

Environment groups challenge political parties' plans to halt wildlife decline

Wildlife and Countryside Link—a coalition of over 80 charities including the RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust and WWF UK—is challenging all political parties to set out how they would halt wildlife decline by 2030, ahead of the General Election.

Under the Environment Act 2021, Government has a legal duty to halt the decline of wildlife by 2030, and further targets on biodiversity, air pollution, water quality and waste reduction for 2042.

Nature groups recognise that the Government has taken significant positive steps in environmental policy, including the world's first legally binding target to halt the decline of biodiversity. However, they do not think that politicians have yet taken sufficient action to meet that target, or laid out clear and credible plans for how they would do so.

The government's statutory advisor, the Office for Environmental Protection, has [warned](#) that nature action is largely off-track, but the Government has not considered whether to strengthen the plan in light of the OEP's findings.

Ahead of the announcement of the General Election, Wildlife & Countryside Link initiated legal proceedings, questioning why the Secretary of State did not fulfil a legal duty to consider a review of the Environmental Improvement Plan in light of the watchdog's report. Responsibility for updating the plan and meeting the target will now transfer to the next administration.

The charities are calling on political parties to:

1. Increase public investment in nature, including doubling the budget for wildlife-friendly farming. Currently public funding for biodiversity is just 0.031% of GDP.
2. Increase private investment in nature by requiring big businesses to disclose their impacts on nature and to pay toward nature-recovery. This makes business sense: 12% of GDP could be lost in the coming decade because of the degradation of nature.
3. Properly protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030, by expanding and improved wildlife sites. Only 3% of land and 8% of seas are effectively protected for nature so far.
4. Guarantee environmental Rights for Everyone: clean air, clean water, access to nature. Government figures show that 38% of people do not have access to green space within a 15 minute walk of home, often the most vulnerable communities.

Richard Benwell, CEO of Wildlife and Countryside Link, said: "In the Environment Act, the previous Government established a groundbreaking legal framework for nature recovery, and it is positive to see politicians of all stripes pledge to halt wildlife decline. Yet time after time, environmental targets are missed.

"The Office for Environmental Protection says that once again delivery is falling short. It's time for the culture of non-compliance with environmental law to end. When plans to restore biodiversity and stop pollution aren't delivering, we can't afford to stand by. Environmental charities are ready to take legal action where any Government falls short of its own promises for nature.

"As we approach polling day, we're calling on all parties to set out what they'd do for nature if elected. Environmental charities large and small have written to all party leaders to challenge them

to explain to the voting public how they would restore our natural world and pass on a country rich in nature for future generations.”

Tanya Steele, Chief Executive of WWF said: “As the General Election campaign gets underway, we know that the actions of the next UK government will determine whether or not we meet our crucial 2030 targets for climate and nature. Time and again these targets have been missed, delayed or watered down, despite repeated calls for action from environmental groups and even the independent environmental watchdogs.

“We know that the majority of the UK public care about nature and climate change and want to see immediate action. We urge all political parties to commit to halting and reversing environmental decline and to unlock the economic opportunity of our generation to offer a safer, sustainable stable future for the country and our world.”

Dr Darren Moorcroft, CEO, Woodland Trust said: “With the General Election looming, this is a pivotal moment for our natural environment. Nature is under threat. Species are still declining, irreplaceable habitats like ancient woods need our protection more than ever. Talk is cheap. We need action from whoever forms the government after July 4.

“We need vision too. But that vision must have a clear, workable plan to deliver it.

“Missed targets and broken promises often feel like a staple of environmental policy from one government to another. We need all parties to set out plainly how this time will be different, with plans that give nature a fighting chance and get our environment on the path to recovery.

“We call on all political parties to do what is needed, to make the difficult decisions, put nature at the heart of their programmes, and create a better environment for future generations. It's a chance to be remembered for action and not bluster.”

Beccy Speight, CEO of RSPB said: “Millions of people care deeply about the perilous state of our wildlife and wild places. And with less than six years until 2030, we have a crucial window of opportunity to rewrite this story of decline.

“We need all political parties to tackle the nature and climate crisis as one, and to all share ambitious plans that will halt decline and allow our natural world to flourish. Plans should recognise the vital role of farmers by providing long-term, meaningful support and doubling the budget for nature and climate-friendly farming. They should also support the health of our protected areas to secure the future of some of our rarest and most iconic habitats and species. And they should demand that big polluters pay towards nature recovery. We need to spur on action on a much bigger scale and at a faster pace so that we can all play our part in protecting nature – we can't afford to wait any longer.”

Hilary McGrady, Director-General at the National Trust said: “Ahead of the General Election all political parties need to up their game on tackling the nature crisis.

“We have a world-leading Environment Act that commits us to halting the decline of wildlife by 2030, cleaning up our air and protecting our rivers. It's something we should be proud of, and any

Government is required to deliver against it. But six years from that deadline, the UK is still one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth.

“Healthy nature is fundamental to all our lives. It protects our ability to grow food and helps tackle the impacts of more extreme weather. It’s good for the economy and essential for our health.

“We still have time to reverse these declines to meet the 2030 targets, but we will need the next Government to act promptly and energetically.”

Craig Bennett, chief executive of The Wildlife Trusts, said: “Nature recovery is critical for food security, the economy and people’s health across the country. Politicians should be pulling out all the stops to reverse wildlife declines and clean polluted rivers. Yet time and time again, we’ve been left frustrated by the Government’s lacklustre efforts to keep promises and meet the legal targets it has set. This paints a grim picture for UK nature.

“It’s high time we moved on from a pattern of sporadic and piecemeal policy announcements from Government, which individually may sometimes have some limited merit, but which collectively do not add up to a clear plan to reverse nature’s decline and deliver on our international commitments and legally binding targets.

“Whichever party ends up leading the next Government, we need them to move much faster and provide better support for nature-friendly farming, ensure big penalties for all polluters, and much greater investment to restore at least 30% of our land, inland waters and sea over the next six years. Nature is in crisis and nature recovery must be a central priority for government, not an optional extra.”

Rebecca Wrigley, CEO of Rewilding Britain, said: “We are woefully off track in meeting our legally binding climate and nature targets. With less than six years to go, warm words and promises are hollow gestures without decisive UK Government action underpinned by a credible delivery plan.

“With flash flooding, soaring temperatures, rising oceans and increasingly extreme weather events, the threat of the climate and biodiversity crises to our future health and prosperity is very real. Our economy, food production, the resilience of our landscapes, ecosystems and communities are all at risk.

“It’s time the UK Government delivered on their promises to people and nature and that starts with having an Environmental Improvement Plan that is fit for purpose. Only swift, decisive action now will help us pave the way for the prosperous, wild future we know is possible.”

Wildlife and Countryside Link is represented by Leigh Day environment team solicitor Ricardo Gama, who added:

“The government set ambitious targets for itself in the Environment Act 2021, as well as setting up an independent regulator, the OEP, to monitor whether it is on track to meet those targets. The OEP’s most recent assessment is bleak, finding that the government is ‘largely off track’ to meet the targets that it set for itself. Link are rightly asking the government how it can carry on with a business as usual approach and still meet its targets in light of the OEP’s findings. A pre-action letter

has been sent asking that question. If the government don't give a satisfactory response then Link will consider issuing a claim for judicial review in the High Court."

With [pollution on the rise](#), wildlife numbers [declining](#), and just a small proportion of the [land and sea](#) adequately protected for nature, the UK is among the most nature-deprived countries in the world.

The Environment Act 2021 and the Environmental Improvement Plan (first published in 2018 and updated in 2023) are the core of the Government's programme for nature protection, intended to ensure that this is the first generation to pass on nature in better condition. Wildlife and Countryside Link argues that the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan falls short in substance, evidence and delivery, and that the plan must be strengthened to guarantee a brighter future for nature. [3]

Wildlife & Countryside Link has taken the first step towards a challenge in court over why the Government has not fulfilled its legal duties under the Environment Act. To comply with its legal duty, nature groups believe that the Government must consider whether to review and strengthen its plan in light of its advisor's warning. Through seeking a judicial review, nature groups want the Government to strengthen its Environmental Improvement Plan.

Link has sent a pre-action protocol letter, which obliges Government to explain how it thinks it is fulfilling its legal obligations. If further legal proceedings follow, Government could be required to consider whether to review and strengthen its nature plans.

Charities have also written to all political party leaders today, saying that the next Government will be in breach of the law if it does not halt the decline of nature by 2030. In the letters, the charities say that the main parties have so far failed to set out credible plans.

Key failings in the Environmental Improvement Plan include:

- The measures set out in the plan—and progress on delivery—will not ensure that the Government's legal obligation to halt the decline of wildlife by 2030 will be met.
- The plan does not quantify or explain in scientific terms how the Government thinks that current measures will enable the targets to be met.
- The plan does not set out a clear timetable for delivery and there is no overall accountability for its delivery.

The nature coalition contends that other critical elements of the plan, such as the transition to wildlife-friendly farming, must be strengthened to deliver nature-recovery. It is calling for a combination of better regulation and more investment in nature-friendly farming, alongside market reforms that would see farmers receive fairer prices for the production of sustainable, healthy food without being undercut by lower quality imports.

Wildlife and Countryside Link is calling for the following improvements to be made to the Environment Improvement Plan (EIP):

1. Government should set out a cross-Departmental delivery framework, with clear timelines and accountability for implementation of key actions.
2. It should scale up and speed up delivery of priority actions, including:
 - Scaling up investment in nature.

- Scaling up nature-friendly farming, with higher standards and incentives.
 - Speeding up private sector investment, with “polluter pays” plans for big businesses.
 - Speeding up improving access to nature, focusing on nature-deprived areas.
3. Government should publish evidence of how actions in the plan add up to delivery of the Environment Act targets.

The threat of legal action comes ahead of what aims to be the biggest gathering of people for nature and climate that the UK has ever seen. Environment campaigners are urging everyone who cares for nature to unite and march through London to Parliament Square on Saturday 22 June, with a simple demand to all political parties: [Restore Nature Now](#).

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

1. Wildlife & Countryside Link has sent a pre-action protocol letter to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The next step would be a claim for judicial review. A judicial review is a type of legal case where a judge (or judges) reviews the lawfulness of a decision or action made by a public authority, in this case the Government.
2. The following organisations support the legal action:
 - Beccy Speight, CEO, RSPB
 - Craig Bennett, CEO, The Wildlife Trusts
 - Tanya Steele, CEO, WWF UK
 - Hilary McGrady, Director General, The National Trust
 - Dr Darren Moorcroft, CEO, The Woodland Trust
 - Dr Rose O’Neill, CEO, Campaign for National Parks
 - Nida Al-Fulaij, CEO, People’s Trust for Endangered Species
 - Dr Mark Avery, Director, Wild Justice
 - Hugh Knowles and Miriam Turner, Co-Executive Directors, Friends of the Earth
 - Matt Larsen-Daw, CEO, The Mammal Society
 - Julie Williams, CEO, Butterfly Conservation
 - Kit Stoner, CEO, Bat Conservation Trust
 - Gill Perkins, CEO, Bumblebee Conservation Trust
 - Dr Stephen Head, Founder Patron, Wildlife Gardening Forum
 - Matt Collis, Deputy Vice President, Policy, IFAW
 - Allison Ogden-Newton OBE, Chief Executive, Keep Britain Tidy
 - Sandy Luk, CEO, Marine Conservation Society
 - Professor Jeremy Biggs, CEO, Freshwater Habitats Trust
 - Clare Brook, CEO, Blue Marine
 - Catherine Gunby, Executive Director, FIDRA

- Kate Ashbrook, General Secretary, Open Spaces Society
 - Hugo Tagholm, Executive Director & Vice President, Oceana UK
 - Andy Atkins, CEO, A Rocha UK
 - Nick Measham, CEO, WildFish
 - Prof Alastair Driver FCIEEM, Director, Rewilding Britain
 - Sue Sayer MBE, Director, the Seal Research Trust
 - Mark Lloyd, CEO, The Rivers Trust
 - Sally Hayns, CEO, CIEEM
 - Peter Hambly, Executive Director, The Badger Trust
 - Kate Sheldon, CEO, Trees for Cities
 - Paul Ratcliffe, CEO, British Mountaineering Council
 - James Wallace, CEO, River Action
 - Professor Jeremy Biggs, CEO, Freshwater Habitats Trust
 - Dr Richard Benwell, CEO, Wildlife & Countryside Link
3. In England, the abundance of wildlife has [declined by 32%](#) since 1970 and 1 in 8 species are at risk of extinction. The latest official figures show that the numbers of threatened species and habitats and the distribution of “priority species” declined over the long term and short term. The list of priority species includes birds like the Skylark, mammals like the Wildcat, butterflies like the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, and fish like the Atlantic Salmon.
 4. In response to the State of Nature campaign by Wildlife & Countryside Link, the Government set the world’s first legally-binding target to halt the decline of species abundance by 2030. The UK has also signed up to the Global Biodiversity Framework with the same target.
 - However, delivery of key measures in the Environmental Improvement Plan, such as a Land Use Framework and a Chemicals Strategy, are already behind schedule. The land-use framework is an essential step to ensure that the production of healthy food and housing development can go hand-in-hand with nature-recovery. With 0% of English rivers in good chemical condition, the strategy is key to safeguard wildlife and public health from pollution.
 5. Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 83 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.
 6. Relevant Environment Act targets, binding in law:
 - To halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.
 - To ensure that species abundance in 2042 is greater than in 2022, and at least 10% greater than 2030.
 - Improve the Red List Index of endangered species by 2042.
 - To restore or create in excess of 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitat outside protected sites by 2042, compared to 2022 levels.

- That 70% of the designated features in Marine Protected Areas to be in favourable condition by 2042, with the remainder in recovering condition.