

Speech: Prime Minister's speech on the environment: 11 January 2017

It is wonderful to be here at the Wetland Centre – a true oasis in the heart of London.

In our election manifesto last year we made an important pledge: to make ours the first generation to leave the natural environment in a better state than we found it.

As we leave the European Union, which for decades has controlled some of the most important levers of environmental policy, now is the right time to put the question of how we protect and enhance our natural environment centre-stage.

And it is a central priority for this government.

Our mission is to build a Britain where the next generation can enjoy a better life than the one that went before it.

That means tackling the deficit and dealing with our debts, so they are not a burden for our children and grandchildren.

It means building the houses that people need, so that the dream of home ownership can be a reality.

Ensuring every child has a good school place and can get the best start in life.

And it also means protecting and enhancing our natural environment for the next generation, so they have a healthy and beautiful country in which to build their lives.

Making good on the promise that each new generation should be able to build a better future is a fundamental Conservative principle.

And whilst every political tradition has a stake in our natural environment, speaking as the Leader of the Conservative Party, I know I draw upon a proud heritage.

Because Conservatism and Conservation are natural allies.

The fundamental understanding which lies at the heart of our philosophical tradition is that we in the present are trustees charged with protecting and improving what we have inherited from those who went before us.

And it is our responsibility to pass on that inheritance to the next generation.

That applies to the great national institutions which we have built up as a

society over generations, like our courts, our Parliament, the BBC and the NHS.

And it applies equally to our natural heritage.

Value of our natural environment

Britain has always been a world leader in understanding and protecting the natural world.

From Gilbert White's vivid descriptions of the ecology of his Hampshire village in the first work of natural history writing, in the eighteenth century, to Sir David Attenborough's landmark TV series in the twenty-first century, which have opened the eyes of millions of people to the wonder of our planet and to the threats it faces – the appeal of our natural world is universal and has caught the imagination of successive generations.

In the United Kingdom, we are blessed with an abundance and variety of landscapes and habitats.

These natural assets are of immense value.

Our countryside and coastal waters are the means by which we sustain our existence in these islands.

They are where we grow and harvest a large proportion of the food we eat. Where the water we drink comes from.

Our green and blue places have inspired some of our greatest poetry, art and music and have become global cultural icons.

Shakespeare's Forest of Arden has been recreated on stages across the globe.

Beatrix Potter's stories and William's Wordsworth's poetic descriptions of 'the calm that Nature breathes among the hills' has made the Lake District world-renowned.

The Suffolk landscapes of John Constable, and the beautiful depictions of the River Thames in my own constituency by Sir Stanley Spencer, are iconic.

People from every continent are drawn to our shores to enjoy these beautiful landscapes, supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs in tourism.

Industries which directly draw on our environment – from agriculture and forestry to aquaculture and fishing – support hundreds of thousands of jobs and contribute billions to our economy.

The natural environment is around us wherever we are, and getting closer to it is good for our physical and mental health and our emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

Millions of us visit the countryside, the seaside, a local park or places like this, every week to recharge our batteries, spend time with friends and

family, and to exercise.

So the environment is something personal to each of us, but it is also something which collectively we hold in trust for the next generation.

And we have a responsibility to protect and enhance it.

Conservation and growth

It is sometimes suggested that a belief in a free market economy which pursues the objective of economic growth is not compatible with taking the action necessary to protect and enhance our natural environment.

That we need to give up on the very idea of economic growth itself as the price we have to pay for sustainability.

Others argue that taking any action to protect and improve our environment harms business and holds back growth.

Both are wrong. They present a false choice which I entirely reject.

A free market economy, operating under the right rules, regulations, and incentives, delivering sustainable economic growth, is the single greatest agent of collective human progress we have ever known.

Time and again, it has lifted whole societies out of abject poverty and subsistence living, increased life expectancy, widened literacy and improved educational standards.

More than this, it is in free economies and free societies that the technological and scientific breakthroughs which improve and save lives are made.

The innovation and invention of a free enterprise economy will help to deliver new technology to drive a revolution in clean growth.

Around the world, economies at all stages of development are embracing new low-carbon technologies and a more efficient use of resources to move onto a path of clean and sustainable growth.

And our Industrial Strategy puts harnessing the economic potential of the clean growth revolution at its heart, as one of its four Grand Challenges.

From how we generate power, and transport people and goods, to our industrial processes and how we grow our food – new clean technologies have the potential to deliver more good jobs and higher living standards.

The UK is already home to around half a million jobs in low carbon businesses and their supply chain.

We are a world-leader in the manufacture of electric vehicles.

We are the biggest offshore wind energy producer in the world.

And we must continue to press for sustainable economic growth, and the immense benefits it brings.

Of course, for a market to function properly it has to be regulated.

And environmental protection is a vital part of any good regulatory regime.

So where government needs to intervene to ensure that high standards are met, we will not hesitate to do so.

That is the approach which underpins our corporate governance reforms and our plans to make the energy market work better for consumers.

Government stepping-up to its proper role as an engaged and active participant defines our Industrial Strategy.

And it is the approach we are taking in this Environment Plan too.

Together, they combine to form a coherent approach to boosting economic productivity, prosperity and growth, while at the same time restoring and enhancing our natural environment.

Our record

Conservative Governments have always taken our responsibility to the natural environment seriously.

In the nineteenth century it was Benjamin Disraeli's Conservative government which passed the River Pollution Prevention Act, providing the first legal environmental protections for our waterways.

A Conservative government in the 1950s passed the Clean Air Act, making the Great Smog of London a thing of the past.

Margaret Thatcher was the first world leader to recognise the threat of global warming and helped to protect our ozone layers through her work on the Montreal Protocol.

And David Cameron restored environmentalism to a central place in the Conservative agenda.

The measures set out in this plan build on this proud heritage, and the action which we have taken in office since 2010.

We have seen some notable successes.

Thanks to concerted action over many years, our rivers and beaches are now cleaner than they have been at any time since the Industrial Revolution.

Otters are back in rivers in every English county.

We are releasing beavers to the Forest of Dean, to help reduce the risk of flooding and enhance biodiversity.

Action at the EU level – of which the UK has consistently been a champion – has helped drive these improvements.

Because we recognise their value, we will incorporate all existing EU environmental regulations into domestic law when we leave.

And let me be very clear. Brexit will not mean a lowering of environmental standards.

We will set out our plans for a new, world leading independent statutory body to hold government to account and give the environment a voice. And our work will be underpinned by a strong set of environmental principles.

We will consult widely on these proposals, not least with many of the people in this room.

But be in no doubt: our record shows that we have already gone further than EU regulation requires of us to protect our environment.

Thanks to action we have taken, 7,886 square miles of coastal waters around the UK are now Marine Conservation Zones, protecting a range of nationally important, rare or threatened habitats and species.

Our ban on the use of microbeads in cosmetic and personal care products is another positive step towards protecting our marine environment.

And we want to further restrict neonicotinoids to protect our bees.

We will use the opportunity Brexit provides to strengthen and enhance our environmental protections – not to weaken them.

We will develop a new environmental land management scheme which supports farmers who deliver environmental benefits for the public.

And once we've taken back control of our waters, we will implement a more sustainable fishing policy that also supports our vital coastal communities.

Animal welfare

That is action for the future – but we are also acting in the here and now.

When animals are mistreated, our common humanity is tarnished.

So we are pursuing policies to make Britain a world-leader in tackling the abuse of animals.

Here at home we are introducing mandatory CCTV into slaughter houses, to ensure standards of treatment are upheld.

We are increasing the maximum sentence for the worst acts of animal cruelty in England and Wales ten-fold.

We recognise that animals are sentient beings and we will enshrine that

understanding in primary legislation.

We have consulted on plans to introduce a total ban on UK sales of ivory that contribute either directly or indirectly to the continued poaching of elephants.

In 2014, we convened the London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade, the first of its kind, to help eradicate an abhorrent crime and to better protect the world's most iconic species from the threat of extinction.

In October we will host this conference again and will press for further international action.

Whether they are pets, livestock or wild fauna, animals deserve the proper protection of the law and under a Conservative government that is exactly what they will receive.

Enhancing our natural environment

I am proud of the progress we have made but recognise that the challenges we face remain acute.

In England, changes in patterns of land use have seen habitats lost and species threatened.

Since 1970 there has been a significant decline in the numbers of woodland and farmland birds.

Pollinating insects have declined by 13% since 1980.

And while the water in our rivers and beaches are cleaner than ever, around the world eight million tonnes of plastic makes its way into the oceans each year.

The problem was vividly highlighted in the BBC's recent Blue Planet II series, which was public service broadcasting at its finest.

And I also pay tribute to the Daily Mail for its tireless campaigning on this issue.

The 25 year environment plan for England, which we are publishing today, sets out the action government will take to tackle all of these challenges, and I pay tribute to Michael Gove and his team for their work on it and the energy and enthusiasm they have brought to this.

Its goals are simple: clean air, clean and plentiful water, plants and animals which are thriving, and a cleaner, greener country for us all.

These are all valuable in themselves, but together they add up to something truly profound: a better world for each of us to live in, and better future for the next generation.

We have worked closely with the devolved administrations as we have developed

this plan, and we want to work closely with them on these issues in the years ahead.

This is a plan for the long-term: as our environment changes, our plan will be updated to ensure we are continuing to deliver on our commitment to deliver a healthy natural environment.

Northern Forest

Nothing is more emblematic of that natural environment than our trees.

A tree is a home to countless organisms, from insects to small mammals.

They are natural air purifiers. They act as flood defences.

We have committed to plant millions more trees, in urban and rural locations.

We also support increased protections for England's existing trees and forests, both from inappropriate developments and from invasive pests and diseases.

To make more land available for the homes our country needs, while at the same time creating new habitats for wildlife, we will embed the principle of 'net environmental gain' for development, including housing and infrastructure.

And as we pursue our Northern Powerhouse, connecting the great cities of the North of England to promote their economic growth, we will also create a new Northern Forest.

It will be a new community woodland for Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire, provide a new and enduring amenity for the growing population of the north of England, and act as a carbon sink for the UK.

Decades from now, children as yet unborn will be exploring this forest, playing under the shade of its trees and learning about our natural world from its flora and fauna.

Access and participation

But today, more than one in ten young people do not spend time in the countryside or in large urban green spaces, meaning they are denied the benefits which spending time outdoors in the natural environment brings.

These young people are disproportionately from more deprived backgrounds and their effective exclusion from our countryside represents a social injustice which I am determined to tackle.

The National Park Authorities already engage directly with over 60,000 young people a year in schools visits, and they will now double this figure to ensure that even more young people can learn about our most precious environments.

I have seen for myself this morning the excitement and enthusiasm of children learning about these wetlands and the birds that inhabit them.

And to help more children lead happy and healthy lives, we will launch a new Nature Friendly Schools programme.

Targeting schools in disadvantaged areas first, it will create improved school grounds which allow young people to learn about the natural world.

It doesn't have to be big, difficult or expensive.

It could be planting a garden, growing a vegetable patch, or setting up a bird feeder.

Whatever form it takes, it will be putting nature into the lives of young people, because everyone deserves to experience it first-hand.

And this work with schools will be supported by £10 million of investment.

Plastics

We look back in horror at some of the damage done to our environment in the past and wonder how anyone could have thought that, for example, dumping toxic chemicals untreated into rivers was ever the right thing to do.

In years to come, I think people will be shocked at how today we allow so much plastic to be produced needlessly.

In the UK alone, the amount of single-use plastic wasted every year would fill 1,000 Royal Albert Halls.

This plastic is ingested by dozens of species of marine animals and over 100 species of sea birds, causing immense suffering to individual creatures and degrading vital habitats.

1 million birds, and over 100,000 other sea mammals and turtles die every year from eating and getting tangled in plastic waste.

This truly is one of the great environmental scourges of our time.

Today I can confirm that the UK will demonstrate global leadership.

We must reduce the demand for plastic, reduce the number of plastics in circulation and improve our recycling rates.

So we will take action at every stage of the production and consumption of plastic.

As it is produced, we will encourage manufacturers to take responsibility for the impacts of their products and rationalise the number of different types of plastics they use.

As it is consumed, we will drive down the amount of plastic in circulation

through reducing demand.

Government will lead the way by removing all consumer single use plastic in central government offices.

And I want to see other large organisations commit to doing the same.

Supermarkets also need to do much more to cut down on unnecessary plastic packaging, so we will work with them to explore introducing plastic-free aisles, where all the food is sold loose.

And we will make it easier for people to recycle their plastics, so less of it ends up in landfills or our waterways.

But I want us to go a step further.

We have seen a powerful example over the last couple of years of the difference which a relatively simple policy can make for our environment.

In 2015 we started asking shoppers to pay a 5p charge for using a plastic bag.

As a direct consequence, we have used 9 billion fewer of them since the charge was introduced.

This means the marine-life around the shores of the UK is safer, our local communities are cleaner and fewer plastic bags are ending up in landfill sites.

This success should inspire us.

It shows the difference we can make, and it demonstrates that the public is willing to play its part to protect our environment.

So to help achieve our goal of eliminating all avoidable plastic waste, we will extend the 5p plastic bag charge to all retailers, to further reduce usage.

And next month, we will launch a call for evidence on taxes or charges on single use plastics.

We will also use the United Kingdom's international influence to drive positive change around the world.

When we host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in April we will put the sustainable development of our oceans firmly on the agenda.

We will work with our partners to create a Commonwealth Blue Charter and push for strong action to reduce plastic waste in the ocean.

And we will direct our development spending to help developing nations reduce plastic waste, increase our own marine protected areas at home, and establish new Blue Belt protections in our Overseas Territories.

I want the Britain of the future to be a truly Global Britain, which is a force for good in the world.

Steadfast in upholding our values – not least our fierce commitment to protecting the natural environment.

Climate change

You can see that commitment in our work on climate change.

Since 2012, the carbon-intensity of UK electricity has fallen by more than twice that of any other major economy.

In 2016 the UK succeeded in decarbonising at a faster rate than any other G20 country.

And last April, the UK had its first full day without any coal-fired electricity since the 1880s.

We are supporting the world's poorest as they face up to the effects of rising sea waters and the extreme weather events associated with climate change.

Last month I attended the One Planet Summit in Paris, where I announced new support for countries in the Caribbean, Asia and Africa to help them build resilience against natural disasters and climate extremes.

We will continue to lead the world in delivering on our commitments to the planet, from fulfilling the environmental aspects of the UN Sustainable Development Goals to complying with the Paris Climate Agreement.

Our Clean Growth Strategy set out our commitment to phase out unabated coal fired electricity by 2025, and through the Power Past Coal alliance, which the UK established with Canada, we are encouraging other countries to do the same.

26 nations have already joined the alliance – and I will carry on pressing others to join too.

We can be proud of our success in facing up to the reality of climate change.

But as the plan we are publishing today demonstrates, we are not complacent about the action needed to sustain that success in the future.

Air quality

And we are not complacent about the action we need to take here in the UK to improve the quality of the air in our towns and cities.

Since 2010, air quality has improved, and will continue to improve, as a result of action we are taking, but I know that there is more to do.

That is why we have committed £3.5 billion to support measures to improve air

quality.

We are investing in electric vehicle infrastructure and new charging technologies, supporting the roll-out of low carbon buses, and expanding cycling and walking infrastructure.

In July we published our plan to tackle traffic pollution and we will end the sale of new conventional petrol and diesel cars by 2040.

In the last Budget we announced a £220 million Clean Air Fund, paid for by tax changes to company car tax and vehicle excise duty on new diesel cars.

This year, we will set out how government will support the transition to almost all cars and vans being zero emission vehicles by 2050.

And the UK will host an international zero-emission vehicle summit, driving innovation towards cleaner transport.

I am determined that we will do what it takes to ensure our air is clean and safe for the future.

Conclusion

The New Year is a time to look ahead.

The UK is making good progress in our discussions on EU withdrawal – and I am determined that we will keep up that progress in 2018.

We are pursuing a modern Industrial Strategy which will help promote sustainable growth in our economy and deliver greater prosperity across the country.

We are improving standards in schools, investing in our National Health Service and helping more people to own their own homes.

And in our comprehensive 25 year environment plan, we are setting out how we will protect and renew our natural inheritance for the next generation.

How we will make our air and water cleaner, and our natural habitats more diverse and healthy.

How we will create a better world for ourselves and our children.

It is a national plan of action, with international ambitions.

But what it really speaks to is something much more personal for each of us as human beings.

That is: the impulse to care for and nurture our own surroundings.

To protect what is vulnerable and precious.

To safeguard and improve on our inheritance, so we can pass on something of

value and significance to those who come after us.

It is what Roger Scruton has described as: 'the goal towards which serious environmentalism and serious conservatism both point – namely, home, the place where we are and that we share, the place that defines us, that we hold in trust for our descendants, and that we don't want to spoil.'

Our goal is a healthy and beautiful natural environment which we can all enjoy, and which we can be proud to pass on to the next generation.

This plan is how we will achieve it.