

Speech: Environment Secretary sets out plans to enhance environmental standards

I am the last person to shy away from criticising the European Union when they get it wrong. Indeed, one of the reasons I campaigned for us to leave the EU was because I've seen first hand the damage it has done to our environment.

I grew up in Aberdeen in the Eighties all too vividly aware of how the Common Fisheries policy depleted fish stocks, damaged sustainability and, in the process, undermined the long-term health of our coastal communities.

And as a worker at one point in a Farmers' co-operative, I also saw how another arm of EU environmental action, the Common Agricultural Policy, damaged our countryside.

It paid farmers according to the amount of land they farmed, not the way they managed it, and has harmed biodiversity. Outside the EU – once we have taken back control of our agricultural, fisheries and environmental policies – we can do so much better.

But it is also important to acknowledge that there have been some changes which have occurred during our time in the EU which have helped improve our environment.

Indeed, British politicians, from Margaret Thatcher to Stanley Johnson, John Gummer to Owen Paterson, have played a part in shaping policy at the European level to improve environmental protection.

Rules and protocols that protect important habitats and endangered species have been drafted by British authors working internationally. And I want to preserve the gains we have made.

Indeed, this Government has pledged that we must be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.

I have argued therefore that we must not only maintain but enhance environmental standards as we leave the EU. And that means making sure we secure the environmental gains we have made while in the EU even as we use our new independence to aim even higher.

Our first task is to ensure that we have a coherent, functioning body of law in place on the day we leave. That is why we are transferring all existing European law, including environmental protections, into UK law through the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. Rules and regulations in place the day before Brexit will still be in place the day after.

However, this alone is not enough. Some of the mechanisms which have

developed during our time in the EU which helpfully scrutinise the achievement of environmental targets and standards by Government will no longer exist in the same way, and principles which guide policy will have less scope and coverage than they do now.

Without further action, there will be a governance gap. The environment won't be protected as it should be from the unscrupulous, unprincipled or careless.

Of course, in the UK we benefit from a vibrant democracy and robust legal system which allow individuals and parliaments to hold the powerful to account when they do the wrong thing – whether it's turning a blind eye to pollution or damaging our beautiful countryside.

But when it comes to protecting the environment, this is not sufficient on its own. Nature is, by definition, voiceless. Animals and plants, habitats and coastlines cannot petition parliament or defend themselves through judicial review.

That is why the EU asked the European Commission to play a role as environmental watchdog. It's been far from perfect.

Sometimes the Commission makes decisions which fail to protect the environment, or even harm it. But on other occasions the Commission has contributed to helping raise environmental standards.

Outside the EU, we have an opportunity to learn from both the Commission's successes and failures. We can develop new institutions which do a better job and hold us to higher standards.

So we will consult on using the new freedoms we have to establish a new, world-leading body to give the environment a voice and hold the powerful to account. It will be independent of government, able to speak its mind freely.

And it will be placed on a statutory footing, ensuring it has clear authority. Its ambition will be to champion and uphold environmental standards, always rooted in rigorous scientific evidence.

We will consult widely on the precise functions, remit and powers of the new body, but we are in no doubt that it must have real bite.

We also need to ensure that environmental enforcement and policy-making is underpinned by a clear set of principles. Environmental principles are already central to Government policy.

However, besides their mention in the EU treaties, we do not set these principles down anywhere or define their role in policy making.

So as we leave the EU, we will create a new policy statement setting out the environmental principles which will guide us. This statement will draw on the EU's current principles and it will underpin future policy-making.

By early next year, we will launch a formal consultation on both the new environmental body and the new policy statement.

There are significant questions to answer – such as exactly what functions and powers the new body has to enforce environmental laws, exactly how a new policy statement is embedded into public policy making, and whether Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland wish to take a different or similar approach.

Of course, we will be engaging widely before bringing forward a final proposal and want to hear from as many people and organisations as possible – from business, NGOs, the farming sector, civil society, and others.

We are already working with the devolved administrations on which powers coming back from the EU should be devolved further.

We will discuss this proposal with them as part of wider conversations on how and where powers should be exercised on return from the EU, and the need or otherwise for common frameworks across the UK.

Nothing can be more vital than the future of our environment and the natural world. We are their custodians and we must safeguard their future if our ambition for a Green Brexit is to become a reality.

We have the chance to set the gold standard for environmental science and become a home to centres of environmental excellence. A new independent, statutory body and a strong statement of principles will ensure that outside the EU, we become the world-leading curator of the most precious asset of all: our planet.

Speech: Environment Minister speaks at the UN Climate Change Conference

I am delighted to be here at COP23, working with other nations, international organisations and of course Peter Thomson.

I thank Fiji for their leadership in the Presidency and Germany for being great hosts.

We have had feedback that the UK can play a greater role globally and we are happy to do that.

Oceans make up around two thirds of our planet and our lives are inextricably linked with our blue seas. However, our oceans are changing and we must take action to save them.

We now have nearly 300 Marine Protected Areas in UK waters, and by 2020 we will deliver a network of Marine Protected Areas that will cover 25 per cent of the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone. In addition, the UK is on track to protect 4 million square kilometres of ocean across its Overseas Territories

by 2020.

The UK continues to be a global leader in protecting oceans and marine life. Action on plastic bag use has been taken across the UK, for instance, the 5p plastic bag charge in England has cut the use of plastic bags by over 80 per cent, or over 9 billion in just one year, and our microbead ban will be one of the toughest in the world.

We recognise the particularly damaging effects of climate change on developing countries. That is why the UK has committed at least £5.8 billion of international climate finance between 2016 and 2020 to help developing countries mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

One example of this is the £10 million we have committed to tackle mangrove loss in Madagascar that will benefit over 100,000 people in coastal communities by providing protection against natural disasters and supporting their livelihoods. It will deliver around 13 million tonnes of CO2 savings.

It is only by collaboration on a global scale that we can truly address marine climate issues, including ocean acidification.

We have already seen the devastating impact of rising sea levels on our coastal communities. We should be clear that ocean acidification could threaten the very basis of life itself. I say that because acidification threatens the whole basis of the marine ecosystem, as it literally attacks the building blocks of life as key organisms fail to develop fully, which is starting to disrupt the food web.

Earlier this year we published a synopsis of our [UK Ocean Acidification Research Programme](#) and, based on current projections, cold water corals will be 20-30 per cent weaker, causing reef disintegration and losing the rich biodiversity that they support.

The programme provided an extremely successful collaborative science partnership across the UK and internationally, particularly with the EU European Project on Ocean Acidification and the German BIOACID programme. Science is the spur to action and the more we can collaborate across nations, the more we can innovate.

The UK set up the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership (MCCIP) to provide verifiable evidence of the effect of climate change. This brings together scientists, government, its agencies and NGOs and has just published "Marine Climate change Impacts – 10 years' experience of science to policy reporting".

However, there is more that we can do. This is why the UK Government is committed to a new United Nations Agreement for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, which will deliver real protection across the world's oceans.

Oceans Action Day reminds us of the importance of the two thirds of our world and that our blue spaces are just as precious as our green spaces – and that actions on land have consequences for all parts of this blue planet,

especially those actions which are altering our climate.

That is why I am pleased to announce that the United Kingdom will today sign up to the “Because the Oceans” declaration and I encourage others who have not done so, to do the same.

Thank you.

Press release: New environmental protections to deliver a Green Brexit

Plans to consult on a new, independent body that would hold Government to account for upholding environmental standards in England after we leave the European Union have been set out by Environment Secretary Michael Gove today.

Leaving the EU gives us the opportunity to put the environment at the heart of policy making, while ensuring vital protections for our landscapes, wildlife and natural assets are not only maintained but enhanced.

To help deliver a Green Brexit, ministers will consult on a new independent, statutory body to advise and challenge government and potentially other public bodies on environmental legislation – stepping in when needed to hold these bodies to account and enforce standards.

A consultation on the specific powers and scope of the new body will be launched early next year.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said today:

We will deliver a Green Brexit, where environmental standards are not only maintained but enhanced.

Today we are setting out our plans to ensure the powerful are held to account. We will consult on creating an independent body – encouraging transparency and preventing careless or irresponsible behaviour damaging our natural environment.

We will consult as widely as possible on these proposals to ensure we get this important decision right for future generations.

Currently environmental decisions made in the UK – from improving air and water quality to protecting endangered species – are overseen by the European Commission, which monitors targets, scrutinises new legislation and takes action against illegal behaviour.

This current system is underpinned by a number of 'environmental principles', such as sustainable development and the polluter pays principle, which puts the onus on polluting individuals or businesses to pay to repair damage.

Although these principles are already central to government environmental policy, they are not set out in one place besides the EU treaties. The proposed consultation on the statutory body will therefore also explore the scope and content of a new policy statement to ensure environmental principles underpin policy making.

One of the key questions, which we will explore with the devolved administrations (DAs), is whether Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland wish to take a different or similar approach. We want to hear from as many people and organisations as possible right across the UK – from business, NGOs, the farming sector, civil society, and elsewhere.

[Press release: North east man sentenced for waste fire](#)

A Cleveland farmer has been ordered to pay £4,899.44 after illegally storing and setting fire to controlled waste on his land.

The blaze, which was filmed by a National Police Air Service (NPAS) helicopter crew, took place at Holdensfield Farm, Yarm, in December 2016.

Charles Roderick Pickering, aged 71, of Holdensfield Farm, was charged with two waste offences when he appeared before Teesside Magistrates' Court on Friday, 10 November.

He admitted both allegations brought by the Environment Agency and was handed a £3,000 fine with £1,729.44 costs and £170 victim surcharge.

The court heard how the NPAS helicopter crew observed the fire, which was giving off a large plume of black smoke. Footage shows the fire was unattended and included materials such as uPVC door and window frames, wood, wheelie bins, a fridge and shower trays over an area of 50 metres square.

The fire was 200m away from a large housing estate to the north, 200m from HMP Kirklevington Grange to the west, 200m from two busy A roads servicing Yarm and immediately adjacent to a golf driving range.

Burned waste

When Environment Agency Officers attended the site on 19 December 2016 they found the burned and partially burned waste also included televisions, carpet, mattresses, kitchen units and garden waste. There was also an area of

unburnt waste consisting of various packaging materials, paint tins and wooden pallets.

Pickering explained that he had allowed a man, whom he only knew by first name, to bring on some of the waste at no charge, with the rest being from his own farm. He admitted he had started the fire, stating he had done it when he considered the wind conditions suitable.

On 26 January 2017, Pickering was interviewed under caution. He produced an invoice and waste transfer notes showing that some of the burnt materials had been removed from the farm.

Mr Brown, of Hewitts Solicitor's mitigating on Mr Pickering's behalf, said Mr Pickering accepted responsibility for his wrong doing and had only burnt waste when the wind blew away from local housing and prison. He had now removed the waste at his expense.

Ignorance is 'no excuse'

Speaking after the court case, Environment Agency spokesperson Rachael Caldwell said:

Ignorance is not an excuse for flouting environmental laws. Not only did Pickering unlawfully accept controlled waste onto his farm, he put the health of the local community and environment in danger by setting fire to it, producing a flume of smoke and fumes.

This case demonstrates the need for everyone to take their environmental responsibilities seriously. Failure to do so can have an immediate impact on people around you and pollute the environment for future generations.

[Press release: Thousands of fish released into rivers](#)

The Environment Agency has released 8,000 young fish to give fish stocks a boost in north east rivers.

The chub and dace were released on Thursday, 9 November into the River Tees at Low Coniscliffe and River Wear at Maiden Castle.

It's part of the Environment Agency's ongoing plan to develop and restore rivers in the region, targeting those which have been affected by pollution or where barriers affect fish passage.

Fisheries experts will release a total of 30,000 fish over the next two weeks in rivers and Stillwater fisheries in the north east. As well as the Tees and Wear, fish will be released into the Skerne near Darlington and the Team at Gateshead.

The fish – chub, dace, roach, bream, tench, rudd and crucian carp – were all reared at the Environment Agency’s fish farm near Calverton, Nottinghamshire, using funding from rod licence sales.



Commitment to anglers

Alice Fitch, Fisheries Team leader for the Environment Agency in the north east, said: “We are pleased that we can provide these fish for stocking as part of our commitment to rod licence paying anglers. Restoration and the creation of new fisheries for all people to enjoy is a very important aspect of our work.”

The Environment Agency releases fish into our waterways annually. Fisheries officers target fish stocking activity using data from national fish surveys to identify where there are problems with poor breeding and survival. Releasing fish helps the process of natural recovery in waters which have been impacted by pollution or suffered poor water quality.

Alice added: “Restocking is one of many things we do together with our partners to develop fisheries, including reducing the effects of pollution, improving habitat and removing barriers to fish migration.”



Fisheries officer Paul Frear releases dace into the River Wear.

Improved water quality

Many of our industrialised rivers have improved dramatically in water quality in the last 30 years and targeted and appropriate restocking has helped the restoration of natural fish stocks and viable fisheries.

Angling is a great way for everyone to keep healthy and enjoy the natural environment. All rod licence income is used to find work to protect and improve fish stocks and fisheries.

Anyone who wants to go fishing needs to buy a rod licence. A full annual licence costs £30 (short term and some concessionary licences are also available) and are available [online](#)

[Fish stocks boost for north east rivers](#)