

Environment Secretary speech at the COP26 Business Leaders Event

It's a real pleasure to be at this conference today and I wanted to begin by commending the fantastic work of the Council for Sustainable Business. This is an incredibly forward thinking group of companies and you're the early adopters of so many new ways of approaching sustainable business that we can all learn from.

Whether that is water companies who are contributing to peatland restoration, or whether it's some of those fantastic examples we heard of earlier of companies taking individual actions to reduce their carbon footprint. Or whether it's food companies paying special attention to due diligence in their supply chain to prevent deforestation.

I think it's crucial as we start to consider how we can deliver green recovery in the wake of the coronavirus, that we learn from some of the examples you have illustrated today because the coronavirus has brought into sharp focus the importance of our relationship with nature.

Like most new diseases, it's a disease that probably originates from animals – in common with HIV or Ebola – and it's thought to have originated from wet markets; probably from a bat, possibly from a pangolin. It's illustrated again the importance of our relationship with nature and the importance of treating nature with respect, and that the loss of biodiversity and climate change are two sides of the same coin.

It is climate change that is sadly driving the loss of much of our nature and much of our biodiversity. It is climate change that is contributing most to the extinction of species. And yet it is also the case that nature and biodiversity – and the rich biodiversity we contain within our nature can give life itself, resilience, it enables life to adapt and to evolve – got a very important role to play in contributing to the fight against climate change.

And we're very interested at the moment in driving forward some of the nature based solutions and the role that they can have in tackling climate change and in restoring biodiversity – whether that is a massive expansion of tree planting, both in our farm environment and in some of our upland areas to peatland restoration, which can be a major source of carbon capture, to a new emphasis in our agriculture policy on soil health and the biodiversity that can be contained within that.

Nature has so many of these solutions that can contribute to our battle against climate change and this is a very important year for Defra. We currently have three flagship bills that are making their way through parliament.

We have an Agriculture Bill that puts nature at the heart of our future

agriculture policy.

We have a new emphasis on sustainable farming, a new emphasis on nature and allowing habitats to recover and on animal health and animal welfare.

There's a new Fisheries Bill. As well as giving us control of our own waters, it also gives us the power to set the terms of access to our waters, including on the environment. It's a bill that creates some incredibly important environmental objectives, including both on sustainable fishing and climate change.

And finally and by no means least because it is the largest bill by some way: Of course the Environment Bill which sets out an entirely new guidance framework, a new set of targets on areas such as water quality, air quality, biodiversity and waste resource management and introduces new concepts such as biodiversity net gain.

There's also a very important international agenda here, too.

We've had a very good report back from the Global Resources Initiative which was led by Sir Ian Cheshire.

For me, once you've lost ancient woodland, that contributes so much to the health and quality of our environment and is such an important carbon, you will never replace that.

It would take thousands of years to replace it and that is why it is so important that we protect those vitally important forests that we have, the lungs of the world. And that is why I am very interested in doing more to introduce due diligence into the supply chain so that companies really take absolute care of their supply chain and make sure that they are not sourcing products that are contributing to deforestation. We are looking very closely at this report and we are going to be able to say more later this year.

And finally of course next year is going to be a very important year with the delayed COP 26.

We're working very hard on developing this agenda.

We want nature-based solutions to become an important part of that agenda and that is why so much of what you have been discussing today – some of those fantastic examples of individual companies taking action that I heard about earlier, and of course an appeal to all of you to think about what you might be able to do for next year at COP 26 – is so important.

Because we want to be able to demonstrate the UK is taking a lead in all of these areas both through government with the legislation we're introducing in steps, taking the powers that we now have, but also that British businesses are stepping up to the plate as well and playing their part.

So thank you once again and I look forward to hearing the rest of the conference.