

## Environment Secretary speech at Delamere Forest on restoring nature and building back greener

Thank you very much Craig. It's a great pleasure to finally get out of London and to be able to visit Delamere Forest here in Cheshire. A thousand hectares of woodland – the largest area of woodland in Cheshire. Also home to the Lost Mosses project of woodland both ancient and more recent.

I think the events of the last twelve months have led people to appreciate the difference that nature makes to our lives more than ever before. There is an increased awareness of the link between our own health, and economic prosperity, and that of the planet– as highlighted by the recent Dasgupta Review on the economics of biodiversity.

And restoring nature is going to be crucial as we build back greener from the pandemic, and in what is a huge year for the environment we will use our COP26 and G7 presidencies to take a leading role on the world stage.

Nature is going to be key pillar of our work as host of the UN Climate Change Conference COP26. We were the first major economy in the world to set a net zero emissions target in law. To meet that target we must protect and restore nature, with nature-based solutions forming a key part of our approach to tackling climate change.

The UK is sadly one of the most nature depleted countries in the world. Over the last 50 years, much of the UK's wildlife-rich habitat has been lost or degraded, and many of our once common species are in long-term decline. Between 1932 and 1984, we lost 97% of our species-rich grassland. Five species of butterfly have disappeared from England in the last 150 years. And our farmland bird indicator stands at less than half its value of 1970 – following a precipitous decline during the 1980s and 1990s, and further losses since.

We want not only to stem the tide of this loss, but to turn it around and leave the environment in a better state than we found it. I want us to put a renewed emphasis on nature's recovery.

And, that is why today we will be amending the Environment Bill to require an additional legally binding target for species abundance for 2030, aiming to halt the decline of nature. This is a huge step forward, and a world leading measure in the year of COP15 and COP26. We hope that this will be the Net Zero equivalent for nature, spurring action of the scale required to address the biodiversity crisis.

To recover species, we'll need to work on habitats both within protected sites and in the wider countryside, meaning a single target for 2030 will drive wide-ranging improvements to the state of nature. We will develop this

target alongside the longer term legally binding targets we are already developing and set the final target in secondary legislation, following the agreement of global targets at the UN Nature Conference CBD COP15 in the autumn. The 2030 target goes hand-in-hand with other actions to create real global change for our environment. This includes playing a leading role in developing a far-reaching and transformative framework for biodiversity to be adopted at CBD COP15 and driving forward the Leaders' Pledge for Nature to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030.

Now if we are to deliver this ambitious new target and actually reverse the downward trend we have seen in recent decades, we need to change our approach and we need to change it right now. We must move the emphasis away from processes that simply moderated the pace of nature's decline, and instead put in place the governance regime that can deliver nature's recovery. We need to create space for the creative public policy thinking that can deliver results, rather than relying on change being set principally by litigation and case law.

In Natural England, we have exceptional technical expertise on habitats and our protected sites but this precious expertise is often distracted by highly prescriptive legal processes. I would like to get to a position where our talented staff in Natural England have fewer distractions and are able to prioritise the interventions that will make a big difference. I want them to have more freedom to exercise judgement, rather than being stewards for a process.

And that is why we are also taking a power in the Environment Bill to re-focus the Habitats Regulations to ensure our legislation adequately supports our ambitions for nature, including our new world leading targets. We want to ensure that the targets and governance framework in the Environment Bill becomes our compass in future. The existing habitats regulations predate the Environment Bill and the target we are setting today.

We have already set out some important changes in the Environment Bill to switch the focus to nature's recovery. We have the requirement for new environmental targets including on biodiversity and water quality; a requirement for an Environment Improvement Plan; Local Nature Recovery Strategies supported with new funding under biodiversity net gain; and Natural England are making progress with a more strategic approach to nature recovery through their support for delivering the Nature Recovery Network. We will also be exploring ways to make Site Improvement Plans on protected sites and the Local Nature Recovery Strategies more prominent in the decision-making process.

While we are seeking a power to make some changes to the Habitats Regulations, we will take a cautious approach to reform.

I recognise, of course, that our existing regulations are established. And of course, there will always be a need for some form of assessment and screening process. I have therefore asked Lord Benyon to chair a small working group together with Tony Juniper, Christopher Katkowski QC and Rebecca Pow to consider changes that might be appropriate.

We will also consult the new Office for Environmental Protection on any proposal before it is brought forward. And of course work with conservation groups before any regulatory changes might be made. In addition, later this year, we also plan to bring forward a Green Paper setting out how we plan to deliver this, and how we plan to deliver our other objective of protecting 30 percent of terrestrial land by 2030.

Today we are also publishing our peat strategy.

Peatlands are our biggest terrestrial carbon store and home to some of our rarest species, including bitterns, swallowtail butterfly, carnivorous sundews, hen harriers and short-eared owls. But only 13% of our peatland is in a near-natural state. Areas like the Great North Bog peatlands currently store 400 million tonnes of carbon, but due to damage and degradation, our peatlands are emitting 10 million tonnes of carbon per year. That is why I am setting out a plan to restore, sustainably manage and protect our peatlands.

This will enable us to restore at least 35,000 hectares of peatland by 2025, supported by our new Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme which will invest over £50 million over the next four years. That's a tripling in average historic rates of annual restoration, providing a strong foundation for long-term investment.

Healthy peatlands can help us adapt to the effects of climate change. Restored upland peatland reduces flood risk, storing water and releasing it over a longer period of time, reducing high flows downstream during storms.

A new Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme will also launch this year and will include planning grants and annual bidding opportunities. We have invested £2.7 million in the Great North Bog, a landscape approach to restoration across nearly 7,000KM<sup>2</sup> of upland peat. We will set a target for peatland restoration as part of the forthcoming Net Zero Strategy which will be consistent with our obligations to meet Carbon Budget 6.

We have already brought forward legislation to introduce new restrictions on managed burning on protected blanket bog, with a ban on burning unless covered by a licence in limited circumstances granted by the Secretary of State. This is protecting some 142,000 hectares of England's upland deep peat. We will also phase out the use of peat in horticulture, publishing a consultation in 2021 on banning the sale of peat and peat containing products in the amateur sector by the end of this Parliament.

In areas like the Pennines, we will be developing incentives under our future agriculture policy to support projects that deliver both the capital required to achieve re-wetting of land, and preserve it for the future.

Today, I am also outlining measures to better protect our existing trees and woodland and set us on the path to ensure that we have at least 12% of woodland cover by the middle of the century.

It is our ambition that all woodlands in England will improve the environment, acknowledging that our woods and trees are vital habitats. This

plan aims to see current planting trends for majority native broadleaf woodlands continue, given the additional benefits they provide for nature. The iconic oak tree alone supports 2,300 species, of which 326 are dependent on oak trees for their survival. Trees are also important for sequestering carbon. Indeed woodlands currently sequester about 4% of the UK's gross emissions.

Over £500 million of the £640 million Nature for Climate Fund will be dedicated to trees. We aim to treble woodland creation rates by the end of this Parliament, reflecting England's contribution to meeting the UK's overall target of planting 30,000 hectares per year by the end of this Parliament. We will make sure that the right trees are planted in the right places and that more green jobs are created in the forestry sector.

And from that £500 million, a series of funds will support the creation and management of woodland. This includes £25 million for Woodland Creation Partnerships this year, a further £6 million for the Urban Tree Challenge Fund, a £2.7 million Local Authority Treescape Fund over the next year, and substantial funding for the England Woodland Creation Offer which will launch this spring and will support traditional methods of tree establishment, as well as natural colonisation, agroforestry and critically riparian planting, with new riverwoods providing corridors for biodiversity as well as flood prevention benefits.

We will create at least three new community forests, which, together with existing community forests, will enable the planting of 6,000 hectares of new woodland around our towns and cities by 2025, building on the 500 hectares planted in the last year. We will also work with landowners and woodland users to develop and implement a plan to improve the quantity and quality of public access to new and existing woodland.

We will also better protect our existing trees and woodlands, particularly our veteran trees and ancient woodlands. The oldest tree in England is estimated to be 2,000 to 3,000 years old, forming a vital part of our natural history. We plan to introduce a new category for 'long-established woodland', recognising how woods that are old but not yet ancient are also significant in their own right and offer tremendous benefits for biodiversity.

We will provide significant funding between now and 2025 to build nursery capacity – supporting UK public and private sector nurseries and seed suppliers to enhance the quantity and quality of domestic tree production. We will create a new Centre for Forest Protection and develop a Woodland Resilience Implementation Plan to improve the ecological condition of woodlands and increase resilience to climate change, pests and disease.

To drive higher international standards of biosecurity, we will publish a new Great Britain Plant Biosecurity Strategy by 2022. This will be supported by a Trees and Woodland Science Advisory Group to provide independent advice.

We also want to upskill the current supply chain, so we will encourage sector engagement with government schemes, charities and businesses to develop new technical and higher technical professional education routes into the

forestry sector

We also want people to be involved in our ambitious plans, and that is why we are encouraging everyone to get involved in the Queen's Green Canopy, a unique, UK-wide tree planting initiative created to mark Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee in 2022, by inviting people to "Plant a Tree for the Jubilee".

Now along with the decline of nature in recent years, species abundance has shown a long-term downward trend. We want to see a more nature rich Britain, with further action to bend the curve of species loss in this country. We will recover threatened species and provide opportunities for reintroductions through a range of projects.

This will include a partnership project between Natural England, the RSPB and the Knepp Estate which will look at the feasibility of reintroducing the red backed shrike as breeding birds in England. We will also undertake a feasibility study for reintroduction of Golden Eagle in England.

After a successful release in Devon, we are now looking positively towards the reintroduction of beavers and further releases of this iconic species in England. Our consultation, to be issued later this summer, will outline our approach to this, and the management of beavers in the wild. We will particularly consider reintroductions where the benefits are clear, where there are strong partnerships and agreement from stakeholders. Our approach will acknowledge the potential of beavers as a keystone species whilst working closely with local communities.

We will also establish an England Species Reintroduction Taskforce which will bring together experts, landowners and NGOs to prioritise, share knowledge, find consensus and build collaborative projects, towards a more ambitious approach to recovering and restoring some of these iconic species in England. It will consider reintroductions of iconic species we have lost entirely, such as wildcats, as well as the release of declining species, such as the curlew, into areas from which they have been lost to help populations recover.

Now it is important that reintroductions are carried out properly and fully take biodiversity, social and economic impacts into account. That is why we will publish a reintroductions code of best practice guidance, emphasising our commitment to seeing good quality projects delivering for species reintroductions.

In conclusion, the actions I have set out for peat, trees and species represents a huge step forward in our efforts to tackle the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss in the terrestrial environment. They also demonstrate the Government taking early action on the recommendations of the Dasgupta Review. But they are by no means the full extent of our ambition for nature.

This all goes hand in hand with our new agricultural policies. The Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery

components will pay farmers for environmentally sustainable actions, support nature's recovery and deliver ecosystem recovery.

We will continue to explore opportunities to build and strengthen our approach to climate change and to reverse biodiversity loss in line with our new leading target. We will be at the forefront of driving international ambition and action on nature at the CBD COP15, the G7 and on nature-based solutions at COP26.

If we do all of these things then we will leave our environment in a better state for future generations – and we will succeed in turning the tide on the decline that we have seen in recent decades.

Thank you.