

Leading the charge for the environment

Thank you so much for that introduction. It is wonderful to be here in these beautiful wetlands behind me and I am delighted that such an influential audience has gathered at short notice. I will apologise for the slightly coarse tone of my voice, I've been grappling with a few vocal cord problems over the last few weeks but that won't deter me from being a strong voice for the natural environment. I certainly felt a sigh of relief to step into this haven of serenity in the heart of this great, global city.

Thank you to the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust for hosting us today. It's a fitting backdrop to talk about the next steps that the Government want to take to protect, restore, and invest in the natural world. It's a tragedy that around the world we've lost 87% of wetlands but gems like this remind us of what conservation can achieve when we make space for nature within our communities. These wetlands alone protect and restore habitats that are home to more than 180 species. From snipe to shoveler, worm to wigeon. And as you've heard it was here in Barnes that my predecessor first set out the Government's ambitious 25 year plan to improve the environment for the next generation.

A twin global crisis – climate and nature

In light of the growing body of evidence gathered by the world's scientists, we should be in no doubt that our planet faces two immense threats: climate change and biodiversity loss. A million species are facing extinction as climate change heaps yet more pressure on endangered wildlife and its habitats. In the last 15 years the number of species under threat has more than doubled. And in my lifetime the blink of an eye in evolutionary terms populations of animals have, on average, more than halved.

If global temperatures rise by even 1.5C, we face even greater loss. We all appreciate the complex interconnections between species, habitats, and ecosystems. We are utterly reliant on nature, from the most fortunate of us to the most vulnerable, not least because wildlife pollinates the crops that account for over a third of global food supply. In this interconnected natural world, it is imperative that we make ensure that our action to tackle the twin challenges of climate change and the decline of nature is joined-up as well. This is both achievable and essential.

We must not flinch from the fact that this global crisis is biting at home. Our 10 hottest years in the UK have all occurred since 2002. Our UK Climate Projections published this year warn us that we should expect our weather to become warmer and wetter with more frequent, more intense extremes. Between 2002 and 2013, more UK species declined than grew. Overall, about 15% of species in Great Britain are threatened with extinction.

So what remains is all the more precious. The hugely important point that is becoming more and more prominent is the climate debate is the realisation that climate change and conservation are so inextricably linked together.

They are, as the Prime Minister put it, two sides of the same coin. It will be impossible to save nature without stabilising the climate, and we will not be able to prevent disastrous climate change without stepping up protection for the carbon sinks provided by the world's forests, wetlands, and natural open spaces.

It is increasingly clear that many people in this country and around the world recognise the pressing need for action.

But at this stage I don't believe anyone can pretend our collective response to this global issue yet matches the scale of the challenge. The good news is that we have real solutions nature's own tried and tested tools first amongst them. Whilst it is important to strive for scientific advance on carbon capture technology we already have access to effective, available, and scalable natural carbon capture devices. They're called trees. It makes good economic as well as environmental sense to use nature-based solutions as a core part of our efforts to address the climate crisis. The Dasgupta Review into the economics of biodiversity will allow us to better understand biodiversity's global benefits.

A natural capital approach to decision-making is already embedded in our 25 Year Environment Plan and the Office for National Statistics is in the process of producing the UK's first ever set of national natural capital accounts. We need to take the environment into account, in every sense of the word so if we invest in our environment, we have cause to hope that we can help nature recover. Conservation can bring species back from the brink. Take, for example, the work that Natural England are doing alongside many of you including the RSPB and Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust to bring 20 species 'Back from the Brink' of extinction and put over 200 others on the road to recovery.

For example, we see the tangible results of that work when species like the Black-tailed Godwit are thriving in Cambridgeshire once again. The need for a step change in activity is unarguable. And as we think about the right solutions to address this litany of loss that I've outlined, I want to return to that sigh of relief I mentioned at the start of this speech. Nature enriches our lives. Science and research have confirmed our instinctive sense that spending time in natural environments and open spaces helps us retain and regain good physical and mental health.

That's why we've made this our Year of Green Action – to try and help everyone connect with their natural environment and take action to protect and enhance it. We need to rethink the way we invest, and the way we plan for the future, if we're going to meet the challenges that I'm addressing today. So today I am proud to be introducing a historic Environment Bill, the first major environment legislation for thirty years. We want this Bill to help us deliver our commitment to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. It will also play a crucial role in setting us on the path to becoming a net-zero carbon economy by 2050. That's why the governance measures in today's Bill take the long view acknowledging the obligations we owe to those who will occupy this world long after we are gone. Whatever the view each of us holds on the issue of leaving the EU, we should all recognise

that this is a crucially important opportunity to go further and faster for the environment and in so doing set an example which we hope others might choose to follow.

Governance and principles

The Bill published today will embed environmental principles in government at the heart of policy-making.

The following principles are on the face of the Bill:

- that the polluter should pay
- that harm should be prevented or rectified at source
- that the environment should be taken into consideration across government policy, and
- that a precautionary approach should be taken

The Bill will require the Government to set ambitious, legally-binding, long-term targets, rooted in science and research.

Targets for air quality, water, biodiversity and nature, and resource efficiency and waste reduction.

A key benefit of leaving the EU is being able to respond more quickly to changing scientific advice and changing circumstances.

Future governments will be required to renew their targets every 5 years to ensure they are tough enough to deliver the nature recovery that we believe is crucial for our future. Ministers will be required to consider how the government will deal with any weaknesses in environmental action and commitments whether by making existing targets more demanding or setting new ones.

Crucially, this Bill will also require future governments to publish their evidence-based plan to meet the targets they have set themselves. Governments will also have to report annually on progress just as we did in May to ensure we're on track to meet our commitments. The Bill will establish a powerful new independent watchdog.

The new Office for Environmental Protection, called for by many of the organisations represented in this room, will provide expert independent advice to government on environmental plans and policies. It will scrutinise progress, and it will take enforcement action when needed. In a change from the Government's draft version of the Bill, the OEP's remit will include climate change and the Climate Change Act. This was a key ask from the EFRA and EAC parliamentary committees and I was pleased to be able to add it to the Bill published this afternoon.

The OEP's work in this space will, I believe, complement the scrutiny and advice functions of the much respected Committee on Climate Change. We are determined that the OEP will have the power and authority to enforce compliance with environmental law which will ensure the momentum for

environmental improvement is maintained and enhanced and hopefully accelerated.

From a free-to-use complaints system to the authority to instigate and undertake investigations to the power to take the government to court if necessary the OEP will have real teeth. The first of our Environmental Improvement Plans our 25 Year Plan is well underway. I want to pay tribute to Michael Gove who brought such energy and dynamism to his work as Environment Secretary aided by dedicated Defra civil servants, and many colleagues across different Government departments. I'm determined to move forward using the momentum he created with help of the excellent ministerial team that I have in Defra.

Our first progress report published earlier this year on the 25 Year Plan shows that 90% of actions that will make the most significant contribution to the ten goals in our 25 Year Plan are either delivered or on track – so real progress. And this Bill will make us even better equipped to achieve those goals once we have left the EU.

Environmental improvements – further and faster

The second half of the Bill is designed to empower environmental improvement across the board, right now.

From making sure that the regulation of our thriving chemicals industry can keep pace with the latest science to enabling us to breathe cleaner, safer air.

It is designed to encourage the market to produce more of the miracles we need to meet this great challenge ahead of us:

- by encouraging business to innovate
- by supporting people to make a difference in own lives
- and by empowering local authorities and local communities to take an active role in shaping the places where they live and their own local, natural environment.

Air quality

And of course a really important concern for many communities is air pollution. It is the single biggest environmental threat to public health. The numbers of those affected by shorter life spans and health difficulties caused by poor air quality are truly frightening and it is a form of pollution that damages crops and habitats as well as human health.

We are already making progress for cleaner air so people can live longer, healthier lives. Annual emissions of SO₂ and NO_x have fallen by 62% and 29% respectively since 2010. Our Clean Air Strategy has been praised by the World Health Organisation as 'an example for the rest of the world to follow'. We are investing £3.5 billion to reduce vehicle emissions and clean up our air moving us further towards our goal of ending the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040.

And we're working with farmers on a plan to reduce ammonia emissions from agriculture. But we can all acknowledge that there is so much more to be done if we are to effectively tackle this threat to the health of our nation. That's why we are elevating our ambition for air quality as we make our preparations to leave the EU.

The Bill, published this afternoon, introduces a duty to set a legally-binding target for the pollutant that has the most significant impact on human health fine particulate matter, or PM2.5. I believe this is a ground-breaking step forward. Setting such a target will put us ahead of almost all other major developed economies in the extent of our ambition. If we're to have a chance to succeeding in this goal, we also need to make sure that we have action across government including at local council level. So the Bill updates, simplifies and strengthens their ability to lead action on local air quality issues. And their action will be crucial to a successful outcome of meeting the new targets that will be set.

And should manufacturers ever be tempted once again to cheat on their emissions tests again, the Bill gives government the power to compel companies to recall vehicles that do not comply with environmental regulations. In addition, many are shocked to learn that the fuels some people burn in their homes across the country are one of the largest contributors to fine particulate matter emissions. The Bill will make it more straightforward for local authorities to tackle smoke emissions in their communities. And we will step up our efforts to give the public the information they need to make more sustainable choices from avoiding burning wet wood and coal to keeping chimneys clean.

Water

Water is another fundamental pillar of this Environment Bill. It may seem plentiful in this country but the available water per person is actually less than in some Mediterranean countries. The water companies who manage this most precious natural resource must make good on their plans to halve leakage by 2050. They must show real progress on getting there and I applaud the work the Environment Agency in all the work they do in keeping up pressure in relation to the water sector and ensuring that they live up to their environmental obligations.

I think it is vital that we see from the water sector greater determination to prevent the pollution incidents that kill thousands of fish, animals, and plants, damage ecosystems and ruin water quality. In a changing environment, where droughts and floods will threaten in equal measure. This Bill will help government ensure improved, long-term water resources. It will also help wastewater planning and I hope leave us better equipped to secure clean, safe, abundant water for all.

Resource and waste

We need greater efficiency in the way we treat resources and waste too. This is another key element of the Bill being launched today.

The inboxes of MPs are packed with emails from constituents fed up with litter on our streets and fly tipping and dismayed at the devastation that plastics wreak on life in our ocean. It is shocking that waste crime costs the taxpayer over £600 million every year. And it's appalling that every year the RSPCA has to respond to 1,500 incidents involving animals harmed or affected by litter, so this Bill will help us get tough on the scourge of waste crime and fly tipping. It will make it easier to hold to account those who flout the law because it will create powers to introduce electronic waste tracking- and we need to be smarter when it comes to the finite resources our planet provides.

We all know this is a crucial part of what we have to do to tackle the greater environmental questions of the day. The Bill will build on our Resources and Waste and Litter Strategies, to help people recycle more and take us further and faster to a genuinely circular economy. Small changes can make a big difference like banning single use straws, cotton buds, and stirrers. And we have also introduced a ground-breaking ban on microbeads in a range of cosmetic products.

The Bill will help us all do more by:

- enabling the creation of charges for other single-use plastics to encourage people to switch to reusable alternatives, and
- by taking powers to introduce a deposit return scheme such as drinks containers, so that we see fewer cans and bottles littering our streets, and more of them ending up in recycling centres

The Bill harnesses the power of business to tackle plastic pollution too. It will create powers to make producers responsible for 100% of the cost of dealing with the packaging waste they create incentivising better design and more responsible choices and ensuring that more of the plastics we use is recyclable and recycled. We will develop strong sustainability standards for a wide range of products.

Nature and biodiversity

We all have a stake in our approach to nature and biodiversity. There's a huge task ahead.

The Bill will provide important parts to achieve the goals we want to deliver. We'll provide, for example, the Forestry Commission with greater powers to tackle the illegal deforestation, and give communities a say when local authorities plan to remove well-loved trees in their streets, and it will strengthen and improve the duty on public authorities to make sure that they carry out their functions conserves and enhances biodiversity – that includes many strategies which are simple, money-saving local strategies like turning roadside verges over to 700 species of wildflower that support our bees and pollinators.

The Bill will also enable landowners to enter into voluntary Conservation Covenants with responsible bodies such as charities binding subsequent owners of the land to sustainable stewardship, long after the people who originally

set up the covenant have moved on. A key aim of the Bill is to ensure that our programme of house building is delivered in a way which benefits habitats too. Our Net Gain provisions will make a 10% boost for biodiversity a compulsory part of plans for new development under the Town and Country Planning Act.

This is expected to generate millions for investment in nature and give more people ready access to green space as well, and I think people will look back on it as one of the most significant changes included in this piece of legislation. Through our 25 Year Environment Plan we are committed to restoring three quarters of our one million hectares of protected sites to favourable condition, and to creating or restoring 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitats in the wider landscape, not least through working with the experts in our National Parks who do so much to safeguard our beautiful rural landscapes.

The Nature Recovery Network was a key commitment of our 25 Year Environment Plan joined up habitats supporting healthy ecosystems across the country. Earlier this month the Wildlife Trusts called for the Bill to underpin its establishment of this recovery network.

We've listened and we're taking action, so the Bill includes provisions to strengthen the Network's pillars of spatial prioritisation and stronger partnerships. The Bill will require the preparation and publication of Local Nature Recovery Strategies mapping nature-rich habitats so that investment can be targeted where it will make the most difference. The Government will provide data, guidance, and support, but these local plans will embrace local knowledge to strengthen links between neighbouring communities and support the wider Network. These provisions will play a crucial role in protecting what we have and restoring nature that is in decline.

Wider action at home

This leviathan, landmark Environment Bill addresses issues which are relevant to the whole of our country. Over half of the measures in the Bill will apply beyond England, helping the environment from the Shetlands to the Scillies. And it is possible that other parts of the legislation will be extended to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales in the future.

But of course the Environment Bill is part of a wider opportunity for climate and nature as we leave the EU. Brexit means regaining control of our waters, so that we can manage our stocks more sustainably, and support our marine environment and also find a way to give a fairer deal to our coastal communities too. Reinvigorating the way we use land is another major Brexit benefit. We are determined to seize this a once-in-a-generation opportunity to combine support for farmers with support for the environment.

We will help farmers deploy precision farming and innovation. Our new agricultural policy will aim to improve agricultural productivity, enhance animal welfare, and reduce agriculture's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. Our hard-working farmers produce the high-welfare, high-quality, delicious, nutritious British food that is prized both at home and around the

world. Their produce is the backbone of the success of our food and drink sector.

For the most part, the Common Agriculture Policy pays landowners simply for owning land, no matter how they manage it. And our farmers are looking to embrace transformative change with the NFU setting out plans for agriculture to reach net zero in advance of the rest of the economy. Outside the EU we can and will replace the CAP with a system that not only help farm businesses to be more resilient, productive, and internationally competitive – but also supports excellent stewardship of land and nature from heathlands to hedgerows, to soils rich in carbon, to better biodiversity.

Our farmers will be properly rewarded with public money for the public goods they provide, such as clean air and water, landscapes better protected from floods, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and thriving plants and wildlife. All this will be part of our Environmental Land Management Scheme the cornerstone of our new agricultural policy. And the Environment Bill will bolster the action we are taking on climate change and biodiversity loss in a global context including the nature-based solutions that make nature's innate resilience our ally.

That's why the Prime Minister recently announced that we will be planting three new Forests in Northumberland. We are restoring almost 6,500 peatlands. Our biggest carbon sink and home to some of our most threatened and fastest declining bird species, like the golden plover and the curlew. The UK is home to scientific excellence that has made us world-leaders in environmental innovation from Kew's Millennium Seedbank to climate resilient crops.

And we are a country with the experience to prove that economic and environmental success can go hand in hand. We've cut our emissions by over 40 per cent faster than any other G20 country while growing our economy by more than two thirds. Only six years ago 40% of our electricity came from coal now that's less than 5%. We have the largest installed offshore wind capacity in the world and we are committed to relying on it to meet a third of demand by 2030. And we're accelerating the low-carbon growth that already provides over 400,000 jobs in the UK including £2.5 billion of investment in research and development.

So right across government, we are taking urgent action to fulfill our pledge to leave the environment in a better state than we found it not just as an important goal in itself but also a crucial means to deliver our commitment to reach net zero. A decade on from the landmark Climate Change Act that enshrined ambition in law and marshaled action across society we are now putting forward a new legislative framework to drive forward progress on this great task of nature recovery and environmental protection.

Global leadership by example

We should be proud that we are raising our sights as we leave the EU, to become a greener, global Britain. But there is so much more to do – not least because over 70% of the poorest people are directly reliant on the natural environment for their livelihoods and directly threatened by climate change.

We are determined to escalate the UK's response to the climate and nature crisis domestically and internationally and help developing countries avoid the environmental mistakes we made as our economies developed. That's why the Prime Minister announced at the UN a few weeks ago that we will double our International Climate Finance funding to at least £11.6 billion between 2021 and 2025. The PM has announced £220 million of investment to protect international biodiversity and help to halt its decline.

This will deliver a boost for our efforts to combat the devastating illegal wildlife trade, with £30 million extra in funding, and it will also mean triple the funding for our world-renowned Darwin Initiative. This will rise to £90 million over three years helping us protect treasured species, from Bengal tigers to black rhinos, from coral reefs to mangroves. And a new £100 million Biodiverse Landscapes Fund will work across five vast areas building on the success of wildlife corridors in the Kavango-Zambezi river basins that span five nations, and is home to half of Africa's remaining Savannah elephants. 80% of all terrestrial species live in forests yet current deforestation at the rate of 47 football pitches every minute is second only to burning fossil fuels as a cause of global emissions.

Tragically, it is also undermining the livelihoods of 1.2 billion of the world's poorest people. Our projects are promoting sustainable agriculture and improving forest protection from the Lower Mekong to the Amazon. As the largest contributor to the Climate Investment Funds we have helped put an area of forest the bigger than Hungary under improved management, and our Global Resource Initiative is bringing leading businesses and NGOs together to help us reduce the environmental impact of the supply chain which provides the goods we all consume here in this country. Our Future of the Sea report estimated that the 12 million tonnes of plastic that enter the ocean every year will treble by 2025 if we do not intervene.

So we're investing £70 million to fund global research and develop circular economies for waste worldwide. A key part of that is our Commonwealth Litter Programme and the Clean Ocean Alliance, because our shared ocean is critically important. As custodians of the fifth largest marine estate in the world, we are on track to protect more than half our UK and Overseas Territories waters by 2020 with £7 million dedicated to expanding our Blue Belt even further. We are calling on the world to protect at least 30% of the ocean in Marine Protected Areas by 2030, and ten nations have already joined our new Global Ocean Alliance determined to make this happen.

Conclusion

You've been very patient as I've spoken at length about what I believe is a step change in our efforts to protect nature and biodiversity, and next year is critical in relation to the matters I have considered in this speech today. 2020 needs to be the year when the international community pulls together to agree time-bound, measurable, and demanding targets for protecting biodiversity on land and in our oceans which will be instrumental to meeting our climate objectives.

We know we face a historic, daunting task if we are to leave young people with a better natural inheritance than was bequeathed to us. As we make nature-based solutions and biodiversity a central focus of our efforts at home and abroad, we look ahead with enthusiasm to the prospect of co-hosting COP 26 in Glasgow, and we really want to continue working with you in this audience and the organisations you represent to find global solutions that work for climate, nature, and people too. We want the Environment Bill published today to mark a big step forward in turning the tide on the degradation of nature our natural environment – and in closing, I want to thank you for everything you have done to contribute to this legislation and the nine consultations which underpin it!

I want to pay tribute to the work of scientists, businesses, civil society, and countless individuals for years of dedication which helped to get us here. The power of your persistence underpins everything in this Bill, and everything it will achieve. So I hope that whatever else may divide us we can come together behind this Bill to get it on to the statute book and open a new chapter in the protection and enhancement of the natural environment of these beautiful islands which we are privileged to call home.

Thank you.