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**The Natural  
Environment  
Policy Paper 147**



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# **1 Introduction**

1.1 Successive governments have failed to halt the decline of nature nationally, failed to play their full part in stopping the destruction of nature around the world, and failed to guarantee people a healthy natural environment at the local level. These failures have consequences for people, economy and wildlife. Continue down this road, and ecological decline will accelerate at an unacceptable cost.

1.2 Internationally, the ecosystems that sustain essential services like food provision and climate regulation are being pushed beyond their limits, including by UK consumption. For example, UK dependence on products that contribute to global deforestation, particularly in the tropics, is driving the destruction of one of Earth's most precious places.

1.3 Nationally, evidence of the decline of the natural environment is set out in the State of Nature Reports. They show that the UK is one of the most nature-deprived countries in the world. This also has consequences for our economy. Soils that sustain our agriculture are degraded; the seas that maintain our fisheries have been plundered; our natural defences against flooding are failing.

1.4 For individuals, the consequences of a degraded environment are a matter of serious social inequality. Tens of thousands of people die premature deaths each year because of pollution, and millions of people are isolated from nature, with major consequences for their mental and physical health.

1.5 Turning these problems around is among the greatest political challenges we face, but one with great rewards. Change is possible, if we act decisively. In this policy paper, we set out our objectives for turning round each of these failings, and the policies needed to succeed. The prize

is a splendid one. We can create vibrant local surroundings that support community and health. We can rebuild natural services that can defend us against flooding and support our economy. We can safeguard our rivers, woodlands, wildlife and ecosystems forever.

1.6 This ecological challenge is inseparable from the climate change challenge. It will be impossible to stabilise global temperatures at 1.5°C above pre-industrial temperatures without large-scale investment in halting land-use emissions and restoring entire ecosystems. It will be impossible to adapt to a changing climate unless ecosystems are healthy and resilient. It will be impossible to stop nature's decline without stopping climate change.

1.7 We know that many of the choices needed to help restore the natural environment will involve costs for the taxpayer and for particular industries. Some sectors—such as agriculture, water and development—will need to play a particularly large part and we simply cannot succeed without their support. However, it is clear that the costs of inaction will very soon outweigh the costs of creating a more sustainable economy. It is also clear that green investment can create jobs and improve productivity, including in the most neglected parts of our country and economy.

1.8 The Liberal Democrats have always been champions of environmental improvement. From Liberal MP James Bryce fighting for Rights to Roam in Scotland in the 1890s through to Liberal Democrat run St Albans City and District Council delivering the highest recycling rates in the country in 2021, we have always been environmental leaders. We know that real environmentalism requires local action, national ambition and international cooperation. We know that progress must always be rooted in respect for our planet.

1.9 Today, we are delighted and inspired by the millions of people who take action every day to help protect and improve our natural world. The growth of plastic-free shops, walking and cycling clubs, repair and recycling cafes, regenerative farming and grow-your-own, rewilding and reintroductions have all made a difference. The UK's amateur ecologists and our wonderful wildlife charities are dedicated, professional and impressive.

1.10 But they cannot turn things around by themselves. For too long, the odds have been stacked against us in making genuinely sustainable choices, with a system that takes more from our Earth than it has to give. It is Government's job to rebalance the equation so that our whole economy works in a way that helps enrich our environment. We are determined to make that change.

1.11 Our overarching goals are to:

- **halt and begin to reverse the decline of nature nationally by 2030 at the latest and then "double nature" by 2050:** doubling wildlife-rich habitat, places protected for nature, and restoring wildlife populations.
- **guarantee everyone the right to a healthy natural environment:** clean water, clean air and access to thriving natural places.
- **reduce our "global footprint" on planet Earth by creating a nature-positive economy:** cutting down on our throwaway society by reducing raw material use and waste.

1.12 In this policy paper, we set out our plan to deliver these ambitious goals.

## **2 Our overarching goals**

### **2.1 Introduction**

2.1.1 The natural environment is extraordinary, resilient and adaptable, but it is being pressed to breaking point by pollution and unsustainable consumption.

- The UK has lost nearly half of its biodiversity since the Industrial Revolution and is ranked in the bottom 10% in the world and the worst among G7 nations for biodiversity;
- The Government has missed its 2020 target for 50% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest to be in favourable condition with just 38% in favourable condition in England, a figure that has barely improved in the last decade;
- The Government has missed its 2020 target for UK seas to meet Good Environmental Status, failing on 11 out of 15 indicators of marine health;
- The Government is set to miss its target for 75% of rivers and streams to be in good condition by 2027, with just 14% of surface waters in good ecological condition in England and 0% in good overall condition.

2.1.2 Typically, environmental challenges are dealt with in isolation from one another and in isolation from economic and social policy. This is misguided because our environment is a complex, interdependent system and it is the foundation of our economic and social prosperity.

2.1.3 With this interdependence in mind, a comprehensive environmental policy should include goals that span a range of key features

of the natural environment (including biodiversity, fresh water and the marine environment, and air quality), at the individual, national and international level.

2.1.4 We want to set overarching goals that are ambitious and based on sound science. The Government is in the process of setting new national targets for nature under the Environment Act 2021 framework, but looks set to leave major gaps and flawed ambition.

2.1.5 Our targets are to:

- stop the decline of nature nationally by 2030 and double nature by 2050
- guarantee everyone equitable and fair access to a healthy natural environment.
- reduce the UK's "global footprint" on nature.

## **2.2 Context**

2.2.1 At the moment, there are huge and unfair disparities in access to a healthy environment. This is a major social determinant of health and prosperity. In other words, because of environmental factors over which people have very little control, some people's life chances are seriously harmed and they will live shorter, unhealthier lives. This is fundamentally unfair.

2.2.2 The problem is particularly acute for BAME communities and for poorer socio-economic groups. You are much more likely to live in a nature-rich area if you are white and wealthy. However, nature-deprivation is increasingly a problem for everyone, from every background, and merits great attention.

2.2.3 Tackling nature-deprivation would bring many direct benefits for public health. There are proven mental and physical health benefits of living in a greener area, with cleaner air. Air pollution alone is the cause of over 40,000 premature deaths each year in the UK, disproportionately harming poorer and marginalised communities. Lack of access to natural greenspace contributes to a swathe of mental health concerns, as well as exacerbating problems like obesity, which are affecting millions of people. If everyone had access to a healthy environment, billions of pounds could be saved for the NHS, taking pressure off the system.

2.2.4 Instead, everyone should enjoy a right to a healthy environment. The UN Human Rights Council has now formally recognised that having a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a human right. However, the Conservatives have chosen not to set a statutory target for World Health Organisation limits on particulate air pollution; it has presided over widespread water pollution; and it has left millions of people without access to nature.

2.2.5 We would introduce a new Environmental Rights Act to root out environmental inequality and create a fairer society for everyone. It would create an enforceable human right to a healthy environment to hold public bodies and polluters to account. It would go beyond setting targets for environmental improvement, giving every individual the right to expect decent environmental standards at home and at work.

2.2.6 Alongside the individual right to a healthy environment, we would establish a new Open Environment Standard, expanding everyone's right to access and roam in areas like green belt, rivers and woodlands.

2.2.7 Individuals' environmental rights go beyond the expectation of a healthy environment. We must also guarantee access to environmental justice where things go wrong. This includes the right to environmental

information, participation in environmental decision-making and the ability to question unlawful decisions in court: the right to know, the right to engage and the right to challenge. The Conservatives have been moving in the wrong direction on this agenda, taking away support for legal costs and making it more difficult to pursue environmental justice through judicial review. The Environmental Rights Act would ensure affordable access to environmental justice and fair outcomes for all.

2.2.8 Individuals should also be able to expect that the environmental promises businesses make are reliable. Greenness is becoming big business, but greenwash is becoming a big problem. People are less likely to make environmental choices if they do not have confidence in the environmental integrity of products on the market. This also deters more genuine environmental businesses, who are forced to compete in an unfair market. Therefore, as part of the Environmental Rights Act, we will establish a new environmental Duty of Care for business, and a new Office for Environmental Integrity with the power to prevent greenwashing through effective rules on environmental protection and carbon use.

## **2.3 Doubling nature nationally**

2.3.1 Our national target will be to “double nature” by 2050, including habitats, species and protected sites. The evidence we heard suggested that doubling an index of species abundance by 2050 (against the latest baseline) would be difficult but possible. We also heard that an effective network of protected sites should double the current area protected as SSSI. And we want to double the area of important habitats for nature outside the protected site network. These are our three “doubling nature” plans.

2.3.2 Liberal Democrats are already delivering action locally, with Lib Dem-run South Cambridgeshire launching a doubling nature strategy which

will bolster rich wildlife habitats, tree cover and accessible green spaces, as well as improving air quality and water management.

2.3.3 First and foremost, we must protect the remaining fragments of natural and semi-natural habitats around the country. At the moment, some of these are protected as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) or as European Protected Sites. SSSIs have been in existence for almost a century now, but the network has never been completed. Together with the National Site Network of areas protected under the Habitats Regulations, these sites protect our most important places for nature.

2.3.4 Instead of improving our most important nature sites, the Government is proposing to reduce their protection by repealing our most effective legal protection for nature, the Habitats Regulations. Liberal Democrats recognise that protecting and investing in precious places for nature is fundamental to the future of our society. There is good science to show that nature's recovery requires the protected area network to double from 8% of the land to at least 16%. We will put in place an expedited process to double the area of land protected at this highest level.

2.3.5 Beyond these core protected sites, we must create more places for nature. We will aim to double the area of the most important wildlife habitats—priority habitats—across England. These include woodlands, but also other important habitats like meadows, wetlands and coastal habitats. Most of this land will be held by private landowners, so we will achieve this goal with targeted incentives for long-term habitat improvement, but we will also consider increasing the public estate if necessary to secure nature's recovery and a legacy for future generations.

2.3.6 Alongside targeted action for wildlife and particular species, better protection and management of habitats should be the key to improving the fate of our wildlife. The UK's wildlife has been in steady long-term decline,

which has recently been accelerating. Currently, the abundance of wildlife is about half of 1970 levels. We must halt and reverse that decline. The Conservatives' ambition is only to maintain existing levels of biodiversity for the next twenty years. We commit, instead, to doubling the abundance of species by 2050 compared with the most baseline at the beginning of the Parliament. This will depend on targeted measures for saving species on the brink (and, where appropriate, reintroducing others) as well as measures to encourage wider biodiversity.

2.3.7 We would set these targets in law, as a genuine net zero for nature, complementing our net zero for climate. These twin targets will work together toward overall environmental improvement.

## **2.4 Treading lightly in the world**

2.4.1 There is little point in acting for nature nationally if the choices we make simply "offshore" environmental damage, exporting the effects of our consumption to other countries. This is unfair and, ultimately, self-defeating since the whole world is ecologically interconnected.

2.4.2 It is difficult to measure the UK's entire ecological footprint precisely, but it is possible to measure aspects of it with confidence. Too many product choices still entail unseen environmental harm. Too many payloads of environmental waste still go astray. According to WWF, the UK must reduce its environmental footprint by three-quarters by 2030 to help the world stay within planetary limits.

2.4.3 Our third target will be to reduce our footprint on the global environment. We will embed circular economy principles to reward truly sustainable business models that reduce use of raw materials and minimise pollution at home and abroad. The Liberal Democrat approach is to work together with other countries to achieve our common goals. We

will improve our methodologies for tracking offshore harm, including taking a firmer grip in identifying and punishing illegal activities. We will introduce a general duty of care for the environment and human rights – requiring companies, financial institutions and public sector agencies to exercise due diligence in avoiding specified activities such as human rights abuses, or specified products such as commodities produced with deforestation, in their operations and supply chains, and to report on their actions. We will also mandate disclosure of impacts on nature in appropriate financial and business sectors so that consumers and shareholders can play an active and informed role in ensuring that the UK's impact on the world is environmentally positive.

2.4.4 Part of our global efforts will include upholding the highest environmental standards in our trade deals, as well as reconnecting with the European Union across a range of programmes, including chemicals regulation, emissions reduction, food and product standards, which would be facilitated by re-joining the European Economic Area. We will aim to be champions of ambition, accountability and responsibility in agreeing and implementing key multilateral environmental agreements, such as targets and action under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Conservatives have short-sightedly and unfairly turned their back on our partners abroad and producers at home; we will reverse this and ensure Britain's global footprint is a positive one.

## **3 Managing the land for nature**

### **3.1 Introduction**

3.1.1 English farming includes some of the most dedicated and talented land managers in the world, growing good food in a way that works with nature. From traditional, mixed family small-holdings which may have been in a family for generations, to innovative new precision-farming enterprises, our farmers are vital stewards of the land.

3.1.2 Right now, though, farming is facing huge challenges, which the Government has caused or failed to tackle. Some have been caused by short-term problems, like worker shortages exacerbated by Brexit. Some have been caused by structural issues, like the market squeeze at the farm gate as supermarkets vie for dominance. The most fundamental are environmental, as the fertility of our soils wanes and pollinator numbers decline. On top of this, we have no time to lose in shifting towards more sustainable forms of farming, as nature's recovery and climate stability can only be achieved with the support of farmers.

3.1.3 We will put in place a more ambitious programme to support the transition to greener land management to ensure that English farming continues to thrive for generations to come at the same time as supporting nature's recovery. The answer to the current crisis is not to look back to old subsidy systems, but to move forward faster to an effective system that supports and rewards truly sustainable farming. We must work hard and quickly to help our agriculture sector to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, stop diffuse pollution from chemical inputs, and promote nature's recovery alongside the production of healthy food.

3.1.4 That means helping strengthen the sector against unethical and unfair competitive practices, guarding against cheap food grown with

poorer environmental standards from abroad, bringing a new generation into farming, and helping to overcome worker shortages. For tenants and landowners alike, we want English farming to be a career of choice, attracting people who will be proud to work in traditional and innovative ways to grow food sustainably.

3.1.5 We know that it will not be possible to restore our natural environment or achieve net zero without hard-working, forward-looking farmers who are willing to create a stronger, greener, more sustainable farming and land use sector. There is simply no way to ensure that wildlife, nature and climate are restored without the energy and engagement of those who manage so much of our land.

## **3.2 Public money for public goods**

3.2.1 We want to reward farmers well for investing in nature and for managing the land in a way that produces healthy food and supports our natural world. The Conservatives promised a public money for public goods system to reward environmental farming, but it has bungled delivery and faltered in reform, leaving a system that neither supports farmers, nor delivers the scale of environmental improvement needed.

3.2.2 The Conservatives' delays in delivery and poor planning have left farmers struggling with uncertainty, while they have been pursuing international trade deals that could undermine domestic production standards. The first steps toward reform have been inchoate and insufficient. There has been a reduction in the uptake of agri-environment schemes in recent years, not because of a lower appetite among farmers to do good environmental work, but because of weaknesses and uncertainty in policy.

3.2.3 Farmers and growers continue to face severe disruption as a result of Brexit and shambolic implementation of the Conservatives' farming reform proposals. A major worker shortage is disrupting supply chains; rising inflation and increased costs to farms are affecting tight margins; and disrupted trade flows and fierce retail price wars are threatening to push many farms out of business.

3.2.4 This disruption is exacerbating a lack of confidence to invest in environmental farming; farmers may be forced toward short-term intensification and cost-saving measures by uncertainty about future expectations. This kind of upheaval and uncertainty threatens to exacerbate existing difficulties in the agriculture sector and the rural economy, where mental health problems and suicide rates are already running high.

3.2.5 Already, British farmers have some of the highest standards of environmental production and animal welfare in the world, but practices need to evolve further to work in harmony with nature to create a regenerative and sustainable farming system. To do so, there is no doubt that a major transition will be required in the way we farm and manage our land, moving toward a system that fairly pays for public goods (such as environmental restoration) alongside sustainable food production.

3.2.6 There is a world of difference in environmental terms between cattle grazed extensively in a low-input system, versus an animal raised in an intensive feedlot. There is a vast distinction between crops grown to organic or conservation-grade standards in a regenerative farming system and food that has been squeezed out of a degraded ecosystem on the basis of ever more pesticide and fertiliser applications. Yet these environmental differences are rarely visible to the consumer and they are rarely reflected in the income of farmers.

3.2.7 We will give farmers certainty about long-term funding for public goods payments. The Conservatives have only guaranteed investment to the end of this parliament. We will set out a long-term framework for future farming payments. We will publish ten year investment plans, at least five years in advance, setting out how much money will be paid to farmers and land managers for public goods. The overall budget will be based on a scientific assessment of the investment needed to maintain and enhance the environmental condition of our farmed environment and meet climate targets and ensure farmers are given a fair deal.

3.2.8 Modelling by the RSPB, the National Trust and The Wildlife Trusts show we will need £2.8bn in public funding to establish effective environmental land management schemes across the UK, including costs for incentives and advice. So Liberal Democrats would ensure that budgets to support greener farming and sustainable methods of food production are not just maintained beyond this Parliament, but increased to support nature and our green farmers.

### **3.3 Private money for public goods**

3.3.1 At the moment, private markets for environmental services provided by farmers are in their infancy. They can be tricky to navigate and, without proper oversight, they can lead to greenwashing by businesses, or encourage land use changes that do more environmental harm than good. Some of the so-called offsets that appear on the market are fig leaves for on-going environmental damage. But other investments represent real delivery of environmental improvement. It is vital that the public, providers and purchasers of these services can all distinguish reliably between them.

3.3.2 Private markets are now growing for nutrient reductions, for carbon reductions, for biodiversity improvements, for flood risk reduction and more. We support much greater private investment in farming, but

managed in a responsible way that gives certainty to farmers and ensures environmental integrity.

3.3.3 We will establish a new Environmental Markets Authority (as part of the Office for Environmental Integrity), tasked with oversight of standards and guidance for environmental markets. Its work will rely on accuracy and transparency of data, helping to recognise and reward the good work farmers do, and enable different income streams to be aggregated and recorded properly. It will also ensure that unscrupulous polluters aren't able to 'greenwash' their emissions through dodgy offsets.

### **3.4 Improvements across the landscape**

3.4.1 The essential foundation for public and private markets for environmental goods is a clear set of expectations that must be met across every farm, upheld in a transparent and fair way. We will set a new Sustainable Land Standard, embedding regenerative and agroecological agricultural practices and high expectations for the environment and animal welfare, which will apply to domestic production and imports, to ensure fairness and prevent undercutting of our farmers. The Conservatives have promised to support high-standards farming, but have not set out future expectations, or protected farmers in law against lower standard imports.

3.4.2 Our new Sustainable Land Standard will set out a new regulatory baseline for sustainable farming, forestry, moorland and other land uses. While allowing flexibility based on local conditions and environmental farm advice, it will set clear expectations for farming businesses. It will include investment in firm but fair enforcement to ensure that all domestic growers meet good standards. We will require all imports to be produced to equivalent standards.

3.4.3 The role of advice and information is essential in helping farmers do the right thing across their land in a way that also benefits business wherever possible. Precision ecology and precision farming can be improved by clear mapping of opportunity; the plan to map every field in Northern Ireland for opportunities to improve soil and water quality is an excellent example of what can be done. Using modern mapping and monitoring approaches can help identify risks and reward improvements. In combination with catchment sensitive farming information and other advice, it can deliver major advances in environmental improvement. We will roll out mapping, monitoring and advice for every farm to provide a real world baseline of environmental conditions and the best actions for improvement.

3.4.4 We will make sure that farmers who go above and beyond on their whole farm are fairly rewarded, including new agroecological and regenerative farming standards. We will encourage whole-farm approaches, which have been struggling to compete fairly. For example, the amount of land in organic production has decreased by 56% since 2002, while the area of land treated with pesticides and the average number of treatments have increased, despite total agricultural land area decreasing. We will aim to match or improve on the EU's forthcoming target of a 50% reduction in pesticide use.

### **3.5 Fair competition**

3.5.1 To support a viable sector, we need to ensure a fair marketplace. There are three main aspects that need to be fixed. Firstly, we need to ensure a fair deal for farmers with major buyers who dominate the market. Second, we need to ensure fair competition between farmers and that means ensuring that everyone follows the rules. Third, we need to make sure that domestic production is not undercut by unfairly priced imports with lower environmental and welfare standards.

3.5.2 For too long, farm prices have been squeezed by supermarket price wars. Farmers' share of the money spent on food is just 8%, compared to 26% for manufacturers. Working close to the margin can reduce farmers' ability to invest in environmental improvement. There are also import market failures that prevent shorter, more local supply chains from operating effectively. Stimulating local markets for food will help create a fairer market for farmers, while cutting back on excessive food transportation, reducing food waste, and reducing people's reliance on car travel to do their weekly shop. We will roll out Local Food Partnerships across every Local Authority, with a dedicated Local Green Food Fund to support healthy, environmentally positive choices.

3.5.3 We also need to ensure that there is an effective system in place to ensure that all farmers stick to the rules. We recognise that in the past, the system of farming rules has sometimes been both pedantic and impenetrable, combining rules that are hard to understand with an overly punitive approach to infractions that make no real difference. On the other hand, the system for investigating and dealing with real harm has been far too lax or allowed real environmental harm to persist. For example, a 2019 study of the River Axe found 95% of the 86 dairy farms visited by the Environment Agency were non-compliant with agricultural regulations. We will invest in both advice and enforcement functions to ensure that farmers are supported in obeying the rules, but that reckless or persistent rule-breaking is not tolerated.

3.5.4 Ultimately, however, creating a fairer market in England would be in vain if farmers are simply undercut by products from abroad that are not required to meet the same environmental and animal welfare standards. Global food markets are essential, part of UK food security, and can often be a greener way to grow than domestic production for some foods—but only if high standards can be guaranteed. According to WWF and RSPB, the

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UK's overseas land footprint has increased by 15% compared to their 2011-15, as we continue to import more food grown in an unsustainable manner. We would work with governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to coordinate approaches to agri-food goods that defend sustainability, transparency and responsibility. We will ensure that imported goods are held to the same standards as domestic production.

## **4 Managing our seas for nature**

4.1 The seas around the UK are tremendously important habitats for wildlife, stores of carbon, and a sustainable economic resource for communities around the country. Our coastlines, coastal communities and seas are an integral part of our national identity. Unfortunately, they have not been well managed and the marine environment has been steadily degraded for decades. The seas around the UK fail 11 out of 15 indicators of good environmental condition.

### **4.1 Planning our seas**

4.1.1 Our seas must be managed better to make space for nature, renewable energy and sustainable fisheries, both in domestic waters and in the UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies.

4.1.2 At the moment, marine spatial planning is haphazard. The development of offshore wind has huge potential to contribute to the decarbonisation of the economy, but is currently being deployed in an uncoordinated fashion, harming the marine environment. In particular, poorly planned grid connections are causing destruction of sensitive marine habitats, and badly sited developments are threatening seabirds and marine wildlife.

4.1.3 We will reform marine spatial planning to deliver a new, integrated approach focused on sustainability. The development of offshore wind has huge potential, but is currently being deployed in a chaotic fashion, harming the marine environment and an unfair distribution of profits. We will put in place a new strategic marine plan to ensure the UK's lead on offshore renewables increases, while allocating space for nature to recover. Doing so will help us to achieve rapid decarbonisation of the energy sector in a way that is compatible with ecological restoration.

## **4.2 Sustainable fisheries**

4.2.1 Many coastal communities are suffering from significant economic deprivation and health inequality, with high levels of mental ill-health and lower life expectancy than other areas. The retreat of traditional industries has not been matched by investment in new green and sustainable jobs. We will reform and increase the current haphazard system of support and give our coastal communities a fair deal.

4.2.2 In the wake of Brexit, the Conservatives failed to strike annual fisheries agreements with Norway, the Faroes and Greenland, and the fisheries agreement with the EU for 2021 was delayed and accompanied by export difficulties, leaving the fishing industry in further turmoil.

4.2.3 The Conservatives resisted proposals for a legal obligation to set fishing catch limits within scientifically recommended sustainable levels. It has also failed to roll-out Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) as a means to ensure that all fishing activity is fully documented.

4.2.4 60% of UK fish stocks are overfished and many non-target sea creatures (such as dolphins) are accidentally killed in fishing operations each year as 'bycatch'. Fishing quotas are locked in an unfair historical distribution (both between jurisdictions and between different companies), with no regard for the sustainability of fishing operations.

4.2.5 The same picture of poor monitoring and enforcement affecting nature is apparent with regard to the discard ban. This is a ban on discarding unwanted catch at sea, which can have major environmental consequences. New rules introduced following EU legislation have not been properly enforced. According to the State of Nature Report, *"serious concerns exist that the ban is not being implemented and enforced properly and that this could result in overfishing, given levels of unaccounted mortality"*.

4.2.6 We will reform fishing rights to favour the most sustainable fisheries. Fishing quotas are currently allocated on the basis of historical rights, unfairly favouring a few large companies at the expense of small and more sustainable fishers. We will reform the fishing quota allocation system to reward the most sustainable fleet. We will require offshore wind licensing to pay a greater share of revenues to support smaller, more sustainable fleets.

### **4.3 Marine protected areas**

4.3.1 The Conservatives' marine protected areas are extensive but weak. They may be designated for protection, but there are few measures in place to reduce harm to marine ecology from human activities or to promote recovery. Destructive bottom trawling is still taking place in 98% of the UK's offshore Marine Protected Areas and there was a 10% increase in total trawling hours in UK benthic MPAs in 2020. The promise of Highly Protected Marine Areas has not been followed through with action.

4.3.2 We will create a real network of marine protected areas. In our 2019 manifesto, the Liberal Democrats commit establish a 'blue belt' of marine protected areas covering at least 50 per cent of UK waters by 2030, in partnership with UK overseas territories. We will put in place effective management rules, designed to support the ecology of each protected area, including a ban on bottom trawling in marine protected areas for domestic and foreign fleets. At least 30% of our seas will be fully or highly protected by 2030.

### **4.4 Managing our lakes, rivers and streams for nature**

4.4.1 Our rivers, lakes, canals and streams ought to be a latticework of life across the country, connecting habitats, bringing nature into the heart of our cities, and providing wonderful places for people to enjoy.

4.4.2 Unfortunately, our freshwater environment is in a state of disrepair, not suitable for people or wildlife to enjoy. Just 14% of rivers in England are in good ecological condition and 0% are in good overall condition. 82% of freshwater biodiversity has been lost in a single lifetime.

4.4.3 The causes of pollution come from three main sources that we know about: sewage pollution, agricultural pollution, and run-off from urban areas and hard infrastructure. But our infrastructure for monitoring and managing river pollution is not fit for purpose. Whole stretches of rivers are rarely checked, or there are months between samples for key pollutants—by the time a sample is taken a pollution incident can be long gone. To tackle the problem, we need to use modern monitoring approaches to give real time data about our rivers, helping identify and solve the many contributors to the chemical and biological cocktail that is affecting our water.

## **4.5 End sewage pollution**

4.5.1 Many of our sewers combine rainwater from surface drains as well as foul water from homes and industry. Combined sewers should only overflow when there is heavy rainfall and the system is overwhelmed, but in 2020, 45% of CSOs spilled more than twenty times. This pollution causes algal blooms and lower oxygen levels, killing freshwater wildlife.

4.5.2 The effects of raw sewage spills from storm overflows are devastating for nature. There were 403,171 overflows recorded in 2020. Overflows are meant to operate only during heavy rainfall events, but now it appears that some overflows have been in regular operation, releasing contaminants into the water in all weather. The water sector contributed to more than half of rivers failing to achieve good status, despite water companies making £2.2 billion in profits in 2020. We need action now - the Conservative approach is to add £5 a month to everyone's bills until 2090 to

solve the problem. Under the latest proposals, 86% of overflows could still be spilling unimproved by 2030. This is too little, too slowly.

4.5.3 Biodiversity has been largely overlooked in economic decision making relating to the water environment, leading to decades of under-investment. The water regulator, Ofwat, has focused on keeping bills low and maintaining supply at the expense of investment in a reliable sewerage system. Regulators have failed to take sufficient enforcement action when pollution has occurred, or even to keep reliable track of the problem.

4.5.4 In England, there has been long-term failure to fix chronic problems in the water system, including leakage and storm overflows. This failure can be traced back to a lack of enforcement action by Government agencies and a lack of investment in upgrading infrastructure and incorporating natural solutions. The Government is responsible for the strategic direction and funding of bodies like the Environment Agency and Ofwat and has progressively cut back on essential funding and failed to direct them toward the changes required.

4.5.5 We will set stringent targets and deadlines for water companies to end sewage discharges in time to halt the decline of biodiversity by 2030, ensuring that no sewage overflows are discharging in sensitive areas by that time. We will introduce a Sewage Tax on water companies profits to fund the cleanup of waterways. Ofwat's powers will be strengthened to hold the companies accountable for discharging raw sewage and include a ban on bonuses for water companies that fail to clean up our rivers.

4.5.6 We will require every water and sewerage company to immediately publish details of its discharge permits and real time data on spill duration, volume and water quality. We will set a new scale of daily fines for sewage overflow incidents, properly enforce the farming rules for water, and

require new developments to meet strict water management standards before they can link to the sewer system.

4.5.7 We will also transform water companies into public benefit companies, so that economic and environmental policy objectives must be considered explicitly in the running of the companies and add local environmental groups onto water companies' boards. More details about this can be found in policy paper 140 Giving Consumers a Fairer Deal.

#### **4.6 Chemical Cocktails: A Precautionary Approach**

4.6.1 It is becoming apparent across the environment as a whole - terrestrial, freshwater, and marine - that the cumulative effects of "chemical cocktails" are a growing risk to nature and human health. There is also an unknown pollution burden from sources like microplastics and a range of chemicals from everyday industrial use that we know little about and do not monitor properly.

4.6.2 There is growing evidence that a range of narcotics, pesticides, antibiotics, and persistent "forever chemicals" are accumulating in our waters, with unknown effects on wildlife and human health.

4.6.3 The Government has fallen behind the EU in regulating the most persistent and potential hazardous chemicals, such as PFAS, partly because it no longer has access to important shared information on chemicals, and partly because of a more deregulatory ideology. This is potentially storing up serious pollution problems for the future. Senior Ministers have expressed scorn for the precautionary principle - a fundamental tenet of environmental law, which ensures that regulators can take action to prevent environmental harm, even where some uncertainties remain.

4.6.4 We will respect the precautionary principle as we aim to reduce chemical pollution across the board. We will treat PFAS chemicals as a group, and dynamically align with the EU's rules at a minimum and rejoin the EU REACH programme and the European Chemical Agency. We will task the Environment Agency to implement a thorough monitoring and prevention programme for emerging chemical pollutants. We will ensure that chemicals licensing, handling and sale decisions take a precautionary approach to cumulative, cocktail effects.

## **4.7 Nutrient budgets**

4.7.1 In many areas, particularly the south and west of England, there is a serious problem of nutrient pollution. Excessive Nitrogen and Phosphorus in the water can starve the water of oxygen, destroying wildlife. This excess often comes from a combination of run-off from farmers' fields, nitrate leaching and sewage pollution. In particular, the massive million-bird chicken factories along rivers like the Wye are a source of huge volumes of nutrient pollution.

4.7.2 In some areas, this kind of system is already operational. For example, there has been a Nutrient Management Plan for the River Wye Special Area of Conservation since 2014 and, since a 2018 European Court of Justice ruling, this has limited additional development in the catchment unless it can be shown to be compatible with healthy waters.

4.7.3 We will introduce a system of nutrient budgeting in English catchments. This will apply a brake on decisions (like additional chicken sheds) that would push a catchment over its natural limits, while allowing sustainable application of nutrients in other areas where it would continue to benefit the land. In areas where a legacy of excess nutrients has already built up in the soils, a flow of pollution is likely to continue over time, so in these areas, projects will need to be able to demonstrate "nutrient

negativity” before they proceed—they must contribute to solving the problem.

## **4.8 Let rivers run**

4.8.1 Pollution problems are exacerbated by rivers running dry. Across England and Wales, almost 3 billion litres of water leaks away every day. At the same time, over-abstraction continues in many waterways, including the extremely sensitive and globally important English chalk streams.

4.8.2 We will end over-abstraction, starting with protection for chalk streams, which should be recognised as globally-significant habitats. We will reform existing rights to abstraction and introduce a real time system that ensures that environmental flow rates are maintained. There will be a strict ban on abstraction from chalk streams and the aquifers that feed them, except at the highest environmental flow rates.

4.8.3 Some areas of the country are extremely water-stressed, with potentially serious problems for people as well as wildlife. To date, there has been very little coordination between water companies at regional or national level to ensure that water supplies are balanced and sustainable across the country. Although the industry has made some attempts to coordinate water resource planning, the process and results have been variable around the country. This may lead to some infrastructure and planning decisions that are driven more by corporate interests than local concerns or long-term resilience. We will set the process on a statutory footing, requiring high levels of participation, transparency and oversight to ensure that water resource planning is effective and democratic.

## **4.9 Blue corridors**

4.9.1 Pollution from sewage, slurry, fertiliser, pesticides and industry must be stopped to make English rivers and streams safe for people to

swim in and to allow wildlife to thrive. Rivers should be naturalised and reconnected with flood plains wherever possible to help play their full role in preventing damage from flooding. By investing in waterways and making them more ecologically diverse and accessible for people, rivers and streams could become “blue corridors” across the landscape that connect up ecosystems and bring nature to the heart of communities.

4.9.2 Rivers and streams have huge potential to improve the health and wellbeing of millions of people, as well as providing habitat for wildlife. At the moment, though, there is little monitoring of suitability for human health river environments compared with beaches because there is not a legal obligation for waters to be swimmable. The length of rivers accessible to people is a tiny fraction of England’s river network, and few of those places are clean enough to swim in.

4.9.3 We will set new “blue flag” standards for rivers, streams and lakes. All England’s rivers should be fit to swim in and enjoy. Our new Open Environment Standard will extend to waterways, ensuring that people have appropriate access to much greater stretches of our rivers and streams. At the same time, we will introduce a “blue corridor” programme to make our rivers and streams accessible and healthy for wildlife and people. We will require catchment management plans to include appropriate habitat corridors along major waterways, including natural regeneration of riverside woodland and meadows, and reconnection of flood plains to their rivers. We will ensure that all navigable waterways are in good condition and safe to use.

## **5 Our economy: making money work for nature**

### **5.1 Tax and Spend**

5.1.1 At a time when the costs of living are increasing and businesses are struggling, there is a risk that environmental action will be slowed or sidelined. Already, prominent Conservative voices are advocating a retreat from net zero commitments, presenting a false narrative that this would help people to pay their bills. This would be a serious mistake. Slowing environmental action would expose the UK economy to much greater costs, and leave our country dependent on an out-moded economic model that will leave homes and businesses more vulnerable to fossil fuel price shocks and to fire, flooding and other natural disasters.

5.1.2 Unfortunately, the way we structure our markets still means that the price of products often fails to reflect the true cost of products. It remains cheaper to grow, market and sell a factory-farmed product than a more environmentally responsible alternative. The truth is that the costs are unfairly simply passed on to the public in other ways: in the destruction of our ecosystem and climate. We need to shift the balance so that the environmental choice is clearly the affordable choice, for businesses and for individuals.

5.1.3 The Dasgupta Review of the economics of biodiversity recognised nature as “our most precious asset” and found that humanity has collectively mismanaged its “global portfolio”. The amount we take from nature far exceeds the Earth’s capacity. We would need 1.6 Earths to maintain humanity's current way of life.

5.1.4 Gross Domestic Product continues to be the driving objective of political economics. However, this old-fashioned view masks the fact that

economies rely ultimately on natural resources. The environmental assets that sustain society and economy are being mortgaged away to fund present consumption. Between 1992 and 2014, produced capital per person doubled, but the stock of “natural capital” per person declined by nearly 40%. We will deliver an Environment and Wellbeing Budget alongside the traditional budget, reporting on the state of nature and progress in meeting environmental goals.

5.1.5 The old economics still influences government decision-making. Economic health is measured with GDP at the forefront and Budget and Spending Review cycles pay little heed to environmental considerations. Environmental taxes as a share of GDP has remained at a broadly consistent level of between 2% and 3%. Public spending on the natural environment remains low with just £502 million of UK public sector funding allocated to biodiversity in the UK in 2019/20.

5.1.6 These macroeconomic misjudgements feed through to everyday choices for consumers. Too often, environmental choices are the more expensive choices, putting consumers in a dilemma that the ethical choice may be an unaffordable choice. We will:

5.1.7 **Focus on green taxes and green tax reliefs.** We will change the long-standing Treasury convention that taxation should not be hypothecated for particular purposes and increase the proportion of green taxes in the tax system.

5.1.8 The money raised by green taxes has risen by 19% in the ten years since 2009–10, but that is much lower than the 53% rise in taxes as a whole and far lower than inflation. Environmental taxes as a share of tax revenue fell from 8% in 2010 to just 6% in 2020.

5.1.9 We will undertake regular systematic reviews to ensure that green taxes and spending make up an increasing proportion of the overall fiscal

picture, prioritising taxes on polluters with additional benefits for environment and health. For example, we will explore further taxes on chemicals, virgin materials and plastics. Liberal Democrat commitments to use the emissions trading system and other mechanisms to accelerate decarbonisation are set out in full in Policy Paper 139a, Tackling the Climate Emergency: Proposals for Carbon Pricing.

5.1.10 At the same time, we will also increase the tax reliefs offered for greener choices and phase out subsidies for polluting industries. We will implement the UK's G7 pledge to end fossil fuel subsidies by 2025, and provide Just Transition funding for areas and communities negatively affected by the transition to net zero greenhouse gas emissions. We will also end support from UK Export Finance for fossil fuel-related activities, and press for higher environmental standards for export credit agencies throughout the OECD.

5.1.11 **Introduce a fourth fiscal rule: to ensure that tax and spending plans are sustainable.** This means that Government spending plans can result in a draw down of "natural capital", but overall must ensure that investment in nature and climate change mitigation more than compensates for any environmental damage from spending plans. The implementation of this rule would be overseen by the new cabinet-level Chief Secretary for Sustainability we would establish (see below). The Office for Budget Responsibility should be tasked with monitoring compliance, working closely with the Office for Environmental Protection.

5.1.12 **Implement a green finance plan.** This would include a long-term sovereign green bond, focused on certified "nature based solutions", as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation. It would also guarantee that UK Export Finance supports only sustainable projects. We would introduce climate-related financial disclosure and nature-related financial disclosure

for larger private sector companies and ban the new listing of fossil fuel companies on the London Stock Exchange.

5.1.13 Meanwhile, the system of regulation of markets is unfit to take proper account of business impacts on nature. Disclosure of nature-related harm in the supply chain is in its infancy compared with carbon disclosure, so the damage caused by industries is often invisible, particularly where it falls in other countries, such as global deforestation. Egregious environmental wrongdoing like the “diesel gate” defeat devices, unlicensed water pollution, and unlawful development actions still often go unnoticed and without accountability.

5.1.14 By contrast, a green economy brings with it job creation, particularly in the most economically-challenged parts of the country. Improving woodland, peatland and urban parks could create 16,050 jobs across the 20 per cent of British constituencies experiencing the most severe employment challenges and promote greater economic and social fairness. However, more positive private sector actions, such as investment in nature-based solutions to flooding, climate change and biodiversity loss, remain stubbornly small-scale because they are not underpinned by the regulation needed to drive demand and avoid corporate greenwash.

## **5.2 Beyond a Throwaway Economy**

5.2.1 Global demand for raw materials - food, electrical goods and clothes - is increasing too quickly

5.2.2 Progressive governments are waking up to the fact that we cannot go on taking more and more from our natural world. We need to create a “circular economy”, reducing our demands on the planet to sustainable levels and reducing waste. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Government has promised to halve the consumption of primary raw materials by 2030.

5.2.3 In England, the Conservatives have failed to take the measures needed to support business in becoming more efficient, and to support communities in moving beyond the throwaway culture.

5.2.4 Building on the Liberal Democrat idea of the plastic bags levy, we would ensure that the right incentives are in place to cut back on waste and overconsumption. The Conservatives have shied away from meaningful measures to charge businesses for the waste and litter they produce. We would put in place comprehensive Deposit Return Schemes and make polluters pay with Extended Producer Responsibility across all major waste streams.

5.2.5 At the same time, we would put in place standards for repairability, interoperability, sustainable construction and reusability to help communities to break free of the cycle of continually replacing items.

### **5.3 Institutions**

5.3.1 A key element of ensuring that environmental improvement is genuinely embedded across the economy is institutional change. For too long, important public bodies have been guided by purposes that fail to take long-term sustainability into account.

5.3.2 We would create a cabinet-level Chief Secretary for Sustainability in the Treasury and a new Department for Climate and Natural Resources, reversing the Conservative's disastrous downgrading of climate change at the ministerial level in 2016. This would give nature the voice it needs in government and with the public.

5.3.3 The Conservatives have put in place a "growth duty" on public bodies and a duty to maximise revenues from oil and gas exploitation. These duties belong in another world that we left behind us a long time ago, not one where we understand that planetary limits are being

exceeded. We would abolish the duty to maximise fossil fuel revenues and replace the growth duty. Instead, we will ensure that the twin purposes of nature's recovery and climate stability are written into the guiding statutory purposes of all relevant public bodies and not just siloed into one or two departments. This will begin with reform of key public bodies in the DEFRA family, including the Environment Agency, OFWAT and the Forestry Commission, Marine Management Organisation, Natural England. This should help to rebalance their priorities, so that short term financial considerations do not stack the balance against responsible environmental investment.

#### **5.4 Invasive Species - A Hidden Cost**

5.4.1 Invasive, non-native species are a major threat to nature. As well as well-known examples like the disappearance of red squirrels, new threats like fungal infection are expected to destroy 80% of ash trees in England. They can also impose huge economic costs on sectors like agriculture, forestry, transport and utilities, amounting to billions of pounds a year.

5.4.2 The Conservatives do not have an effective strategy in place to stop accidental introductions of invasive species. The Liberal Democrats would extend biosecurity requirements to all trees and potted plants entering the country, and make sure timber, soils and compost undergo protective measures to reduce the risk of stowaway species.

5.4.3 We would also support the expansion of nurseries for trees and plants in the UK to reduce reliance on horticultural imports.

## **6 Making planning work for nature**

6.1 The planning system has an integral role to play in nature's recovery. Without intelligent spatial planning, combining local preferences with national need, it will be impossible to use our scarce supply of land to provide the homes, food and natural spaces we need. Well-planned development that integrates natural habitats can be positive for nature, but the Government has failed to put in place a system that can ensure planning plays its part in nature's recovery.

### **6.1 The purposes of planning: reclaiming sustainable development**

6.1.1 At the moment, the planning system has grown lopsided, with too great a focus on development. Major infrastructure projects have avoided proper environmental assessment. House-building has become a numbers game, with the idea of "sustainable development" reflecting the minimum developers want to deliver, rather than building homes and communities for the future.

6.1.2 We will reform the planning system to make environmental improvement and quality of life explicit purposes of planning, alongside delivering the homes (and the kinds of homes) that people need. We will do this by setting a new statutory purpose for planning. This will require planning decisions to contribute to or be compatible with successful delivery of the statutory nature and climate targets.

6.1.3 These new objectives for the planning system should be translated into specific objectives for individual Local Authorities. For example, we would apply our "doubling nature" target at the Local Authority level by requiring authorities to contribute to the aim of doubling the area of

priority habitat and doubling the extent of land protected as SSSI, working together at a landscape scale.

## **6.2 Evening the odds**

6.2.1 There is often an unfair asymmetry of power in local environmental decision-making, with environmental considerations trammelled by over-mighty business interests. Local people's preferences and scientific ecological information have often been squeezed out of the decision-making process, with few Councils having access to professional ecological advice, and even fewer having the means to genuinely hold developers to account or challenge inappropriate proposals.

6.2.2 We aim to even the odds by strengthening strategic planning, by improving access to environmental information, and by creating new systems for transparency and accountability in planning. We will develop a national spatial plan, informed by a comprehensive map of important habitats.

6.2.3 We will ensure that major infrastructure projects like HS2 (which are currently exempt from Strategic Environmental Assessment) are subject to a new higher standard of environmental assessment. We will introduce new requirements for developers of major infrastructure and housing to pay to more than compensate for any environmental damage they cause.

6.2.4 If it is done well, better strategic planning can have real benefits for the environment and for development alike. For example, housing development contributes to environmental problems such as poor water quality and, where environmental issues reach dangerous thresholds, development can be affected. This is happening in Hampshire, where water quality issues in the Solent have led to a moratorium on house-building. Better strategic planning of catchments to improve biodiversity and reduce

pollutants would help to anticipate and avoid problems of this kind before they arise.

6.2.5 In other circumstances, better and more accessible data about habitats and species would enable development to avoid costly mistakes, reduce the need for legal actions, help to direct development away from more sensitive sites and facilitate the delivery of the homes we need. However, the norm remains for environmental survey data to be collected and held by individual companies, with insufficient public provision for collating accurate environmental information and making it available to Local Planning Authorities in user-friendly fashion.

6.2.6 Too often, even where the right rules are in place, local people are unable to hold developers to account for poor standards; it is simply too costly and expensive in many cases. We will create a new Environmental Planning Commissioner to improve enforcement of local environmental rules, with strict, swift and dissuasive penalties for developers that break the rules.

### **6.3 Protecting and restoring nature**

6.3.1 The UK's network of sites protected for nature also remains partial and in poor condition. The network of Sites of Special Scientific Interest is incomplete and, of those sites that have been designated, less than 40% are in favourable condition. At the same time, the laws that protect the UK's most important nature sites—derived from the EU Birds and Habitats Directives—are under review and could be tampered with for the first time in decades.

6.3.2 Recent reforms to planning are too half-hearted to make a real difference. For example:

- “biodiversity net gain”, which requires developers to more than compensate for destruction of habitat, is likely to prove ineffective. The “gain” requirement is just 10%, there is no reliable system for monitoring whether on-site biodiversity commitments are honoured, and off-site habitat creation is only required to be maintained for 30 years.
- “local nature recovery strategies” are a positive concept supported by green NGOs for environmental spatial planning. However, while there is a duty to create strategies, there is no real duty to implement them in planning and spending decisions, so there is a risk that they will prove an added burden for local authorities with no tangible environmental benefits.

6.3.3 We will improve those instruments so that they make a genuine difference for nature.

6.3.4 For net gain, we make two major changes. First, we will increase the length of time that net gain habitat must be maintained from 30 years to 120 years. This will ensure lasting benefits for nature, in line with the expected lifetime of many developments. Second, we will increase the net gain requirement for major developments (over 25 dwellings) from 10% in smaller sites on a sliding scale up to 100% in larger greenfield sites, by the end of the next parliament. This would represent a “doubling of nature” from development, without disproportionate cost. The Government’s impact assessment of net gain anticipated that the policy would cost developers less than £20m a year. Increasing from 10% to 100% gain would represent little over a doubling of the costs, because most of the cost of the policy comes from achieving no net loss. Balanced against industry profits of £7bn during the pandemic, these additional costs could easily be absorbed, but could make a major difference for the natural environment.

They will ensure that the policy is effective in steering development away from the highest nature-value sites and that real investment in nature is forthcoming.

6.3.5 For Local Nature Recovery Strategies, we will establish a proper legal link between the plans and planning and spending decisions. In particular, we will empower Local Nature Recovery Strategies to identify a new Wild Belt for nature's recovery.

## **6.5 Rewilding, Reintroductions and Restoring Natural Processes**

6.5.1 Sometimes, restoring nature requires precise planning and careful, long-term management. At other times, the right approach is to let nature take its course.

6.5.2 We want to update the way we manage landscapes so that land managers and conservationists can take an integrated view of whole ecosystems, planning out where detailed management is needed and where to be more hands off.

6.5.3 We will ensure that supporting thriving wildlife - "favourable conservation status" - is considered across catchments, landscapes and seascapes, giving flexibility to adapt with climate change and to employ the full range of conservation techniques. By investing in our conservation bodies, we will ensure that the right advice and expertise is available on the ground to manage our changing world better.

## **6.6 Making the Nature Recovery Network work**

6.6.1 The Conservatives first promised a Nature Recovery Network in 2018, but it has failed to put measures in place to make the idea real. It remains amorphous and ineffective, with no real improvements for nature

on the ground. We will bring the Nature Recovery Network to life, based on the Lawton principles of “more, bigger, better, and better connected” places for nature. These will combine sites chosen for their existing value to science and wildlife, with areas that are most important for people’s connection with nature, and with places where nature can be restored.

6.6.2 We will protect at least 30% of the land and sea for nature’s recovery. Unlike the Conservatives’ existing promise, we will ensure this is meaningful. We will conduct a comprehensive review of existing remnant fragments of important habitats like ancient woodland, peatlands and wildflower meadows and complete the programme of SSSI designations. We will reform landscape designations like National Parks and AONBs to ensure they are well managed for nature, with a clear statutory duty to manage protected areas for nature’s restoration.

6.6.3 The planning system has also proven ineffective in creating equitable access to quality natural “green and blue” spaces. More affluent communities are more likely to be in “leafy”, biodiverse places. Ethnic minority communities and poorer socio-economic groups, by contrast, are more likely to be deprived of access to a high-quality environment, with serious implications for mental and physical health and wellbeing. This is fundamentally unfair.

6.6.4 We will ensure that the planning system is nature-positive. We will create a new “Wild Belt” programme, connected by wildlife corridors. It would improve the environmental condition of the existing greenbelt. Woodland, wildflower meadows and other habitat creation near to urban centres can help everyone benefit from nature, while improving flood prevention and air quality. These will be connected with planned wildlife corridors and green transport routes.

6.6.5 We will complete our Nature Recovery Network in three parts:

- Protecting the best: we will strengthen and complete the network of SSSIs, England's finest nature sites. This means increasing the legal protection for SSSIs against development, so that they enjoy the same legal protection as European protected sites, and a programme of investment to improve their management.
- We will map out and strengthen protection for irreplaceable habitats, such as ancient trees and woodland, temperate rainforests, and ancient peatlands, to prevent their destruction.
- Wonderful landscapes: we will improve the management and funding of AONBs and National Parks for nature, with a clear duty on all public bodies to contribute to nature recovery plans in these important designated landscapes. As a core part of the Nature Recovery Network, at least 60% of AONBs and National Parks should be managed for nature's restoration.
- A Wild Belt for nature's recovery: we must also plan for new areas to be protected and improved for nature, targeting investment and better management in places where people and nature can benefit the most. We will do this with a new designation for nature's recovery, identified on the basis of science and community consultation through local nature recovery strategies. These places will connect up our finest wildlife sites and bring nature back into places where it has been lost. In these areas, there will be a planning presumption in favour of environmental land use choices, as well as added incentives for environmental land management.

## **6.7 Wonders of the World**

6.7.1 England is home to amazing wildlife, including some habitats that are of global importance.

6.7.2 Our peatlands - blanket bogs, raised bogs and fens - are ancient habitats that are among the world's richest stores of carbon, and support unique ecosystems. But the Conservatives continue to allow heather burning on sensitive peatland habitats, and have failed to stop the widespread use of peat in horticulture.

6.7.3 85% of the world's chalk streams are in England, but we continue to neglect these global treasures, permitting pollution and too much water abstraction. So precious are these streams they are sometimes called England's rainforests...

6.7.4 ... But Britain also has rainforests! Our Celtic rainforest is extremely rare and vulnerable and is part of our remaining area of ancient woodland. But these areas often remain unmapped and unprotected, with ancient woodlands still being lost to development and neglect.

6.7.5 The Liberal Democrats recognise these ancient, irreplaceable habitats for their global significance and for their incredibly rich local benefits. We would ensure we know where they are, give them the highest levels of protection from harm and invest in their restoration.

## **7 Nature and climate change**

7.1 As well as being the right thing to do for its own sake, restoring nature can provide many benefits for people: mental and physical health benefits, disaster risk reduction, food security, clean water, and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

7.2 Among these nature-based solutions, the links between climate and nature are the closest. Climate change is among the greatest threats to nature and, at the same time, it will be impossible to effectively mitigate and adapt to climate change without protecting and restoring nature.

7.3 In our 2019 Liberal Democrat Policy Paper on *Tackling the Climate Emergency*, we committed to increasing UK forest cover by planting an additional 60 million trees a year, and by restoring peatlands. But we know we must go further to maximise the potential of as many kinds of habitat as possible for climate change mitigation and adaptation, mapping out and protecting the rich carbon stores that already exist in our landscape, and investing in all kinds of carbon-rich ecosystems in a way that complements nature recovery efforts.

### **7.1 Mitigation action**

7.1.1 Around a third of the “effort” required to reach net zero in the UK will rely on the power of restoring nature to sequester and store greenhouse gases as a way to compensate for continuing pollution by the sectors where it is hardest to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions. The ecological crisis and the climate crisis are interdependent and they are two parts of the wider challenge of living within our planetary means.

7.1.2 Many important habitats, such as ancient woodland, peatland, and wetlands, are important repositories of carbon and important sanctuaries for nature. According to the RSPB, these landscapes alone contain 2

gigatons of carbon, the equivalent of four years of the UK's annual emissions.

7.1.3 There is a huge effort required to shift domestic land-use toward a net zero footing. The UK's territorial greenhouse gas emissions are reported in the annual UK Greenhouse Gas Inventory. When the 21.3 MtCO<sub>2e</sub> emissions from degraded peatland are added, land use in the UK is a net emissions source of 11.5 MtCO<sub>2e</sub>. If we do not change course, land use emissions are projected to be 14.4 MtCO<sub>2e</sub> in 2030. In other words, far from being a sector that currently draws down carbon, land use in this country continues to account for additional carbon emissions.

7.1.4 Success will depend on large-scale change in land use approaches, both in commercial settings (such as commercial forestry and agriculture) and in non-commercial settings (such as wetland creation, or seabed restoration).

7.1.5 Nor is this simply a matter of creating new habitat. There is little point creating great swathes of new woodland if established habitats are destroyed, or carbon-rich agricultural environments simply ploughed up. The Government's current approach to priority habitat creation takes a gross "hectares created" approach; this covers up overall losses. An integrated approach to nature-based solutions must encompass: protection of existing carbon stocks (such as soils and ancient woodland); management and recovery of landscapes (such as rewetting peatland); as well as creation of new carbon stores (such as native, broadleaf woodlands, or saltmarsh creation). In this modern era, it is absurd that no comprehensive maps are available of where our most precious and carbon-rich habitats can be found. We will map out the areas that are most important for nature and climate, and those that could be, and extend planning protection and investment to those areas to ensure they are drawing down carbon and providing important habitats for wildlife.

7.1.6 At some point, many natural climate solutions reach saturation when sequestration is balanced by emissions. In these circumstances, there remains an important role to play in continuing to recognise and support carbon maintenance.

7.1.7 Overall, whether they are nature-based solutions or technological options, methods for removing carbon from the atmosphere must be positive for climate and for nature alike.

## **7.2 Adaptation action**

7.2.1 Nature can also play an invaluable role in helping to prepare for the inevitable consequences of climate change. Until now, the risks to life and business posed by extreme weather, natural disasters and climate change have mainly been managed with engineered solutions, such as sea walls, levees or drainage infrastructure. However, nature-based solutions may offer an important way to compliment or replace more conventional solutions in a way that yields additional benefits for people and nature.

7.2.2 Creating and restoring habitats like saltmarshes, mudflats and seagrass meadows can help guard against coastal flooding and erosion, providing a natural break in the force of flood and storm. Habitats like woodlands and grasslands can reduce flood risk to communities and businesses. Restoring floodplains, re-naturalising rivers, and rewetting peatlands can help replenish aquifers and slow the flow of water to reduce the likelihood of drought. In cities, trees, parks, green roofs and sustainable drainage systems help to protect against surface water flooding and can provide cooling and respite from heat.

7.2.3 At the moment, however, the role of nature-based solutions in fostering resilience is often under-utilised. For example, water companies have not been permitted by Ofwat to make the most of nature-based catchment planning options because the benefits are often long-term and

diffuse. Public bodies like Ofwat, Local Authorities and the Environment Agency should be supported and required to consider nature-based solutions alongside conventional engineered options. They should account for wider benefits to biodiversity and the climate, for example in the allocation of flood risk management funding, ring-fencing an allocation for projects that work with nature.

7.2.4 We must also ensure that we help nature to adapt to changing conditions. The threat of climate change means that we need to make our landscapes adaptable to changing conditions, managing ecosystems at scale to create mosaics of habitat that are resilient. This will also mean stronger safeguards against invasive, non-native species which pose a great threat to native biodiversity.

### **7.3 High environmental standards**

7.3.1 So far, the Conservatives have been slow to realise the scale of opportunity in nature-based solutions, but also slow to realise the crucial role of Government to ensure that they are robust. The Government has been supporting voluntary markets, without adequate regulation to ensure that the products being sold have genuine environmental benefits.

7.3.2 There are three main risks to an unplanned, unregulated approach to nature-based solutions. Firstly, a focus on carbon to the exclusion of nature can lead to ecological harm. Second, “greenwashing” through poor-quality offsets can be a cloak for on-going carbon emissions. Third, nature-based solutions can be invoked as an excuse for slowing down decarbonisation. These risks are real and the Conservatives’ current approach of a laissez-faire voluntary market in carbon is exacerbating the problem. We will manage these risks responsibly at the same time as quickly expanding the deployment of nature-based solutions.

7.3.3 Not every solution to climate change is good for biodiversity, and not every action to restore biodiversity is an effective solution to climate change. Too often, these issues are considered separately and this can lead to perverse outcomes, where our solutions to one problem worsen another.

7.3.4 This separation has sometimes been apparent in policy. For example, the rush to become the “Saudi Arabia of offshore wind” has failed to take into account the effects of large infrastructure projects on the marine environment.

7.3.5 Too great a focus on carbon sequestration in tree-planting policies has sometimes led to the destruction of other valuable habitats (such as grasslands or even peatlands) in the pursuit of carbon credits. Large-scale plantations of non-native “carbon crop” woodlands can disrupt established ecosystems, draw huge amounts of water, and even release ancient carbon if they are planted on peatlands, for example. Yet policy has often failed to differentiate between a nature-positive “right tree in the right place” approach and a simple numbers game. This tokenistic approach may have been driven more by the visibility and public appetite for tree-planting than a responsible approach to nature-based solutions.

7.3.6 We will take a more science-led approach, aiming to create and restore a range of habitat types on land and at sea to maximise carbon sequestration in harmony with nature restoration. This will encompass a range of active management approaches, as well as natural recolonisation of woodland, for example.

7.3.7 There is also a clear need for strict new standards for carbon removals in domestic land use. The current Woodland Carbon Code and the Peatland Carbon Code are not strong enough to ensure that these

habitats are well managed for nature and that the credits they produce are robust.

7.3.8 Our new Office for Environmental Integrity will be tasked with setting new standards for a range of habitats, including a Blue Carbon Standard and a Soils Carbon Standard, to ensure that any carbon credits are genuine, additional and produced in a way that respects nature. Its priority will be to ensure that accredited units can only be used by companies that have a Net Zero plan approved by the Science-Based Targets Initiative.

## **7.4 The Office for Environmental Integrity**

7.4.1 Liberal Democrats know that markets can help protect nature - but only when they are properly designed and regulated, and only alongside well-functioning public authorities. We do not subscribe to the deregulatory, market-led approach so favoured by the Conservatives.

7.4.2 Markets for nature-based solutions can play a role, but only if they are combined with clear corporate responsibilities for protecting nature, strong standards and rigorous enforcement.

7.4.3 Our new Office for Environmental Integrity would ensure that corporate claims to be climate and nature positive are genuine. It would also set out strict standards for any market-based solutions to ensure that buyers, sellers and the public alike can be sure they represent real benefits for the environment.

7.4.4 We would expect the Office for Environmental Integrity (focused on standards in the private sector) to work closely with the existing Office for Environmental Protection (focused on standards in the public sector).

## **7.5 Scaling up nature-based solutions**

7.5.1 To achieve the scale of natural sequestration necessary to meet net zero targets will require a combination of regulation and large scale public and private investment to create and restore a range of habitat types. This will need to be balanced with competing land use options, such as agriculture and development. It will need to be done in a way that makes trade-offs between nature and climate completely transparent, capitalising on win-wins wherever possible.

7.5.2 Regulation and incentives both have a role to play in scaling up nature-based solutions. At the moment, the scale of public funding necessary to achieve major gains—for example in the amount of carbon stored in agricultural soils—has not been sufficient. At the same time, private markets are small and, often, unreliable with the prospect of “greenwashing” emissions through unreliable offsets.

## **7.6 Peatlands and wetlands**

7.6.1 From the blanket bogs of the uplands, to the lowland fens and raised bogs, English peatlands have been seriously degraded by damaging land use. In the uplands, draining and rotational burning are damaging peatlands, sometimes to support “big business” shoots. In the lowlands, agriculture and tree-planting have left the peat in poor condition. The degraded condition of our peatlands means they emit the equivalent of 5% of the UK’s greenhouse gases every year, releasing carbon that has been stored for millennia.

7.6.2 There is potential for 22,000 hectares of new saltmarsh to be created at a benefit to cost ratio of between 2:1 and 3:1 , and storing carbon potentially over 100 times faster than forests. Creating new wetlands in flood prone areas would provide a natural solution to flooding

by slowing flows and retaining water in the land, potentially saving £10 for every £1 spent.

7.6.3 The Conservatives committed to banning burning heather on peatlands in protected areas, but the regulations introduced in 2021 were filled with loopholes. They allow considerable leeway for damaging burning to continue both inside and outside protected areas. We will protect the UK's most important carbon store with a complete ban on horticultural peat use and a ban on burning heather on peatlands, as well as committing to restoring the peatlands that have been damaged.

## **7.7 Woodlands and trees**

7.7.1 We will provide funding for agroforestry, natural regeneration, urban trees, and planting of broadleaf native species from domestic nurseries. We will invest in public land to create new priority habitats for wildlife. We will end support for tree plantations for bioenergy, and restrict support for biomass power generation to feedstock which minimises the impact on the climate, such as sawmill wastes.

7.7.2 To date, too much focus has been dedicated to sheer numbers of trees, with too little attention paid to the type of trees or their place in a landscape. Instead of raw tree-planting targets, we will plan to increase woodland and canopy cover to 20% by 2050. We will ensure that at least three quarters of the area is dedicated to native, broadleaf species, with space for open habitats. We will include protection for individual trees and agro-forestry as well as areas of woodland.

7.7.3 We would help spur investment in agro-forestry by incentivising the use of sustainably produced wood in place of high-carbon materials like brick and concrete on the demand side, whilst providing sustainable finance on the supply side. Agroforestry can take decades to deliver returns; our new ELMS will ensure that agro-foresters have access to

appropriate finance and support. This would include tax incentives, changes to building regulations and by reforming local and national government procurement policy to favour the sustainable options.

## **7.8 Urban green and blue infrastructure**

7.8.1 Urban green infrastructure is particularly important in improving resilience to climate change for vulnerable communities and businesses. As more areas become urbanised, including green spaces, permeable pavements and sustainable drainage, for example, can help to reduce flooding and stop excessive volumes of water running into storm overflows.

7.8.2 We will focus on retrofitting inner city areas to ensure that canals and waterways are up to scratch, urban green spaces are accessible and in good condition so everyone has fair access to nature, and that natural solutions to drainage and flooding are in place across the country. According to the National Trust, the benefits of improving urban greenspaces bring £27 in value for every £1 invested.

7.8.3 Public bodies like Highways Authorities have an important role to play in ensuring that the right nature-based solutions are built in as part of urban development and redevelopment.

7.8.4 We will also ensure that funding is available to support the development of urban food production, through innovative models like vertical farming, as well as more traditional approaches like allotments.

## **7.9 Coasts and seas**

7.9.1 The ocean is a huge repository of “blue carbon”, in its wildlife and vegetation, in the seabed, and in coastal habitats like saltmarshes and mudflats. At the moment, this carbon is not properly accounted for in national registries, and it is not properly protected.

7.9.2 At the moment, there is little recognition of the impacts on blue carbon of activities at sea. It is essential that Marine Protected Areas are designated to safeguard areas of high carbon content as well as species richness, removing damaging practices that could lead to the release of greenhouse gases.

7.9.3 There are also many opportunities for enhancing habitat to sequester additional carbon, particularly along the coastlines. We will ensure that a portion of funds from offshore infrastructure development is dedicated to the creation and restoration of habitats. The rate of carbon sequestration in these habitats can be particularly high, and the carbon remains stored for very long periods if it is undisturbed.

## **8 Conclusion**

8.1 The public has woken up to the need for nature. People are demanding clean water, breathable air, more wildlife and a stable climate. The Government has spoken up with rhetoric and promises, but looked the other way when it comes to making the changes needed to create a greener society. By contrast, the Liberal Democrats know that a prosperous future depends on a greener future, and that true environmentalism needs action in every walk of life.

8.2 Where the current Government has failed farmers and land managers, we will ensure they are well-rewarded for working toward a green future, with a long-term guarantee for green farm funding and protection for domestic production standards.

8.3 Where our seas and coastal communities have been neglected, we will ensure that industrial fisheries and poorly planned development can no longer damage our marine environment, and that the most sustainable fisheries and industries are given preference.

8.4 Where the Conservatives have failed to clean up our rivers and streams, the Liberal Democrats will set strict limits on pollutants for each water catchment, and control the chemical cocktail that is building up in our natural world.

8.5 Where the Conservatives have put their faith in markets, big business and old-fashioned growth models, we will build our future around a greener economy that rewards sustainable business and makes polluters pay.

8.6 Where they have taken a laissez-faire approach to planning, letting developers run roughshod over nature without building the greener homes we need, we would ensure that the planning system makes space for

nature, reinforcing protection for our finest nature sites and ensuring that local plans include important green spaces for nature to recover.

8.7 In this climate and nature emergency, only a comprehensive approach to nature and climate recovery that combines international cooperation with national commitment and local action can succeed. The Liberal Democrats are the party that will place nature at the heart of government, top to bottom, now and forever. We will “double nature” in England, guarantee everyone the right to a healthy environment, and ensure our “global footprint” on Planet Earth is sustainable, so that everyone can enjoy the rich benefits that our wonderful, essential, but fragile natural world has to offer.

## **The Natural Environment**

### **Policy Paper 147**

This paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 7.4 of the Federal Constitution.

Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of the federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom.

The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local Party determine the policy of the Party on all other issues, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas.

The Party in England has chosen to pass up policy-making to the Federal level. If approved by Conference, this paper will therefore form the policy of the Federal Party on federal issues and the Party in England on English issues. In appropriate policy areas, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland party policy would take precedence.

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