

## MY WAY OF THINKING

## MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the much-anticipated UK Environment Bill and invites your thoughts on the subject.

**M**onumental decisions are being made in parliament this year that could either spell disaster for the UK's wildlife or embrace a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reverse the catastrophic decline we've been witnessing for decades.

Post-Brexit, we are no longer bound by EU laws (with a few exceptions, such as the Northern Ireland Protocol) so new national legislation is needed to plug all the gaps. Enter the much-anticipated Environment Bill, which is designed to set out a legislative framework for restoring wildlife and natural habitats, improving air and water quality, tackling plastic pollution, and protecting the climate.

The Government has repeatedly said that it will not lower environmental standards once the UK has left the EU. Indeed, its stated ambition in the official 25 Year Environment Plan is to "become the first generation to leave the [natural environment] in a better state than we found it".

So, how is it going so far? Well, it's not looking good to me. Proceedings began in July 2018 and the 'landmark' bill has already been delayed three times. Admittedly, dealing with the pandemic has left less time for parliamentary debate but it's worrying that other bills seem to have jumped the queue.

Then there's the bill itself. While it includes some good measures, a cross-party committee of MPs warned that, in its current form, it would severely downgrade the environmental protection previously provided by the EU.

What needs to change? For a start, the half-hearted and ludicrously protracted targets to halt and reverse

the loss of nature need to be more ambitious – and legally-binding. Last year, at the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity, Prime Minister Boris Johnson signed up to the Leaders Pledge for Nature – committing the UK to reversing biodiversity loss by 2030. This is the perfect opportunity to enshrine that rhetoric in law to make conservation and rewilding a legal obligation.

We all know what happens when world leaders sign treaties and agree targets to protect the natural world. Their ambitions are laudable (either that or they are just playing to green votes) but mere promises are rarely enough.

Then we need a truly independent green watchdog – with teeth – to replace the enforcement powers that were previously provided by the EU. With this in mind, the so-called Office for

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Environmental Protection (OEP) is being created but, if a new clause remains in the bill, the OEP will be 'guided' by the secretary of state. In other words, it will be muzzled, tamed and turned into a lap dog. To ensure true independence – in terms of budget and staff – it should report to parliament, not the Government, with powers to prosecute and impose financial penalties.

Another major concern is that the new environmental legislation will not apply to the MoD or the Treasury. Economic decisions often drive environmental destruction, so making these two ministries completely exempt is staggering. Caring for the natural world needs to be an integral part of all we do.

The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth and we're failing to meet 17 out of 20 UN biodiversity targets. But what we do have is a ground-breaking, legally binding target to reduce net emissions of greenhouse gases to zero by 2050. Now we need to legislate for a 'net zero' equivalent for nature. This genuinely world-leading achievement could become a template for other countries to incorporate into their own legislation.

This year, we'll be hosting the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) and the G7 summit, so we'll be in the spotlight. The Environment Bill is our best chance to use this unprecedented moment of global influence to reverse nature's decline. 🐾

**MARK CARWARDINE** is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?** If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email [wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)

