

Transcript: Nature

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My message today is simple. Nature is not a nice-to-have. It's not a luxury. It is critical national infrastructure. When we destroy and degrade it, we expose this country to escalating risks: floods, fires, heat waves, food insecurity and economic instability. When we protect and restore it, we can build resilience, create jobs, and strengthen the foundations of a safe, happy and prosperous community and country.

We are facing a national emergency not only because the climate is changing, but because the living systems that regulate that climate, protect our homes and feed our people are breaking down here in one of the most nature-depleted nations on earth.

So the facts are sobering. The UK ranks in the bottom 10% of countries globally on the Biodiversity Intactness Index, with only about half of its biodiversity remaining. Across the UK, monitored wildlife populations have declined by around 19% since the 1970s, and 1 in 6 of our species is now at risk of extinction.

Now, that's not just a loss of beauty or heritage, critically important, though that is. It is also a loss of function: the pollination of crops, the filtering of water, the regulation of floods and disease. Only 14% of rivers in England are in good ecological health under our own water framework regulations. Chemical pollution, sewage discharge, soil erosion, agricultural runoff are choking the arteries of our landscapes.

When rivers die, when rivers fail, so does our resilience to droughts, floods and water scarcity for agriculture and industry. Our peatlands, which store phenomenal amounts of carbon, are mostly degraded. Instead of locking away carbon for millennia, they are emitting millions of tons of CO₂ into our atmosphere a year, increasing wildfire risk. Meanwhile, only 7% of our woodlands are healthy, 3% of our land and 8% of our waters are considered effectively protected for nature.

The Office for Environmental Protection warns that the Government is largely off track on almost every target set under the Environment Act, and the Office for National Statistics shows that many of the services nature supports are under growing pressure - even as we

become more aware of their enormous economic value. So let me unpack why this should matter so much to those concerned with the nation's security, stability and prosperity.

First, flooding. Over 5 million properties in England are at risk of flooding from rivers, surface water or the sea. And without stronger action that number is projected to rise significantly over the coming decades. Each major flood damages homes, infrastructure, transport, and energy and water systems. Yet some of the most effective defenses are restored wetlands, peatlands, floodplains and salt marsh, landscapes that slow and store water and deliver very high benefit to cost ratios.

The second is food security. Productive farming depends on healthy soils and thriving pollinators. Soil degradation already costs England and Wales around 1 billion pounds a year. Meanwhile, pollinators contribute over half a billion pounds annually to UK agriculture. And yet, pesticides and habitat loss continue to push them into steep decline. A nature poor countryside is so much less productive and so much less resilient.

Third, health and productivity. There's enormous amounts of evidence supporting this, that nature, access to nature reduces anxiety, depression and cardiovascular disease. NHS pilots in green social prescribing are beginning to show lower GP visits and reduced use of medication. In towns and cities, the loss or lack of trees and green space has made us dangerously exposed to extreme heat.

In 2022, nearly 3,000 people in England died from heat related causes. That is more than from road traffic accidents. This figure will rise as summers warm. Conversely, urban forests and parks cut and mortality, lower air pollution, and support learning and productivity.

Fourth, economic and financial stability. Recent analysis by the Green Finance Institute and others suggests that if we continue to degrade nature, nature related risks could severely cut UK GDP in the coming decades, delivering a macroeconomic shock on the scale of major financial crises.

UK banks and insurers and materially exposed to nature dependent sectors. And yet they continue to finance activities that degrade ecosystems. We are quite literally subsidizing systemic risk. So, this is not an issue on the margins of policy. This is a national security issue. Without a living, healthy biosphere, there is no stable economy, no food, no water security and no public health resilience.

At the moment we have an economic system that is unraveling the web of life that depends on by subsidising pollution, rewarding short term extraction and discounting the future. So the central task for the next decade is to reform the rules and incentives of the economy so

that they reward stewardship and regeneration rather than extraction, degradation and constant delay.

Now, as we get our own house in order, we also gain the credibility to call for the same ambition elsewhere. And that must include protecting and restoring regions such as the Amazon, the Congo Basin, New Guinea, which hold so much of the world's biological and cultural diversity, and are critical for global climate and economic stability. What happens there directly affects our wealth and wellbeing here.

Now, coming straight from COP30 in Brazil, I can tell you that this understanding... despite the headlines, this understanding is finally beginning to take root. But leadership abroad must be matched by commitments at home. And the thing is, the public - the UK public - is already calling for it. My own experiences with citizens assemblies, including as science lead for the UK's first People's Assembly for Nature, show that people in this country care deeply about the living world and they are angry at its dire state, and they want action.

WWF's polling finds that more than half of Britons think that the Government is not doing enough to protect and restore nature. And almost half of those who expressed an opinion want more support to reduce their environmental impact. These are your voters calling for stronger action. Luckily, we know what works, and the science points to the following.

First of all, we need to consider nature as critical infrastructure. Nature must quite literally sit alongside transport, energy and digital systems in national resilience planning. Treasury guidance already allows this. We just need to use it consistently, properly valuing the avoided costs of floods, heat deaths, water treatments and soil erosion - not only the price of building things. When we treat nature as essential infrastructure, when we treat it as kin, we finally plan for a world we are actually living in.

Second, we need to stop funding harm and we need to reward restoration. Right now, billions in public and private finance readily flows into activities that degrade soils, pollute rivers and destroy habitats. We have to end these subsidies, strengthen enforcement, and apply a simple universal test to spending and investment. Does this harm the biosphere or can it help it? At the same time, we have to reward protection and restoration.

Environmental land management schemes offer a very promising framework. I've spoken to many farmers who really want to embrace it, but they need stability, simplicity, scale, multi-year budgets so that they can plan and they can invest. We know that restoring hedgerows, wetlands and peatlands cuts flood peaks, improves water quality, stores carbon

and can create skilled rural jobs. The Treasury's own assessments show that many investments in nature yield the highest economic returns of any form of public investment.

Third, we need to redirect finance and measure what actually matters to us. The financial system is sleepwalking into risk - escalating risk. The Bank of England is to stress test nature related risks, just as it does for climate. Major businesses should disclose these risks for an established task force for nature related financial disclosure. This isn't red tape. This isn't red tape - it's basic market transparency.

And we have to measure what matters. The UK is actually among global leaders - believe it or not - in natural capital accounting. Let's build on that. And each year we need to track the tangible risk reductions delivered by nature. recovery: properties protected from flooding, heat related deaths avoided, millions saved to the NHS and the wider economy.

That's what accountability. That's what good accountability looks like in the age of climate and ecological crisis. Below all this, and very importantly, we have to cultivate a culture of care in this country. National security begins in our communities. We need nature woven back into daily life, children learning outdoors, schools surrounded by shade and green space, cities planned as places that cool, that heal and that connect.

When people have regular contact with nature, they care for it and they care for each other. That is long term, resilient nation building. Ultimately, we need to create an economy that values nature not as a resource to extract, but as a partner in prosperity. We have to stop funding its destruction, invest in its repair, and make it the foundation of our economic and security strategy.

This isn't about choosing between the economy and the environment. It's about recognising that the economy is embedded within the environment and that the health of the nation depends on the living systems that sustain us and that we are part of. Protecting nature is sound fiscal and security policy, and it's actually what the public is asking you to do.

Failing to act would be a betrayal of our children and future generations who will live with the consequences of the choices that we make now.

Thank you.