

Nature Check 2012: Parliamentary launch

Speech by Dr Elaine King, Director at Wildlife and Countryside Link

Thank you for joining us to find out more about Nature Check 2012, Link's second assessment of the Government's performance on the natural environment. I am delighted at the level of interest the report has already received and to see such a wide range of organisations and parliamentarians represented here today.

Our aim is both to hold the Coalition to account and to support effective policy-making and implementation. Nature Check recognises where the Government has made progress; but we believe that progress is not yet sufficient for this to be considered the greenest government ever.

We realise that the Secretary of State may be disappointed with this assessment, given that no new green ratings have been awarded, but we believe the coalition *can* still deliver its ambitions for the natural environment by providing leadership on the Natural Environment White Paper across *the whole of* Government. And in doing this, the Government will be supported by the British public.

Our own public survey, conducted by Com Res, reinforces what our member organisations are saying through Nature Check; the public places a very high value on the natural environment, even in a recession. Our survey found that four out of five people think that the natural environment boosts their quality of life. A similar proportion also wants to see the natural environment and its wildlife protected at all costs.

And through reports like Nature Check we convey the concerns of millions of British citizens. Link speaks with the biggest collective voice in the natural environment sector and our members represent more than 8 million people.

Link's greatest strength lies in the diversity of its membership, which in turn reflects the diversity of the natural world itself. From the simplest plants and insects, to the most magnificent whales and the most diverse habitats and landscapes, Link covers them all. We offer the most convenient, most direct portal for Government, industry and other organisations that have an impact on the natural world to understand our members' views.

We provide expertise, through our members, to demonstrate why the recovery of the natural environment as a whole is so important, and why the environment must be approached as a coherent whole. As well as offering a coherent view on policy, Link is also able to take a long term view, in contrast to the short-term, headline and growth oriented world of Government and industry, which makes their decision-making so challenging.

And of course Link builds consensus amongst its members' diverse interests, in the context of real world pressures. We are not just creating policy in a vacuum. Nature Check 2012 is divided into key areas of policy, but we never lose sight of the over-riding objective – to have a *healthy, sustainable natural environment that meets today's needs without compromising the needs of future generations*. A healthy environment – and the public benefits it brings – is a critical part of everyone's quality of life and not an optional extra.

So we have three key messages for the Government:

1. We want to see renewed political will and leadership. We will support the Secretary of State in working with the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister to achieve cross Government support in realising the bold ambitions in the Natural Environment

White Paper. This includes recognising that a healthy natural environment and a thriving economy are not mutually exclusive, in fact, they are inseparably linked. For example, Ash Dieback can have a devastating impact on both ash woodland and the wildlife it supports, but also on rural businesses;

2. We want the Government to ensure policy decisions are based on good evidence and use the expert advice of all stakeholders;
3. And key to the restoration and protection of the natural environment, is ensuring our statutory agencies are well-resourced and have the power to provide independent, science-based advice. The forthcoming triennial review of Natural England and the Environment Agency will be an important test of the Government's commitments to the natural environment.

We will continue to work with the Government and the many organisations represented here today, to achieve our ambitions for the future of our natural world.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleague, Kate Hand, who has led the Nature Check project, along with other members of the Link team and our member organisations for all their work in producing this report.

I commend Nature Check to you all and now have the pleasure of introducing Owen Paterson, Secretary of State for the Environment, who I hope will be able to give the Government's first response to our members' assessment of the coalition's environmental performance.

Wildlife and Countryside Link
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