



Wildbelt

A briefing by The Wildlife Trusts, September 2020



“Every space in Britain must be used to help wildlife.”

Sir David Attenborough

This country is one of the most depleted in wildlife - and we're losing more of nature every day. Numbers of many species are in freefall; rich wildlife habitats are fewer, smaller and further apart than they've ever been; and many are damaged by poor management, neglect, inappropriate development, pollution, or disturbance. As we navigate a global health crisis, we are also acutely aware that people's dependence upon a healthy natural world is undeniable.

Currently, around 8% of the land area of England is designated as a national or international protected area for conservation. This is nowhere near enough. We know that existing protected sites alone will not achieve wildlife's recovery or help us in our fight against climate change. Recent scientific evidence, and emerging thinking in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, suggests that around 30% of our land and seas need to be managed for nature by 2030 if we're to reverse the declines of recent decades.

Put simply – we need more of our land being managed for nature's recovery.

A designation for recovery

To help us achieve 30% by 2030 we need to think bigger. We need a new designation of land in England. One that goes beyond protecting the nature we have, to protecting the space that nature needs for the future.

In England, there are numerous landscape designations but curiously none of them exist for this explicit purpose. The Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) designation is critical for preserving those bits of land that have been identified as currently most important for wildlife. The National Park, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Greenbelt designations are all focused on protecting landscape and amenity value and do not directly consider biodiversity value – indeed, much Greenbelt is currently of low biodiversity value.

A new designation is needed to support nature's recovery. This would enable land that is currently of low biodiversity value to be designated for nature's recovery at small or large scale, and so speed the creation of the Nature Recovery Network. This new designation would be called Wildbelt.

Putting nature at the heart of planning

A Wildbelt would put nature at the heart of planning and protect land in recovery for nature from development. A successful planning system is crucial to securing the recovery of nature and creating communities with nature-rich green space on people's doorsteps. With wildlife continuing to decline across the country, it is clear the current planning system has flaws and needs updating.

However, we're concerned that, as they currently stand, the proposed reforms in the Government's recent White Paper, *Planning for the Future*, will increase the threat to nature in England and do little to create better homes and communities for wildlife and people. The proposals for three new zones do nothing for nature's recovery – both the 'Growth' and 'Renewal' zones fail to integrate nature, and it is business as usual in the 'Protected' zone.

It's imperative that planning system reforms address the ecological and climate crises by supporting nature's recovery. The Wildlife Trusts have proposed [five principles](#) to ensure the planning system helps nature and, as part of this, Wildbelt should be a bold new designation which will protect new land that is put into recovery.

Wildbelt should sit across all three zones and be protected through the National Planning Policy Framework. By reaching into every part of England, from rural areas to towns and cities, Wildbelt areas will be crucial to the Nature Recovery Network. It will secure the long-term future of land that is being managed to enable nature to recover and where investment is being made to restore or create new habitats, so that we can reach at least 30% of land in recovery by 2030.



'Opting-in' to Wildbelt

For years, The Wildlife Trusts have been working with landowners, farmers and developers, local communities and local authorities to establish new wild spaces and restore habitats. We've created some of the best areas for nature - providing millions of people with places to connect with nature, exercise and relax.

These landowners could opt into designating their land as part of the Wildbelt, and any public money spent on nature's recovery – for example through lottery funding, the new Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM), and other Defra family funds, such as the Nature for Climate Fund – should be directed into it, ultimately funding the new designation. But by protecting this land as Wildbelt, the taxpayer gets an assurance that their money is being invested for the long-term public benefit.

Wildbelt would in no way compete with existing designations, as in some circumstances it could overlay these, in the same way that AONBs, National Parks and SSSIs can overlay each other. But it would provide a new impetus for nature's recovery and rewilding in areas that are currently of low biodiversity value. It would take us beyond just protecting sites, allowing us to create more space for nature and, crucially, help to connect existing sites.

Levelling-up access to nature

The benefits of the Wildbelt would be wide reaching for people and for nature. Wildbelt would improve resilience by enhancing nature's ability to prevent flooding and improve air quality, boost the recreational and tourism economy, create new environmental jobs, and help tackle the climate emergency by sucking up carbon.

By stretching round, through and between England's towns and cities, the Wildbelt would also create more places for people to exercise and enjoy nature right on their doorstep, improving public health, particularly for the most deprived. Lack of access to nature is a significant factor in health inequalities - people living in the most deprived areas are ten times less likely to live in the greenest areas. By justly 'levelling-up' access to green spaces and creating new green infrastructure, we could help tackle preventable illnesses such as obesity and heart disease, saving millions for the NHS.

The Wildbelt is a chance for a new designation to capture the public's imagination, joining up current Government initiatives and spurring action to transform our countryside, our towns and our cities. It would help create communities where people can enjoy healthier, happier lives through on-your-doorstep access to nature and ensure we hand over our natural environment in a better state to the next generation. It would also set a world leading example as the UK looks ahead to hosting the G7 and climate conference COP26 next year.



PAUL HOBSON

No matter where you live in the UK, there is a Wildlife Trust inspiring people about the natural world. Each day we work to save, protect and stand up for the wildlife and wild places near you.

Supported by more than 850,000 members, we take action on our 2,300 nature reserves, through our work with landowners, farmers and policy makers, and by encouraging everybody to look after wildlife where they live. We hope that you will join us.

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