks attached to expansion and the bureaucracy involved in apprenticeships.

A managed system of placements backed by national standards with localised support would enable them to concentrate on delivery but also facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience to improve their approach to recruitment and personal development. It would also turbo-charge action to make the sector more representative of the people it needs to serve – providing a way into good, rewarding jobs that may not be visible, or may at first not seem relevant, to people with different perspectives on nature, either borne of cultural considerations or preconceptions about the skills needed and the rewards on offer. As many entry-level roles in the sector don’t require qualifications it will enable us to address the inequity of people finding their way into the sector through unpaid work experience, which clearly favours the better off. It will also improve the health and wellbeing of those participating, a key consideration given the surge in mental health issues experienced by young people post-pandemic.²⁷

Testing the model

The National Nature Service model is already gaining traction and Groundwork is involved in a number of associated tests and pilots. We’re supporting environmental organisations to employ 95 young people for a year through the New to Nature initiative backed by the National Lottery Heritage Fund’s jubilee and coronation funds. The Welsh Government is facilitating development work by Groundwork and other partners aimed at establishing a similar programme, while in London Groundwork and Parks for London are leading the Mayor’s Green Space Skills Academy, which is exploring how to join up provision and grow the workforce linked to climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Routes to scale and replication are readily available. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund – with its investment priorities of skills, enterprise and ‘pride of place’ – provides the perfect opportunity for all local authorities to develop similar schemes, while the additional oversight of skills provision devolved to mayors and combined authorities could support this through mainstream spending. Even if these opportunities were grasped, however, this would still be a piecemeal approach relying on organisations already struggling for strategic capacity to weave together multiple funding strands with often conflicting compliance and reporting regimes.

Scaling the model

What’s needed is a bold statement of intent, investment in the right infrastructure and a national call to action to capture imaginations and ensure national and local funds are joined up in the right way.

The Obama administration framed its energy efficiency programme as a \$5 billion national “weatherization” campaign, creating jobs for unemployed construction workers and driving up home retrofit. Despite a slow start, it hit some ambitious targets with more than a million homes improved. Joe Biden has now picked up the mantle with his support for a Civilian Climate Corps.

With targets to halt the decline of nature just around the corner, we need a similar sense of urgency and similar leadership aimed at inspiring young people to work as guardians of our natural world. We need to grow the industries and organisations we’ll need to build a fair and green future in which people, places and nature thrive. A National Nature Service could help to diversify and strengthen the environment sector, addressing a nationwide shortage of green job opportunities, and provide a skilled workforce to kickstart nature’s recovery.





The importance of environmental rights

It's not rocket science. When we breathe dirty air, eat food grown in toxic soils, spend our time indoors to escape pollution, and swim in or water our crops with water filled with sewage, it impacts our health. And if the environment around us is in declining health itself – if trees are being cut down, pollinators are in decline, soils and waters are leached of nutrients and loaded with pollutants - then the risks to all of us are only going to get bigger.

Add in the dangers of flooding, heatwaves and storms caused by climate change, combined with the loss of the natural spaces that have been shown to improve mental and physical health, and the disastrous consequences of an unhealthy environment are all too real. And these risks face people across the UK and around the world. And they're often felt most acutely by communities already disadvantaged or discriminated against in other ways.



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We all know our environment is not healthy. In fact, it's in crisis – and the situation is getting worse. The air we all breathe is so polluted that tens of thousands of people die from its effects each year in the UK.²⁸ But the government is still scrapping rules that require published emissions reduction plans to clean up our dirty air. And while 75% of our rivers already pose a serious risk to human health,²⁹ Secretary of State Michael Gove recently tried to bin rules that required new developments to prevent further pollution of our waters.³⁰

The problem isn't confined to Westminster. Across the UK, public bodies are making decisions that make this crisis in climate, nature and health worse.³¹ Projects that increase pollution, destroy natural spaces and accelerate climate change are still being given the go-ahead, to the detriment of nature and people alike. And communities are often frustrated in challenging these decisions.



The implications are huge

If our environment was healthier, it would mean huge savings for our health, social care and welfare systems. It would mean better lives for all of us. A healthy environment should be a right for people everywhere. But without effective systems to guarantee that government and public bodies act to deliver this right, and without the correct mechanisms to help communities seek redress if and when that doesn't happen, a really healthy environment is just a pipe dream.

A healthy environment underpins so many of our human rights – the right to life, to adequate housing, to family life. That's why, in 2021, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council adopted a resolution recognising “the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment” as a “human right that is important for the enjoyment of human rights”.³² In July 2022, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) also adopted a resolution recognising the same right. The UK voted in favour of both agreements, but issued statements³³ following each vote clarifying that the government does not view these resolutions as legally binding – and does not see the right to a healthy environment as a “customary right”. In practical terms, this means that the UK government currently plans to do nothing to help us enjoy or defend our right to a healthy environment at home.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

Around the world, other countries have made the right to a healthy environment part of their written constitutions. This means that communities can more easily challenge decisions in the courts. In 2017³⁴ and 2022,³⁵ South African charities successfully stopped coal power stations from being built, following legal cases which referenced the constitutional right to a healthy environment.³⁶ In Montana, a judge recently ruled that the state was violating its citizens' constitutional right to a "clean and healthful environment"³⁷ by allowing continued fossil fuel development without considering its effect on the climate. In Hawaii, a court case is underway to consider whether the state transport system is being run in a way that harms the ability of people to "live healthful lives in Hawaii now and into the future".³⁸

“The UK government currently plans to do nothing to help us enjoy or defend our right to a healthy environment at home.”

Making it right

The UK doesn't have a written constitution, but the government in Westminster could pass a law recognising the right to a healthy environment as a human right. This would make it so much harder for future governments to make new laws that damage our environment — because new laws, government policies, and actions by public bodies are meant to be compatible with our human rights. The Scottish Government has already consulted on doing just that through a Human Rights Bill for Scotland.³⁹ Why not take the plunge across the UK?

If the UK already recognised a healthy environment as a human right, when Mr Gove attempted to remove water pollution safeguards by amending the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, he would have needed to consider if the amended bill was still in line with that right. And if it wasn't, he would have needed to make a statement accepting the government was breaching our human rights. This would have been politically awkward, to say the least. At best, it might have persuaded the government to think again. And at worst, it would have ensured further investigation of the implications of incompatibility in the explanatory notes to the bill, allowing parliament to better challenge the change. While members of parliament were able to resist changes to the Levelling Up Bill this time,⁴⁰ and our waterways breathed a sigh of relief as no new plans were revealed in the recent King's Speech, an Environmental Rights Act could be a valuable shield against this kind of attempt to unravel our environmental protections in the future.

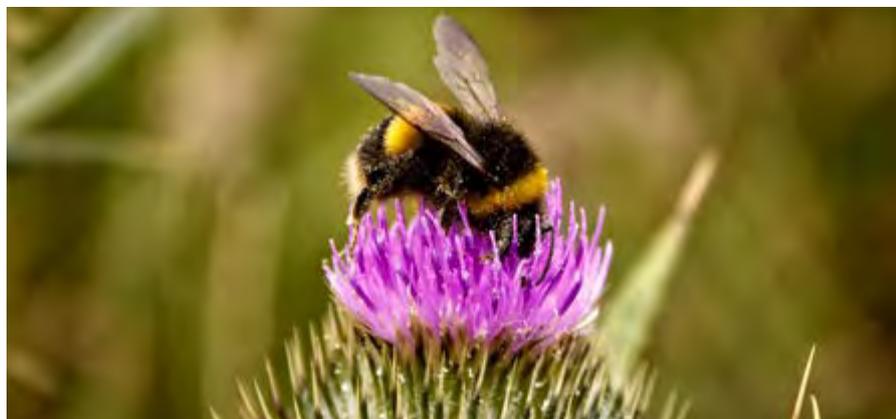
But rights alone aren't enough — we all need to be able to go to court to make our rights real, and fix harms when they do occur. A new Environmental Rights



“It really isn’t rocket science. An Environmental Rights Act could make a real, practical difference to all our lives.”

Act could give communities new legal tools to protect themselves and the environment they depend on. It could also include measures to support our right to access information and to improve public participation alongside access to justice, as required by the Aarhus Convention.⁴¹ It could improve chances of victory in court too, as judges would be able to consider whether actions breached the right to a healthy environment (in what legal bods call “substantive terms”), considering the facts instead of being limited to considering if any relevant decisions were made according to the proper process. This would mean people could benefit from improved grounds to challenge local decision making or right local harms, demonstrate incompatibility if it occurs in legislation, and at best pressure the government into changing the law.

So, if everyone could defend their right to a healthy environment, what could that mean? Depending on how the new law is drafted, it could help groups campaigning against pollution from factory farming to demand better measures to protect soil, water, and public health. It could mean that when families found themselves in mould and damp filled housing, they would be able to take their local authority or social housing provider to court. It could allow people to launch legal action when a planned road would exacerbate the health conditions of those living nearby.



Local communities wouldn't need to prove that the government as a whole had missed targets set around a national average, or wait until unhealthy surroundings lead to a tragic death, as in the cases of Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah⁴² or Awaab Ishak.⁴³ Instead, they could proactively challenge public bodies for allowing or failing to tackle environmental harms locally. They could make links between the quality and health of the environment around them, and their own human rights. This could offer a way to secure the enforcement or remedial action that communities need to guarantee everyone a safe and healthy living environment.

A positive way forward

It really isn't rocket science. An Environmental Rights Act could make a real, practical difference to all our lives. It could bring the law into line with the UK's international commitments, recognising the very real importance of clean air, safe water and thriving habitats to keeping us all safe and upholding our other human rights. It could improve the likelihood of future legislation supporting a healthy environment, exposing new laws that might undermine this new human right the public and parliamentary scrutiny. And it could practically empower communities with a stronger way to hold public bodies to account on pollution, climate action and the nature crisis.

We need the next government to recognise that a healthy environment isn't just a “nice to have” – it's a human right. And we need the tools to defend it across the UK. It's as simple as that.

The Nature 2030 Campaign

From making our communities better and healthier places to live to supporting farmers and dealing with the effects of climate change and pollution, nature plays a huge, but often unseen role in our everyday lives.

But right now, nature in the UK is in trouble. For many years our natural world has been under threat, often forgotten by decision-makers and pushed to the fringes of our communities and our wild places.

Why nature needs our help now

The UK is one of the worst countries in the world for nature loss with just 3% of land and 8% of our seas well protected for nature. Many of the species which call the UK home have seen their populations decline by an average of 41% in the last 50 years, leading to 1 in 6 species at risk of extinction.

Despite this crisis, targets to restore nature have been repeatedly missed. In 2020 the UK only met three of out 10 global targets for nature recovery and had actually gone backwards on six targets.⁴⁴

These failures have a huge impact on not just our wildlife and wild places but on communities across the country.

Whether it's the knock-on health impacts of increased air pollution and lack of access to natural space costing the NHS billions of pounds every year, or fewer pollinators and an absence of healthy soils putting farm productivity at risk, nature's decline is bad for the country.

Turning promises into action

There have been some big promises made in recent years, with the UK committing to halt the loss of wildlife and manage 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030. However, these commitments haven't always been backed up with the ambition needed to meet them. The evidence is clear, without radical action, we're at real risk of losing some of our most important wild places and wildlife and our politicians can no longer afford to see nature as a "nice to have".

What do we want to see?

We're calling on party leaders to commit to our five actions for nature ahead of the next general election. Together, these policies would give the UK a real opportunity to meet the targets to protect and restore our wildlife and wild places by 2030, support local communities across the country and help to turn the tide against the nature and climate crisis.

You can find out more about the Nature 2030 campaign at www.wcl.org.uk/Nature2030





We want to see...

1

A pay rise for farmers, doubling the support for farmers to make sure that they can deliver nature-friendly farming and nature restoration.

2

Making polluters pay, ensuring that businesses have nature and climate plans in place and setting new duties to drive private investment in species and habitat recovery.

3

Making more space for nature, restoring more protected sites and landscapes by 2030, and creating a Public Nature Estate across England with the support of local and national partners.

4

Creating more green jobs, delivering wide-scale habitat restoration and creating green jobs in urban, rural and coastal habitats and in species recovery through a National Nature Service.

5

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Wildlife and Countryside Link is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 80 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature. Our members campaign to conserve, enhance and access our landscapes, animals, plants, habitats, rivers and seas. Together we have the support of over eight million people in the UK and directly protect over 750,000 hectares of land and 800 miles of coastline.

For more information contact enquiry@wcl.org.uk

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