

**Nature Check 2013: Parliamentary launch
19 November 2013**

Speech by Dr Elaine King, Director at Wildlife and Countryside Link

Thank you, Zac, for your constructive introduction and for engaging so positively with Nature Check 2013. And thank you to you all for joining us for the launch of our third Nature Check report.

I'd also like to thank the Link team and our members for their work on the report. Over 70 colleagues in our member organisations contributed their expertise in making objective assessments of the Government's natural environment commitments.

In particular, Kate Hand, my colleague, lead the project and I would like to take the opportunity now to thank her for bringing everything together so efficiently [flowers]. While the purpose of this event is to launch Link's Nature Check report, I think it is first worth reminding ourselves of why we do the work we do. The people in this room are here because we are passionate about nature. It moves us and we want to make a difference.

And we can all think of a recent experience that moved us, whether it was seeing a particular animal or plant, or simply being 'outside'. My most recent experience was standing in a sodden field of winter wheat in my village, in the Chilterns, looking for a ring ouzel that a friend had spotted earlier that day. I didn't see it, but was nevertheless treated to being surrounded by dozens of skylarks, in full song, and a mistle thrush in a nearby tree and numerous red kites wheeling and calling above my head.

And we are not alone in taking pleasure in the natural world, in valuing it and wanting to protect it.

A poll conducted by ComRes for the launch of this report, found that more than nine in ten British adults agree that the countryside is a national treasure, and that we should improve the condition of the natural environment for future generations. But at the same time, we are seeing declines in many of our precious species and habitats. So, Link and its members, and the 8 million people they represent - want to ensure that future generations can indeed enjoy the beauty and wonder of nature, as we all do now.

And we want to protect the natural world not just for its own sake, but also because it has such a positive impact on our health and wellbeing: it is, after all, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the energy to power our world. And the natural environment fundamentally underpins our economic prosperity.

But does the Government share our collective vision for the natural world? And are their words matched by their deeds? Nature Check 2013 helps to answer these questions.

In Nature Check 2013 we find that, overall, the Government is not taking the action needed to reverse the declines in our species and habitats.

In a number of areas, the Government is delivering on its commitments and making significant progress. These include: the effective response to ash dieback, its strong position on the Common Fisheries Policy and a consistently robust opposition to the trade in endangered species and commercial whaling. We also welcome Defra's expressed preference for modulating the maximum amount of CAP funds from Pillar I to Pillar II.

We commend them for that.

But in other areas, the Government has been found wanting. These include: serious delays in delivering its Biodiversity 2020 strategy; its dogmatic focus on culling badgers to control bovine TB; and its failure to designate an ecologically coherent network of Marine Conservation Zones.

In analysing these findings, we come to the conclusion that, when progress has been good, it is because the Government has listened, paid attention to the evidence, provided the necessary resources, and led from the front, often with a cross-departmental approach.

When it has failed, it is largely because of the failure of wider Government to recognise the value of the natural environment in its decision making.

But Nature Check is about more than simply identifying the Government's successes and failures. It is about contributing to a wider discussion on how we all work together to protect our natural world. And we all have a role to play.

As voluntary organisations, we will support Government in its work for the natural environment. And we are pleased that the Secretary of State has recognised the value of this collaboration, telling Defra's civil society advisory board last month that *'partnership with civil society is critical to the successful delivery of our policies'*. Link will work in partnership with all those who want to enable future generations to marvel at the wonders of our natural world, including the private and public sectors and other NGOs.

However, the Government must ensure that we are empowered to give it the necessary practical support. For example, the Transparency of Lobbying Bill threatens to curtail civil society's legitimate activities in working to influence Government policy in the best interests of people and the natural environment. And looking from the outside, as your critical friend, we see that the Government's important role can only be fulfilled if departments and agencies are also empowered to do so.

After a difficult period of budget cuts, Defra now needs the stability to get on with delivering its priorities. Natural England and the Environment Agency must also be afforded the resources and independence to deliver their functions for the natural environment. Natural England in particular plays a vital role in securing value for money for the environment through delivering agri-environment schemes.

But the single most important factor is leadership. So today, we would like to present a challenge, through you Minister, to the Prime Minister.

We ask him to:

- Formally restate the Government's vision and commitment to the natural environment
- Send a clear message across Government that nature is not an optional luxury: it is critical to a thriving economy and to the health and wellbeing of millions of people.

Last month the Secretary of State said he "*wants us all to work together to boost the rural economy while improving the environment.*"

And Nick Clegg said this month: "*If you are for the environment, you are for cutting bills, growing our economy and creating jobs.*"

But what exactly does that mean for the natural environment?

We understand why the Government thought it might have needed to make tough decisions. But now the economy is slowly recovering, and the millions of people who care passionately about the environment will be asking: What action will the Government take to invest in our natural wealth as the economic recovery continues?

I now have the pleasure of welcoming Lord de Mauley, Parliamentary under-Secretary of State at Defra, to give the Government's initial response to our report.