



King's Speech & Debate on the Address: Environmental Briefing

7th November 2023

This briefing is on behalf of Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)), the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 80 organisations to use their joint voice to protect the natural world.

Executive summary

- The King's Speech is a missed opportunity for nature.
- At a time when nature is in continuing decline, to the detriment of human health, the economy and efforts to reach net zero, the omission of nature recovery measures constitutes a misstep.
- In place of the required environmental action, we have attempts to forge dividing lines through North Sea licensing proposals which will harm the environment without reducing UK energy bills.
- We ask parliamentarians to raise these points during the Debate on the Address, to urge the Government to drop this harmful approach, and pursue the ambitious environmental policies climate, nature and people need.
- This ambitious approach could be advanced by Private Member's Bills delivering existing but overdue Government commitments, including banning peat use in horticulture and ratifying the Global Ocean Treaty.
- One welcome measure in the King's Speech is the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill, which would finally fulfill the Conservative Manifesto promise to ban live exports. It is important that this overdue legislation is swiftly progressed.

The nature policy gap

The absence of legislation in the King's Speech to advance nature's recovery is concerning.¹ In 2021, the Government committed to the Environment Act target to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030. Nearly a third of the way through the target period, we have failed to see policy delivery on the scale needed to achieve the target. In the words of the environmental watchdog set up by the Environment Act, the Office for Environmental Protection, "*the current pace and scale of action will not deliver the changes necessary to significantly improve the environment*".²

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/654a21952f045e001214dcd7/The_King_s_Speech_background_briefing_notes.pdf

² <https://www.theoep.org.uk/report/progress-improving-natural-environment-england-20212022>



The extent of the shortfall is illustrated by the progress of the Government commitment to protect and effectively manage 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (known as 30x30). This welcome policy, first announced in 2020, would provide wild species with more of the wild spaces they need to recover in. Progress is, however, extremely slow. Link’s third annual 30x30 report, published in September, found that only 3.11% of land (a fall of 0.11% from last year’s assessment) and 8% of English sea are well protected for nature, leaving a huge gap to close to reach 30% by 2030.³

The King’s Speech represents a missed opportunity to close the growing gap between nature targets and policies needed to achieve them. This misstep comes just as a new report has made clear how essential it is that the decline in species abundance is halted by 2030. The State of Nature report 2023 is the authoritative stocktake on the state of UK wildlife, drawn from extensive biological monitoring. The report charts a long-term decline in the average abundance of terrestrial and freshwater species of 19% since 1970, with a short-term decline of 3% between 2010 and 2020, driven by climate change, intensive agriculture and overexploitation of marine fish stocks.⁴

Without action in response to these declines, the natural world across the UK will continue to decline and degrade. Nature can’t wait.⁵

Closing the nature policy gap

Over 100 organisations have come together to support ‘Nature 2030’, a set of policies that would help provide the required scale of action to halt the decline of nature by 2030.⁶ The policy programme proposes:

- Increasing the budget for nature-friendly farming to £6 billion a year. This would reward farmers and land managers for working to recover nature across farmed landscapes, bringing substantial benefits for water and air quality and people’s access to nature. Land would switch from being a net greenhouse gas emitter, to locking away carbon.
- A Nature Recovery Obligation for the private sector. Large companies in key sectors would be compelled to disclose their impacts on nature, and to set out how their 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.
- A 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project. This would deliver the 30x30 commitment through supporting landowners to manage protected sites better for nature, designating new sites, providing new powers to recover nature in protected landscapes and instigating a new “Public Nature Estate” duty on public bodies to restore habitats.

³ https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/WCL_2023_Progress_Report_on_30x30_in_England.pdf

⁴ <https://stateofnature.org.uk/>

⁵ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/naturecantwait.asp>

⁶ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature2030.asp>



- A National Nature Service. This would establish a new fund to pay for habitat restoration at scale, along with a paid work and training programme to equip people with habitat restoration skills. 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.
- A Right to a Healthy Environment. This would be delivered through an Environmental Rights Bill to establish a human right to a healthy environment, require public bodies to act in accordance with that right and give people legal tools to challenge public bodies that fail to do this.

These popular, pragmatic policies would arrest nature’s decline and head off adverse health, economic and social impacts that will be attendant on further decline.⁷ The restored habitats that will form the bedrock of this nature recovery will serve as effective nature-based solutions, helping to sequester carbon and achieve net zero.⁸

These ambitious, proactive policies for nature must be accompanied by a firm commitment to uphold the nature protections we already have. These protections, including the Habitats Regulations, guard some of our most precious places for wildlife, from chalk streams to ancient woodland.⁹ It is essential that this thin green line is held, for wild spaces and the public who cherish them, in the face of inaccurate rhetoric from some voices pursuing a harmful and unpopular deregulatory agenda.¹⁰

Opportunities for Private Member’s Bills

Although policies on the above scale are outside of the scope of typical Private Member’s Bills, there are a number of effective nature recovery measures that could be delivered through backbench-led legislation:

- Ending the sale of peat for use in horticulture. The Government has committed to legislate to end retail sales of peat for use in horticulture in England and Wales by 2024, to tackle the damage this practice inflicts on natural carbon stores and on peatland habitats. This deadline is fast approaching, and a legislative vehicle is yet to be identified.¹¹ Legislation is required to end horticultural peat use as promised.
- Ratifying the Global Ocean Treaty. The Government played an important role in advocating on the international stage for the Global Ocean Treaty, which provides a legal framework for

⁷ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature-2030-launch-research-and-report.asp>

⁸ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Nature%20Based%20Solutions%20-%20Link%20briefing%20note%2005.04.22.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Link%20briefing%20on%20Habs%20Regs%20risks%20and%20opportunities%20Jan%202023.pdf>

¹⁰ https://unchecked.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Unchecked_Strong-Protections_FINAL.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.lancswt.org.uk/blog/alex-critchley/were-still-waiting-ban-commercial-peat-compost-2024-looming-will-dream-become>



protecting the world's oceans beyond national jurisdiction. This leadership role now needs to be sustained by swift ratification of the Treaty into UK law ahead of the next election. Independent legal advice confirms that this can happen swiftly through a short 8-clause Bill in the next Parliamentary session. This would encourage other signatories to do likewise and help to bring the Treaty into force well ahead of June 2025 - a necessary timeframe in order leave enough time to designate new ocean sanctuaries in the high seas to protect at least 30% of global oceans by 2030.¹²

- Banning the use of pesticides in public spaces in urban areas. Pesticides cause huge damage to plants, and to wider habitats where they are used. Growing evidence also shows links to human health; the UN World Health Organisation has declared the commonly used pesticide, glyphosate, to be a 'probable carcinogen' for humans. A ban on the use of pesticides in public spaces in urban areas, following a successful precedent in France, would address these linked ecological and health harms.¹³

Link and our members would be delighted to support parliamentarians to bring forward Private Member's Bills on these, and a range of other subjects. Link members working on animal welfare are particularly concerned by the absence of legislation to advance an animal welfare commitment contained in the 2019 Conservative Manifesto, a ban on the import of hunting trophies.¹⁴ The inclusion of another animal welfare Manifesto commitment, a ban on live exports, in the King's Speech is however welcome. This overdue legislation must be progressed swiftly.¹⁵

If you would be interested in support to raise the above issues through Private Member's Bills, please do email matt@wcl.org.uk

A retreat from climate is a retreat from nature

The climate and ecological crises are closely entwined – just as a boost for nature will help us reach net zero, a retreat from climate action will make it harder to recover nature. The State of Nature report makes it clear that climate change is now the primary driver of ecological decline in the UK.

The inclusion of new North Sea oil and gas licenses in the King's Speech is therefore deeply disappointing, setting back net zero efforts without lowering energy bills or boosting UK energy independence. New UK licences have produced just 16 days of gas since 2010.¹⁶

¹² <https://protect-the-oceans.greenpeace.co.uk/get-started>

¹³ <https://www.pan-uk.org/call-to-ban-urban-pesticides-to-save-insects-and-ourselves/>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/HSIUKorg/status/1721874154209562872>

¹⁵ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/news-kings-speech-putting-live-exports-ban-back-on-agenda>

¹⁶ <https://green-alliance.org.uk/briefing/what-the-environment-and-climate-need-from-the-2023-kings-speech/>



The Government should abandon these attempts to create dividing lines on climate and instead deliver policies capable of boosting the UK’s future security and prosperity, against ongoing climate and ecological breakdown. The King’s Speech commitment “*to continue to lead action on tackling climate change and biodiversity loss*” needs to be supported by meaningful policy.

For questions or further information please contact:

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