**Written evidence by The Wildlife Trusts to Bright Blue’s Conservative manifesto for conservation**

The Wildlife Trusts (TWT) is a grassroots movement of people from a wide range of backgrounds and all walks of life, who share a set of common beliefs. It has more than 800,000 members, 2,000 staff and 600 trustees. There are 46 individual Wildlife Trusts covering the whole of the UK, the Isle of Man and Alderney. Together, The Wildlife Trusts look after more than 2,300 nature reserves, covering more than 98,500 ha, and operate more than 100 visitor and education centres. We are the UK’s largest people-powered environmental organisation working for nature’s recovery on land and at sea.

**Rural**

**5. Should the UK engage in rewilding? If so, to what extent?**

**9. What are the most important public goods provided by the agricultural sector which should be rewarded through government funding?**

**10. What are the key policies which the Government should introduce to better protect Britain’s rural environments?**

A healthy natural environment is vital for our health, wellbeing and prosperity. For more than seven decades, successive domestic and EU laws have aimed to sustain a healthy, wildlife-rich natural world. There is strong, persistent and widespread public support for this, especially among the young. Despite this, the 2016 State of Nature report showed that 56% of species had declined across the UK between 1970 and 2013.

In 2010, the Lawton Review (Making Space for Nature) concluded that England’s wildlife sites were too small and isolated to prevent disastrous wildlife decline. It called for ‘*more, bigger, better and joined up*’ wildlife habitats and said this was crucial for wildlife’s recovery.

The Wildlife Trusts believe that we need a Nature Recovery Network to set space for nature at the heart of our farming and planning systems and to bring nature into the places where most people live their daily lives. This approach to protecting and restoring our wildlife, and to securing the subsequent socio-economic benefits, is central to the government’s own 25 Year Environment Plan.

We want to see:

* A duty on the Secretary of State to prepare and maintain national strategic guidance on the creation and implementation of Local Nature Recovery Maps and Plans throughout England, including their role in monitoring and reporting progress towards achieving nature’s recovery;
* A duty on relevant authorities to work within national strategic guidance to create and maintain country-wide coverage of interlinked Local Nature Recovery Network Maps that identify the location and extent of priority areas for the protection, enhancement and restoration of habitats and ecological processes;
* A duty on all relevant authorities to pursue nature’s recovery and to ensure that decisions about land use and management take account of these maps.

A Nature Recovery Network would:

* Translate national and local environmental targets into effective delivery plans.
* Drive proactive planning for nature’s recovery, with maps built up from a local level.
* Support proactive planning for improving people’s access to nature.
* Inform decisions on the location and nature of housing and other development.
* Target environmental land management scheme monies from government and net gain contributions from developers and integrate these.

For more information on The Wildlife Trusts’ proposals for a Nature Recovery Network of joined-up habitats, please see our report ‘[Towards a Wilder Britain](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/Nature_recovery_network_final.pdf)’.

**Urban**

1. **How important is access to green and blue space in urban areas and what policies could the Government adopt to improve access to such spaces in the UK?**

The Wildlife Trusts believe that everyone should have the opportunity to experience the joy of wildlife in their daily lives. We want everyone to have easy access to abundant wildlife and high-quality wild places near to where they live and work – particularly children, young people and people who are “Nature Deprived”. Simply being in wildlife-rich natural surroundings, or seeing them through a window, can help to support good health. Daily contact with nature is linked to better health, reduced levels of chronic stress, reductions in obesity and improved concentration. And the health benefits of living near to nature are greater in poor and disadvantaged communities than in wealthy ones.

We believe that providing more equal access to nature through positive and proactive planning will help reduce health inequalities. To achieve this, a new Environment Bill should establish and implement a statutory Nature Recovery Network that brings high quality, accessible, wildlife-rich natural places within a five-minute walk of every home, work place, school and college.

**Marine**

**1. What are the biggest immediate- and longer-term threats to marine ecosystems?**

Our marine environment has never been more threatened. Fifteen years ago, The Wildlife Trusts published Our Dying Seas to highlight the plight of our marine environment. Since then 100+ new Marine Protected Areas have been designated. But our seas are still in danger and faces five critical challenges:

1. Securing protected areas at sea

The UK has not yet achieved an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas. To achieve better seas for both people and wildlife, our Marine Protected Area network needs to be completed. Through the designation of a well-managed and ecologically coherent network of MPAs we could halt the decline of wildlife and habitats, and make the nation a world leader in sustainable management of our seas.

1. Making fishing sustainable

The long-term future of the UK’s fisheries depends on a restored and healthy marine environment. Leaving the EU, whilst creating some uncertainty, provides new opportunities for reforming fisheries and marine conservation management in ways which will benefit both. See the answer to Question 8 for more detail on ensuring sustainable fisheries management after we leave the European Union.

1. Ensuring development is sustainable

Our seas remain incredibly busy, with over 90 per cent of our imports and exports, by weight, transported by ship. Our coastal zone is vital for ports, harbours, sewage works and power stations, as well as being hugely important for recreation. More recently, the UK has become the world leader in the development of offshore wind power and our use of wave and tidal power is increasing. Achieving ecological sustainability of marine industries – existing and new – at a time when economic growth is considered the first priority is a challenge but one we can meet with the right approach. The UK Government should invest in the research and development of alternative renewable technologies and ensure regulators manage a strong consenting and licensing system, with Regional Sea Plans guiding what activity happens where at sea, and leaving space for wildlife.

1. Eliminating pollution

Designated waters and beaches in the UK are increasingly failing to reach Blue Flag standards, with high levels of bacteria and litter posing a risk to human health, tourism and wildlife. 12.2 million tonnes of plastic enters the marine environment per year. A new UK Marine Strategy that meets targets for bathing water standards and tackles pollution can reduce this damage. Given the wide-ranging forms of pollution, several strategies will be needed, including eutrophication, contaminants, marine litter and noise pollution from development.

1. Inspiring and connecting people

Issues such as plastic pollution and whale strandings put the spotlight on our seas but public understanding of marine ecosystems remains low. This is despite the fact that over half our wildlife (more than 30,000 species) lives in the sea. There is still a disconnect between everyday human activities and the long-term impacts of our activities. Increasing understanding of this is critical to the future of our seas, our marine wildlife, coastal livelihoods and wellbeing.

**3. What are the key policies which the Government should introduce to better protect marine environments?**

The Wildlife Trusts believe the UK Government should act to safeguard our national resources and the recovery of our seas. It should embrace a new marine management system based on Regional Sea Plans and a nationwide network of Marine Protected Areas.

The development of a new regional marine spatial planning programme should include:

* **Wildlife areas** - a full network of ecologically coherent Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and wildlife corridors with a new statutory objective “to achieve the recovery” of them.
* **Resource areas** of low environmental risk where development might be suitable.
* **Sustainable fishing areas** for commercial fishing, where we set aside areas of the sea for fishing activities, such as scallop dredging.

However, all activities should be carried out within environmental limits and avoid sensitive wildlife areas.

If the UK Government takes the lead on this new strategy, then within the next 25 years our seas will be more sustainably used and be well on their way to returning to their historic levels. This will benefit the wildlife that inhabits our seas, and the prosperity and wellbeing of local communities and the UK as a whole that depend on them.

**Regional Sea plans that meet the needs of people and nature**

**Involves people**

Inspires and connects people with the sea

**Restores Nature**

Recognises the value of the sea’s natural capital and commits to its recovery

**Meets targets**

Results in measurable Good Environmental Status in all seas

**Minimises harm**

Ends pollution, destructive fishing and unsustainable marine development

**Plans long term**

Uses an ecosystem based approach, meeting the needs of current and future generations

**Stays sustainable**

Sets environmental limits for all activities at sea

**8. Are the Government’s plans for a successor to the Common Fisheries Policy adequate with respect to enhancing sustainability of fish populations?**

The Wildlife Trusts welcomed the publication of the Fisheries Bill and its focus on environment and sustainability. We were pleased to see the inclusion of the fisheries objectives in the Bill as well as the increased powers the Bill extends to the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 which will allow the UK to take control of designating and managing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the UK’s offshore environment.

However, without key amendments being made to the Fisheries Bill it will not achieve the government’s aim of world-leading sustainable fisheries management after we leave the EU. In particular, the lack of a clear legal duty on national authorities to achieve the fisheries objectives is a significant weakness and allows authorities to completely disregard the fisheries objectives in a broad range of circumstances. Furthermore, the lack of firm commitment in the Bill to set catch limits at or below scientifically recommended levels. Without this, there is a risk of short-term political pressure leading to catch limits being set too high, resulting in overfishing and damaging the health of our oceans.

Although the Fisheries Bill provides a helpful starting point as a framework for fisheries legislation, as currently drafted, it will not deliver sustainable fisheries. The above issues as a priority will need to be addressed and the Bill amended if the UK is to achieve truly world-leading sustainable fisheries and marine management.

For more information on The Wildlife Trusts’ Living Seas work, please see our report ‘[The Way Back to Living Seas’](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/the_way_back_to_living_seas_the_wildlife_trusts.pdf)

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**Elliot Chapman-Jones, Public Affairs Manager,** **echapman-jones@wildlifetrusts.org**

The Wildlife Trusts,The Kiln, Waterside, Mather Road, Newark, Nottinghamshire NG24 1WT Tel (01636) 677711

Fax (01636) 670001 Email info@wildlifetrusts.org Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts Registered Charity no. 207238