Conservative Party Leadership contest
A briefing by The Wildlife Trusts
“Conservation has always been at the very heart of Conservatism.”

Conservative Party general election manifesto 2019

The climate and nature crises are not going away. Despite conflict in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis, the need for bold action on climate is greater than ever. In fact, a decision not to prioritise carbon reduction and nature recovery would only increase global instability, food insecurity, and harm our future prosperity.

The 2019 Conservative Party manifesto promised to deliver “the most ambitious environmental programme of any country on earth”. This is the manifesto this government was elected on, and included essential environmental commitments which must be delivered, including:

- Reaching Net Zero by 2050 with investment in clean energy solutions and green infrastructure to reduce carbon emissions and pollution.
- Freeing farmers from the Common Agricultural Policy, which largely allocates subsidies according to the amount of land farmers’ own, and moving to a system based on ‘public money for public goods’.

The UK Government has also committed to protecting 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 and set a legally binding target to halt the decline in nature by 2030 under the Environment Act.

The Treasury-commissioned review, The Economics of Biodiversity by Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta, demonstrated that our economy depends upon the resources provided by nature – for jobs, materials, health, wellbeing and so much more. To secure the prosperity of future generations, we cannot afford to delay action on climate and nature.

Tackling the climate and nature crises together

We need the next Prime Minister to tackle the interlinked nature and climate crises together. It isn’t enough to cut greenhouse gas emissions if the method of doing so destroys our natural environment.

Climate change is driving nature’s decline, whilst the loss of wildlife and habitats leaves us ill-equipped to reduce emissions and adapt to change. Nature’s incredible ability to trap carbon safely is proven — peatlands, woodlands, saltmarsh and other habitats are vital carbon stores. But these natural carbon stores are in increasingly poor condition due to rising temperatures and at high risk of degradation from the extreme climatic conditions that are already inevitable over the next 30 years.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says decisions we take in the next ten years are crucial for avoiding total climate catastrophe. If we delay action now, extreme weather events will increase dramatically: heat will make UK cities hard to live in, rising sea levels will leave coastal areas uninhabitable, water will become scarce, and across the world people will die as a direct result of climate change.

Now is not the time to push net zero to one side. Climate action needs nature. Nature needs climate action. Without both, no government can create a secure UK.
Supporting farmers to be nature-friendly

A thriving natural world is essential for the UK’s food security. Climate change and biodiversity loss are the biggest medium to long term risk to the UK’s domestic food production, according to Defra’s 2021 UK Food Security Report. Our global food systems are reliant on healthy soils, safe and plentiful water, beneficial pollinators, and a stable climate. In England and Wales alone, soil degradation has been calculated to now cost us £1.2 billion every year.

More intensive farming will not increase food security. Instead, it will erode the health of our natural environment even further and severely limit our ability to produce food. But we can create greater food security if we invest in nature-friendly farming.

The 25 Year Environment Plan committed to moving to a system of paying farmers public money for public goods so we can do more for our environment.

The Government must move further and faster to support farmers to transition to a greener farming system. Schemes to reward farmers for restoring hedgerows, reducing pesticide use through Integrated Pest Management, and improving farmland biodiversity should be made available from next year, and the Government should reverse the decision to allocate just 1% of the initial budget to Landscape Recovery - the most ambitious and large-scale approach to restoring land and rivers in the new system.

Calls to delay these new schemes would be bad value for money, providing billions of taxpayer funding to the wealthiest farms in England, hold back the recovery of nature, and hinder the UK’s progress to Net Zero.

Nature is a levelling up issue

Investing in nature isn’t just necessary to avert disaster – it's also a tool to make lives better right now. Evidence shows that access to good-quality green space is linked to improvements in both physical and mental health, as well as lower levels of obesity.

However, access to nature is hugely unequal in the UK. Currently people who live in deprived areas are nine times less likely to have access to green spaces than those living in more affluent places, with access particularly unequal for those from minority ethnic groups. This means those who could most benefit from the wellbeing benefits of nature, cannot access them.

By increasing access to nature, particularly for those in previously left-behind areas, huge benefits can be achieved for both people and nature. In fact, recent research from the National Trust shows a £5.5bn investment in levelling up access to green space in the most nature-deprived communities in England would deliver £200 billion in NHS savings, as well as creating 40,000 jobs.
Leadership pledge for nature:
The new leader of the Conservative Party arrives at a critical moment in the global fight to halt environmental decline, with the potential for the UK to play a pivotal role.

With the right leadership, the UK can show how environmental improvement can go hand-in-hand with a resilient economy, affordable, healthy food, and secure clean energy for everyone.

We’re asking all candidates for Conservative Party leader to commit to:

- **A net zero, nature-positive economy by 2050**, enhancing natural climate solutions to make land use and agriculture ‘net negative’ in greenhouse gas emission this decade.

- **Stop the decline of nature in England by 2030**, protecting at least 30% of land and sea for nature, and accelerating the transition to nature-friendly farming: public money for public goods, a bigger overall budget, and high environmental and animal welfare standards.

- **End environmental inequality**, with equitable access for everyone to a healthy natural environment by 2030 as a core levelling up mission: clean air, thriving ecosystems, access to greenspaces and unpolluted rivers.