



Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

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NATURAL ENGLAND

WHAT IS NATURAL ENGLAND?

Natural England is the government agency responsible for the protection and improvement of the natural environment in England. It was formed in 2006 by the amalgamation of English Nature and parts of the Countryside Agency and the Rural Development Service, and is funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). It has 2,000 staff throughout England, with a head office in York.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE UK?

Natural England's counterparts are Natural Resources Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, though in reality they are all different and have different responsibilities and origins.

WHAT DOES NATURAL ENGLAND ACTUALLY DO?

Its remit is huge and complicated but, in a nutshell, it is responsible for everything from enforcing laws that protect wildlife and designating protected areas to managing the influence of developers and farmers. In other words, it is mandated to look after our wildlife and wild places, but also to contribute to sustainable development.

IS IT INDEPENDENT?

No. It used to be able to speak its mind – and sometimes did – but nowadays, it

does not make public pronouncements (except of the inconsequential kind) and is expected to deliver government policy. Ever since Natural England was formed in 2006, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – a position currently held by Andrea Leadsom – has had the legal power to issue guidance on various issues, for example on badger culling. So, Natural England has issued licences that permit the shooting of free-running badgers (as well as the trapping and shooting of them) as it's following a government directive.

HOW IS IT FUNDED?

Its funding comes from Defra, but since 2010 this has been subject to cuts. Between 2010 and 2015, it had to find savings of nearly £60m, a reduction of 35 per cent over the course of that parliament, and critics say this has resulted in less protection for wildlife sites threatened by developments. Since 2013 it has reduced its reliance on government funding by charging water companies, house builders and wind farm developers, for example, for non-statutory services such as advising on environmental work for planning applications.

BUT IT STILL PROTECTS WILDLIFE?

Not always. This year, it issued a licence permitting

Buzzards' fates can be determined by Natural England.



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MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

● Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

a landowner to control up to 10 buzzards "in order to prevent serious damage to young pheasants", while the RSPB says it has sanctioned the burning of blanket bogs on the Walshaw Moor grouse moor and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in the North Pennines. The European Commission is currently investigating the British Government for failing to uphold its obligations under the Birds and Habitats Directives with regards to our internationally important peatlands.

In 2015, Devon Wildlife Trust took legal action against Teignbridge District Council over its decision to go ahead with a housing development that threatened a colony of greater horseshoe bats that Natural England had given the green light to. However, the Trust's request for a judicial review was rejected by the High Court.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

Our wildlife is in serious trouble – State of Nature 2016 concluded that nature is faring worse in the UK than in most other countries in the world. Many conservationists now wonder whether Natural England has the wherewithal to help us restore our declining biodiversity. ❧

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