

The Natural Choice

What the Natural Environment White Paper means for you

The natural world touches our lives every day. Whether we live in the city or the countryside, we rely on the natural systems that support us. Our natural environment underpins our health, wealth and happiness and gives us a sense of place, pride and identity.

What is a White Paper? Why do we need one now?

A White Paper is a statement by Government on what it intends to do about an important policy issue. This White Paper responds to compelling new evidence about the state of our natural environment.

The UK National Ecosystem Assessment published in June 2011 assessed both the social and economic values of the benefits we get from our natural environment and analysed the risks to them. We are the first country in the world to do this. It showed that 30% of benefits we get from nature are in decline. It also identified that many opportunities to increase these benefits are currently being missed because we take the value of nature for granted.

The White Paper sets out how we will act on this new knowledge by placing the natural environment at the heart of government thinking. It reflects the views of thousands



of people who responded to our consultation last year. People told us:

- that they want to see measures to protect and improve the places they care about in both rural and urban areas;
- that they are concerned about declines in native wildlife;
- that it is important to recognise all the different kinds of value provided by the environment, from the feeling we get from beautiful landscapes to the health benefits we get from outdoor exercise;
- that it is important to understand the financial value of these benefits as well as their intrinsic worth;
- that they are worried about the effect our modern lifestyles have on the environment;
- that they want Government to 'make it easier to do the right thing'.

We want to capitalise on the strength of public feeling by taking action to make this the first generation to leave the natural environment of England in a better state than it inherited. We will create a framework which will give people and organisations greater freedom to protect and improve the green spaces which are important to them.

Making connections to protect the natural environment

The natural environment is sometimes seen as a series of disconnected places – gardens, parks, farmland, forests, coastland, wetlands, rivers and seas. But this way of looking at it can prevent us from understanding how nature works as a system. It also means that action to protect it often focuses on a small area or a single issue, which may not

be as successful as more integrated action on a bigger scale.

We need to stop thinking about isolated spots of green on a map of England and start creating a thriving green network linking wildlife sites with farmland, forestry and urban parks and gardens. We are encouraging local partnerships to create new **Nature Improvement Areas** (NIAs) to improve and reconnect nature on a grand scale. To inspire action we will set up a competition to identify 12 initial areas and will provide **£7.5 million** to support this.

Connecting people and nature

There is a wealth of evidence to show how spending time in the natural environment can help people's mental and physical health. We want everyone to be able to make the most of nature's health service. We will:

- help local councils use their new duties and powers on public health to improve local environments;
- make sure communities have local green spaces to enjoy;

The natural environment can also help children's learning. We want to see every child in England given the opportunity to experience and learn about the natural environment. We will create more opportunities for learning outside the classroom by supporting teachers and cutting red tape.

To help make sure everyone can benefit from the natural environment, we will also give people new powers to protect and improve their own green spaces through a Localism Bill, a Community Right to Reclaim Land and a new Green Space Designation.

Giving back

We benefit from the natural environment and we have the power to protect and improve it in return. For example by making greener choices when shopping, travelling and at home:

- Shop sustainably. From fish to palm oil, many products can have a damaging impact on nature's systems if not produced sustainably;
- Avoid using peat in gardens. It is a non-renewable resource and protecting it will conserve important habitats around the world.
- Use water more sustainably, by turning off taps and fitting low usage appliances.

Volunteering and community action

Volunteering can be a fulfilling way to experience nature. It can help people develop new skills, keep fit; and develop a sense of local ownership. This country already has a strong culture of conservation volunteering. You can find out about volunteering opportunities at www.volunteering.org.uk and www.do-it.org.uk.

Monitoring the natural environment is another practical activity anyone can get involved with. For example, 600,000 people took part in the RSPB's Big Garden Bird Watch in 2011. This helps us to understand what wildlife is thriving and what is at risk.

We want to make it easier for people to get involved in protecting and improving the natural environment. We will:

- launch a new MuckIn4Life programme to help more people get active outdoors and



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- help improve the quality of life in their local area;
- make environmental information available more easily to help people get involved – including the new My Environment web portal.

A role for everyone

We have an ambitious vision for the natural environment that won't be achieved overnight or by Government alone. This White Paper is a call to action for all parts of society - individuals, communities, businesses and Government. Together we can secure the value of nature. You can find out more about our plans at:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/>