

MP Briefing

The Environment Bill: the vital need for a spatial approach and statutory Nature Recovery Network Maps



A healthy natural environment is vital for our health, wellbeing and prosperity. For more than seven decades, successive domestic and EU laws have aimed to sustain a healthy, wildlife-rich natural world. There is strong, persistent and widespread public support for this, especially among the young. Despite this, the 2016 State of Nature report showed that 56% of species had declined across the UK between 1970 and 2013.

The Lawton Review 2010 concluded that even with existing EU and domestic nature protection laws much greater action was needed for existing trends to be reversed. The Wildlife Trusts have long called for an ambitious Act for Nature's Recovery. The Government has now pledged to introduce an Environment Bill in Summer 2019 to underpin its 25 Year Environment Plan and support its pledge to *"leave the environment in a better state than we found it"*.

The Wildlife Trusts welcome the recognition that new laws are needed. As part of the Greener UK coalition we are calling for the Environment Bill to establish environmental principles in law and a strong independent watchdog. The coalition is also calling for ambitious targets and, critically, **statutory Nature Recovery Networks maps**.

What Nature Recovery Network Maps would do

- Translate national and local environmental targets into effective delivery plans.
- Drive proactive planning for nature's recovery, with maps built up from a local level.
- Support proactive planning for improving people's access to nature.
- Inform decisions on the location and nature of housing and other development.
- Target environmental land management scheme monies from government and net gain contributions from developers and integrate these.

An Environment Bill without a Nature Recovery Map would be like a power station without an electricity grid. The geographic arrangement of wild places is paramount.

What we are calling for in the Westminster Environment Bill

At sea: A new statutory objective "to achieve the recovery" of our ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas.

On land:

- A duty on the Secretary of State to prepare and maintain national strategic guidance on the creation and implementation of Local Nature Recovery Maps and Plans throughout England, including their role in monitoring and reporting progress towards achieving nature's recovery;
- A duty on relevant authorities to work within national strategic guidance to create and maintain country-wide coverage of interlinked Local Nature Recovery Network Maps that identify the location and extent of priority areas for the protection, enhancement and restoration of habitats and ecological processes, and to adopt and publish them in local development plans;
- A duty on all relevant authorities to pursue nature's recovery and to ensure that decisions about land use and management explicitly take account of these maps.

Key benefits

- **Nature's recovery** – by better protecting existing wildlife sites (on land and at sea), creating more space for wildlife (whether rural or urban) and linking wildlife habitats.
- **Improved physical and mental health** – providing more equal access to nature through positive planning will help reduce health inequalities.
- **Investment certainty** – allowing businesses to have confidence in where and how to invest for long term environmental gain.
- **Value for money** – by aligning funds (such as “net biodiversity gain” contributions from housing developers and Environment Land Management payments from the government).

The problems we're trying to solve

- **Our wildlife is in crisis** - In 2010, the Lawton Review (*Making Space for Nature*) concluded that England's wildlife sites were too small and isolated to prevent disastrous wildlife decline. It called for '*more, bigger, better and joined up*' wildlife habitats. and said this was crucial for wildlife's recovery. This conclusion is uncontested.
- **Our mental health is in crisis** - Currently those living in the most deprived areas are ten times less likely to live in the greenest areas. Lack of access to nature is a significant factor in health inequality. One in ten children have mental health problems, largely related to anxiety. Anxiety is known to be reduced through contact with nature.

The current systems aren't enough

- **Shaky planning and EU laws** – although our planning system and EU laws have reduced the rate of loss of our wildlife, both are under threat.
- **Never designed for nature's recovery** – even the original systems were never designed to secure nature's recovery, rather they were there to reduce further negative impacts.
- **Never strategically aligned** – multi-million pound built developments and substantial state investment in agri-environment schemes could win some gains for wildlife but have never been aligned and won't be without a shared plan for nature's recovery.

Why we must act now

- **To target the new Environmental Land Management schemes** spatially for the best return on investment (for wildlife, water quality & flood risk management).
- **To provide certainty to commercial investors** who need a long term statutory map to be confident their investment (including in net biodiversity gain) will aid nature's recovery.
- **To ensure a statutory duty** to produce maps that will be relevant across the whole of Government – cross cutting Environment Bills are rare and one is imminent.

Nature recovery network mapping must be a statutory requirement

- **To be credible, stable and consistent** to guide long term private sector investment and maximise value for money from state investment.
- **To ensure high quality** and consistent standards across the country.
- **To ensure all parts of Government** and related public bodies contribute positively to the development and maintenance of local Nature Recovery Networks.

The return on investment

- An England-wide set of local Nature Recovery Network Maps would cost less than £4.5m
- Realignment of existing budgets would cover this and there is plenty of expertise.
- Development decisions will be faster, public and private funds yield better returns.
- More resilient ecosystems would reduce costs of flooding and improve agricultural yields.