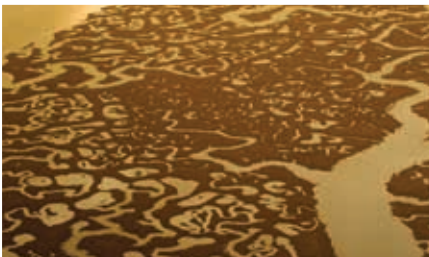


The Nature and Wellbeing Act

An introduction



“The Nature and Wellbeing Act is a proposal for a new law in England to restore nature and improve our quality of life”



What has nature ever done for us?

Not a lot, really. Well, it's given us stuff to breathe. That's helpful. So is water: really rather useful if you want to stay alive. Food comes in handy as well, I suppose. Every day for the lucky ones.

But apart from that, what's nature ever done for us?

I suppose it does provide us with stuff to warm us in the cold and cool us in the heat. It supplies us with the materials we use to cover our bodies. It gives us the materials we use to power our lives. It has come up with the mechanism that keeps the planet working. It gives us things that make us better when we're poorly, starting with aspirin.

But apart from that, do we really need nature?

Well, nature also has the knack of keeping us sane. We associate happiness with trees and rivers and meadows. Nature refuels us, allowing us to return to the stresses and excitements of making a living and looking after our dear ones. Nature refreshes our spirits and that profoundly affects the health of our bodies. Nature makes life possible: nature also makes life worth living.

Nature has faithfully looked after us since the human species first walked upright. But now that we humans have control of the planet we have failed to return the favour. And it's not just nature that's the loser. It's us. All of us. It's high time we did something about it.

Here's a suggestion...



Simon Barnes
Simon Barnes
Author & Journalist

The Nature & Wellbeing Act

Our proposals

We all need nature. Wild and natural landscapes sustain us: they give us clean water to drink and fresh air to breathe; they store carbon and protect our houses from flooding; they can help make us happy and healthy. You don't hear enough politicians or business leaders saying it, but nature gives us the foundation of our economy, our energy system and our food and farming – and its health is intrinsically linked to our own. From watching bees and butterflies and absorbing the colours of plantlife, to noticing the calming rustle of trees in the wind, nature gives us moments of inspiration and reflection and places we can escape to and relax in. Nature has a strong foothold in our national and culture heritage - it's fantastic and we couldn't live without it.

But despite all this, nature is fading away from our lives. 60% of the species we know about are in decline and less than 10% of children regularly play in wild places. And it's not just wildlife that's losing out. It's us too. Our health and wellbeing is in decline, and the loss of wildlife and wild places is part of the problem - with the poorest and most vulnerable in society often affected the most. Nature's health and people's health are linked, and the path to recovery starts with a plan for putting the wild back in our lives.

That's why The Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB, together with their partners are calling for a Nature and Wellbeing Act – a new law to put nature at the heart of how our country is run.

The Act would set the world's first legally binding targets for nature's recovery in a generation. Politicians need to know that we need to act for nature, even when times get tough.

To help achieve nature's recovery, the Act would put nature at the heart of decision-making, in Government, in our healthcare system, housing and developments, education, the economy and flood resilience. We want to create local and national ecological networks to put wildlife habitats back into the landscape and help save threatened species and our wildest places before it's too late. By creating more natural places near people, we can give wildlife the habitat it needs too. The Act would make sure that everyone has access to a high quality natural environment and that caring for nature becomes a key purpose of schooling.

We can all find ways to help wildlife, but legislation can support individual action and help create positive change at the scale and speed we really need. We launched a public campaign – Act for Nature – in October 2014, which is supported by a growing number of people and partners. Together, we can make sure that every political party takes our need for nature seriously.

Photos: Katrina Martin/2020Vision, Matthew Roberts, Ross Hoddinott/2020Vision, Suffolk Wildlife Trust, Luke Massey/2020Vision, Bertie Gregory/2020Vision, Terry Whittaker 2020/Vision, Paul Harris/2020Vision, Guy Edwardes/2020Vision, Amy Lewis, RSPB, Butterfly Conservation, British Mountaineering Council, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Buglife, The John Muir Award, Plantlife, The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, The Conservation Volunteers, National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Terry Whittaker/2020Vision.

What the Act would do...

- Help species and their habitats recover for the next generation
- Place the value of nature at the heart of decision-making, nationally and locally, and across all Government Departments
- Stimulate the creation of a national network of places for nature, planned and built from the local level up
- Reconnect people with our environment, bringing fair access to nature and teaching our children about the world we live in



1. Nature in recovery

Our existing environmental laws provide essential protection for wildlife but now we need to go further to ensure a future where nature is recovering – not just hanging on. A Nature and Wellbeing Act would include a government commitment to nature's recovery within a generation (like another recent Act with a big ambition for positive environmental change – the Climate Change Act).

Our proposals include restoring 80% of our finest wildlife havens (SSSIs) to a favourable condition by 2040 (the current figure is 37%) and a 10% increase in the species watchlist indicator (a new indicator that charts the status of threatened species). In this way, we will make sure that our politicians are held to account in Parliament for looking after nature for this and future generations.



2. Nature in neighbourhoods

Many of our current protected areas are struggling to retain their diversity, surrounded by land that is inhospitable for wildlife. These last wild places are becoming isolated - both from habitats nearby and from people too. A Nature and Wellbeing Act would enable the mapping and creation of local and national ecological networks through the planning system, to put wildlife habitats back into the landscape and to link them up.

Imagine if the starting point for our planning system was identifying our precious green and wild places – our woods, meadows, river corridors, moors and mountains, wild land, parks - and then designing housing and development around them, along with ways to reconnect and recreate habitats where needed. A wild place for nature and people in every neighbourhood should be a realistic ambition. A commitment to the creation of ecological networks is already law in several countries, including France and Germany, along with ways to ensure their delivery through planning systems. We should follow their lead with a credible plan for England's nature networks.



3. Nature in walking distance

As wildlife habitats have disappeared, people are becoming more disconnected and isolated from nature. Our children are more disconnected from nature than ever before. The chances today of a child discovering a wildflower meadow by chance are virtually zero in most places. There is a clear link between income-related inequality in health and exposure to nature in parks and natural areas. In England, the most deprived communities are 10 times less likely to live in the greenest areas. Those with close access to green space live longer than those without, even when adjusted for other factors like social class, employment and smoking.

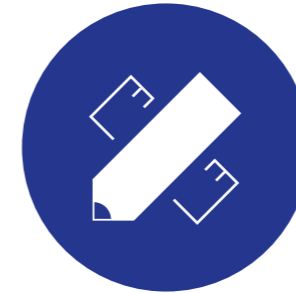
So, restoring nature is also about fairness and social equality. Natural England has published a set of standards for access to nature near our homes. However the standards are not mandatory. We believe this is so fundamentally important to our quality of life – rich and poor – that the Government should go further and commit itself to increasing the amount, accessibility and quality of natural green space in and around our settlements. This requirement would be straightforward to introduce for all new developments and raise the quality of new settlements across England. It would also challenge local authorities to find new ways to provide existing settlements with increased levels of accessible natural green space over time, so that we can all enjoy the benefits that nature brings.



4. Nature in healthcare

As wild places have disappeared, with them so has our sense of connection to the natural world, and levels of physical inactivity, obesity, heart disease, depression and Type 2 Diabetes have all risen. One in four of us will experience a mental health problem at some point in our lives. Pressures on the NHS are growing and costs are forecast to rise inexorably.

Physical inactivity alone costs us £20 billion pounds every year. There is a role, alongside other treatment methods, for a low tech and preventative approach with nature and natural spaces at the fore. Ecotherapy projects have seen organisations like Mind and The Wildlife Trusts collaborate to use outdoor settings and nature to help improve mental wellbeing. Quality is key: spending time in varied habitats, full of wildlife such as birds, butterflies and plantlife is good for us. Halting the decline of wildlife and starting its recovery is good for us all.



5. Nature in schools

Creating a bond between children and nature is vitally important. Children's development can be positively affected by contact with nature, and the future protection of the natural world is entirely in the hands of future generations. Yet the number of children who have hands-on experience of nature is in sharp decline. Only 21% of 8-12 year olds in England have a connection to nature that could be considered realistic and achievable for all children.

There are already inspiring examples where teachers and organisations are bringing nature into the classroom or taking learning outdoors – making it effective and fun for children. So we're proposing an amendment to Section 78 of the Education Act: to make caring for nature a key purpose of schooling. This builds on curriculum reform proposals in 2011 that suggested the curriculum should 'contribute to environmental stewardship'. A minor legislative change like this should create the context and momentum for action in other areas such as a greater focus on eco-literacy within the curriculum and provision of natural areas in school grounds for learning and for wildlife.



6. Nature at the centre of government

For too long, nature's needs and our need for nature have remained peripheral in most Government thinking. An independent public body should be established – an Office for Environmental Responsibility (OER), or a new, stronger version of the Natural Capital Committee – to ensure nature is at the heart of political decision making, planning and business: like the existing Office for Budgetary Responsibility (OBR) but for nature.

An OER would shine a light on whether the health of nature is improving or continuing to be undermined. This could include oversight of an annual set of national environmental 'accounts' or statistics to show the status of our ecosystems and wildlife and to help us live within environmental limits. For example these could show tonnes of carbon stored in peatlands and other habitats, cubic metres of water held in floodplains, soil health, as well as showing an economic value for some of the natural processes we depend on – but not for wildlife itself. This approach would also mean that the status of our nature and ecosystems could then be measured alongside GDP and other socio-economic indicators that guide national decisions. A new body like this would help to make nature's contribution to society more visible and easier to integrate nature and nature-based solutions into government decision-making which tends, on the whole, to undervalue and ultimately destroy natural habitats. For example, it would make it easier to consider protecting and creating natural habitats as flood defences rather than destroying them to create artificial defences.



7. Nature in perpetuity

Our current wildlife laws help to protect many species and habitats from threat and harm. We have really strong national laws and European laws like the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive that have helped safeguard nature for 30 years. The Nature and Wellbeing Act would not remove or weaken existing legislation, but would provide a new impetus towards recovery, and recognise the importance of nature in every aspect of our lives.

Putting the ideas into practice: Partner projects making a difference today



The Wildlife Trusts

The Wildlife Trusts have been leading inspiring and innovative 'nature based' health and wellbeing projects across the country for many years. These are designed to improve the physical and mental health of participants and to contribute to a sense of wellbeing. They range from projects to improve mental health, to urban regeneration projects that bring nature back into urban areas. They encourage participants to stay active, develop new skills, build their self esteem and find a new social network. Their effectiveness is such that many are run in partnership with health charities and local NHS trusts. To find out more:

wildlifetrusts.org/health



RSPB

On Hampstead Heath the RSPB is working with the City of London Corporation to bring tens of thousands of people closer to the wildlife in one of London's best green spaces. **Wild about Hampstead Heath** is working with primary schools to help them to bring their classroom out onto the Heath for lessons ranging from maths and literacy to music and sport and this is now being permanently built into their curricula. The project is also connecting people with the wildlife on the Heath through innovative initiatives like "guerilla interpretation" tricycles that allow people to get closer to nature with the aid of telescopes, iPads and underwater cameras. To find out more:

wildhampsteadheath.org.uk



Butterfly Conservation

The Big Butterfly Count has been engaging over 125,000 people in 'citizen science' over the past 5 years. Set up in association with Marks and Spencer and supported by Sir David Attenborough, it asks participants to carry out a simple 15 minute butterfly count and to record their sightings online or via an App. Feedback from participants is very positive, with many involving the family in Counts. Such citizen science projects have multiple benefits and demonstrate huge public interest in nature, as well as yielding information on visible changes to our wildlife and environment. To find out more:

bigbutterflycount.org



British Mountaineering Council

The British Mountaineering Council manages Horseshoe Quarry in Derbyshire to enhance both its recreational and environmental qualities. In addition to the 300 climbing routes it contains, the site now has upgraded access and contributes to the favourable condition of the SSSI within which it sits. Visitor numbers continue to grow as the site makes an ever increasing contribution to the local economy and demonstrates that recreation and conservation can go hand in hand. To find out more:

thebmc.co.uk/horseshoe_quarry_case_study



Bumblebee Conservation Trust

BeeWalk is BBCT's national recording scheme to monitor the abundance of bumblebees across the UK. The survey involves volunteers taking an hour's walk each month from March to October and counting the bumblebees that they see during their walk. The scheme is making a difference to our understanding of bumblebee populations across the UK, which is vital to securing the future of these essential pollinators. At the same time it is having a positive impact on the lives of hundreds of BBCT volunteers who are developing new skills whilst experiencing the great outdoors within their local areas. Participants learn that you don't need to live in the country to get close to and enjoy nature. To find out more:

bumblebeeconservation.org/get-involved-surveys/beewalk



Buglife

Buglife is working with a range of organizations in the north east of England to create B-Lines. B-Lines are networks of wildflower-rich habitats which link together the best of our existing wildlife sites, restoring wildflowers into the countryside and bringing nature to the heart of towns and cities in their paths. B-lines are a National network with a buy in of local people. As well as helping insect pollinators, they act as a great tool for bringing people closer to nature and educating younger communities on the value of native pollinators and local habitats. For example, Buglife and Durham Wildlife Trust, with funding from J. P. Getty (Jnr) Trust, Northumbrian Water, and the Biffa Award, are leading education activities across schools in the North East allowing children to literally get to grips with bumblebees and other insect pollinators! To find out more:

buglife.org.uk/campaigns-and-our-work/habitat-projects/b-lines



The John Muir Award

The John Muir Award is the main engagement initiative of the John Muir Trust and encourages people to connect with, enjoy and care for wild places. It is used by over 30,000 participants and 1100 diverse organisations each year. One such example is the Lookwide UK programme in Northumberland, run by the Scout Association. Over 40 pupils aged 10-18 spend time getting to know and caring for the Northumberland National Park. Spotting kestrels, wild camping, making pine needle tea, planting trees, sampling a peat bog and trekking out on the moors – these are all part of an experience which provides young people, who struggle in formal settings, with the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge in an outdoor, wild environment. To find out more:

www.jmt.org/jmaward-case-studies.asp



Plantlife

Barnham Cross Common SSSI is a much loved community asset on the edge of Thetford. A key site for Plantlife due to its botanical richness in the heart of Brecklands, this site is undergoing restoration with strong input and support from the local community. With an emphasis on community engagement as well ecological restoration, this project has secured backing and funding from a range of partners. This now supports local volunteers in their work which will ensure the historic importance of the site is restored into the future both through better use and a greater understanding of the site. To find out more:

plantlife.org.uk/wild_plants/work/breckland



The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare

The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare runs the NHS Forest to enable healthcare organisations to open up the green spaces adjacent to hospitals and doctors' surgeries - to local communities. The programme helps local people to stay healthy and aids the recovery of patients by harnessing the benefits of the natural environment. The NHS Forest now spans 150 sites across the UK and features a wide range of outdoor therapeutic environments, including orchards, community gardens, rehabilitation and dementia gardens, and green health routes. All of these make a positive contribution both to people's health and environmental wellbeing. To find out more: nhsforest.org



The Conservation Volunteers

The Green Gym® initiative is run by TCV as an innovative approach to outdoor exercise that has been endorsed by the Department of Health and has proven positive impacts on mental and physical health, wellbeing and outdoor places. There are Green Gyms® all over the UK helping to connect people to the outdoors every day. They are completely free of charge and open to everyone. To find out more: tcv.org.uk/greengym



National Council for Voluntary Youth Services

NCVYS is working in an innovative collaboration with The Canal and River Trust, The National Federation of Young Farmer's Clubs and The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to deliver the Action Squads Programme. This programme helps to mobilise young people to engage in meaningful social action and to date is providing over 1,500 new environmental and rural youth social action opportunities for those who may want to get involved in the National Citizen Service (NCS) and those graduating from NCS. To find out more: ncvys.org.uk/project/action-squad-programme



The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust is working with Thames Water and the Environment Agency to create Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) in the Pymmes Brook catchment in London. This work is taking place within the grounds of 10 schools where it is providing drainage systems that are helping to alleviate flooding and improve the health of the nearby river whilst also creating new natural green spaces for the schools. These spaces are improving the quality of the school environment and are helping to connect children to nature in both their learning and their play. WWT has developed a SuDS for Schools Curriculum which illustrates the cross curricular learning opportunities within the project. To find out more: sudsforschools.wwt.org.uk/the-project

Partners



Protecting wildlife for the future



giving nature a home



Saltmarsh habitat at Essex Wildlife Trust Abbotts Hall Farm created through coastal realignment. Saltmarshes like this provide important wildlife habitat, defence against coastal flooding and a valuable carbon store.

#actfornature

What you can do

Share the campaign...

Please share our campaign with your friends and family. Use #actfornature in social media.

Find out more...

Read our Green Paper (via the links below) which sets out the ideas behind a Nature and Wellbeing Act in more detail. A Frequently Asked Questions document is also available.

Support the campaign...

Please join our campaign and ask your MP, or Prospective Parliamentary Candidate, to support the Nature and Wellbeing Act within their Party.

Tell us what you think...

We're keen to know what you think of our proposals for a Nature and Wellbeing Act. Please send any comments to Julie Middleton (The Wildlife Trusts) and Robin Wynde (RSPB).

wildlifetrusts.org/actfornature

If you're an MP...

Please ask your Party to support our proposals for a Nature and Wellbeing Act. If you have any questions please get in touch via the contact details below.

Contact details

The Wildlife Trusts

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