



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 recent COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated and exacerbated these crises, it has 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 where a higher percentage of people of colour live, both globally and within the UK.^{3,4} Existing health disparities for deprived communities and communities of colour in the UK,⁵ driven by factors including lack of access to high quality greenspace^{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 income, people of colour,¹³ women, older people, and other groups with protected characteristics¹⁴ will be 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 We must act now to address the climate, biodiversity, health, and equity crises together.

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 ‘people of colour’ 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 ‘people of colour’ 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.

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](#)

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is a coalition of 60 environmental organisations committed to protecting the natural environment. **Link recognises that people are at the core of our work: all people should have the right to the beauty and benefits of nature and a healthy environment and all people must be empowered to 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. 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 The quality of people's relationship with nature is key to action to protect it: when people are included and empowered to take environmental action, they act to protect and advocate for nature.²³

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 nature²⁴
- Nature is essential to all people's future: so we must ensure that our policy recommendations aim to ensure a thriving natural environment for all people

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 thriving and healthy environment for all people, for example, through campaigns for a State of Nature target and policies such as 30x30

²⁰ [White et al. 2019](#)

²¹ [Richardson et al. 2021](#)

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

²³ [Richardson et al. 2020](#)

²⁴ 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](#).

- Integrate physical and mental health and wellbeing into environmental policies and programmes, for example, advocating for a Natural Health Service, Green Prescribing for Mental Health and health considerations in Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRs)
- Advocate to Government for greater and more equitable access to high quality natural spaces, for example, through planning reform, improved public access to Designated Landscapes and integrating access considerations in environmental land management and LNRs
- Embed nature and outdoor learning at all levels and settings within the education system
- Review the evidence gaps and collaborate to generate new, robust evidence on the impacts and return on investment of a thriving natural world in planning, health, education, and social cohesion to provide clear and accessible public evidence base for advocacy

For questions or further information please contact:

Emma Clarke, Policy and Information Coordinator, Wildlife and Countryside Link

T: 020 8078 3581

E: emma.clarke@wcl.org.uk

This statement is supported by the following Link members:

A Rocha UK

Bat Conservation Trust

British Canoeing

British Ecological Society

British Mountaineering Council

Buglife

Butterfly Conservation

Campaign for National Parks

Earthwatch

FOUR PAWS UK

Friends of the Earth

Institute for Fisheries Management

John Muir Trust

League Against Cruel Sports

National Trust

Naturewatch Foundation

Open Spaces Society

People's Trust for Endangered Species

Plantlife

Ramblers Association

Rewilding Britain

RSPCA

The Wildlife Trusts

Whale and Dolphin Conservation

Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

Wildlife Gardening Forum

Zoological Society of London