

Protecting and Restoring Nature: COP15 and Beyond

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[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken jointly before the House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee and the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee on 20 June 2022 on COP 15: the international biodiversity conference, HC 480; Second Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, Session 2021-22, The UK’s footprint on global biodiversity, HC 674, and the Government response, HC 1060.]

 1.48pm

Caroline Lucas >

(Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

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I beg to move,

That this House has considered protecting and restoring nature at COP15 and beyond.

I am delighted to open today’s debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for its support in securing this important debate. I also welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) to his new post. I look forward to working with him and hope he will be a champion for nature in the most crucial of years.

COP15 is the most significant biodiversity summit in a decade. As we all know, it has been delayed multiple times, because of the covid-19 pandemic, and it is now due to take place in Montreal from 5 to 17 December, while China still retains the presidency. If the negotiating process has been slowed down, environmental decline most certainly has not. Deforestation in the Amazon, for example, one of the most biodiverse places on Earth, has now reached a six-year high. Recent satellite observation suggests that it could fast be approaching a tipping point beyond which the forest could be lost in its entirety.

The sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change from working group II showed that climate change is already causing what it calls

“dangerous and widespread disruption in nature.”

A new UN report published in April warned that human activities have already altered 70% of the Earth’s land surface, degrading up to 40% of it. The truth is that our only home is not only on fire, but being bulldozed before our very eyes. That is why COP15 must agree a framework not just to halt biodiversity loss by 2030, but to reverse it. Our world desperately needs a nature-positive decade, so that by 2030 species and ecosystems are on a measurable path to recovery and biodiversity loss has started to be reversed.

By now, we all know the facts that, globally, 1 million species are at risk of extinction, and that the UK has lost, or I should say destroyed, almost half of its biodiversity since the industrial revolution, more than any other G7 country. A report published just this week by the Environment Agency showed that a quarter of mammals in England and almost a fifth of UK plants are now threatened with extinction.

Let me focus very briefly on what that actually means, because it is very easy to stand here and quote global or national statistics. I want to see it through the lens of one of my favourite species, which is the swift. Since 1995, we have seen a decline of more than a half in the population of that bird. As the Minister may know, in December they were added to the UK’s red list of endangered birds

along with the house martin and the greenfinch, joining the cuckoo and nightingale whose songs are now very rarely heard.

Swifts are summer visitors from Africa arriving in the UK in the last week of April or in early May, staying only long enough to breed. They are the most amazing, beautiful creatures and they are the fastest of all birds in level flight, reaching speeds of almost 70 miles an hour. A single bird can fly more than 1 million miles in its lifetime. That is why it is honestly heartbreaking that we are seeing them less and less in our skies, and a profound tragedy that, without urgent action, our children and grandchildren are running out of time to discover the wonders that nature holds.

In that context, it is therefore extremely concerning to hear about the lack of progress at the recent COP15 meeting in Nairobi, with just two targets finalised and ongoing disagreements about finance and the headline nature loss targets in particular. The post-2020 global biodiversity framework, due to be adopted in Montreal, should be setting out a vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050 at the very latest. It should be setting out a vision of reversing biodiversity loss, with a series of targets and milestones for 2030. As others have noted, it must be a Paris agreement for nature and mark a turning point in our relationship with the natural world.

Theresa Villiers >

(Chipping Barnet) (Con)

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Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the goals that we need to secure at this and future conferences is protection for the world's peatlands, as crucially important carbon sinks and a source of great biodiversity, supporting many species?

Caroline Lucas >

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I could not agree more with the right hon. Lady. In fact, I will come on to say a few words about peat very shortly. It sometimes feels that with all the focus on planting trees, which is very important, people sometimes forget that, actually, there is far more carbon sequestered in our peatlands than we will replace with our trees.

Dr Andrew Murrison >

(South West Wiltshire) (Con)

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I am listening very carefully to what the hon. Lady has to say. Does she agree that one of the most important things that we can do is reduce the amount of waste that we send for incineration? In that respect, will she welcome the targets set out in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs consultation document of 16 March, which look as if they are taking the Government towards reducing the amount of waste that goes to incineration? Does she agree particularly that the incinerator at Westbury has no place in our waste disposal strategy going forward and does she hope that the Government will place a moratorium on these horrible things?

Caroline Lucas >

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I am delighted to agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the Westbury incinerator in particular and about incineration in general. He is absolutely right. The sooner that we can move towards a genuinely circular economy, where we are not producing the waste in the first place, the better.

I was talking about the progress at the pre-meeting of COP15 in Nairobi just a few weeks ago. Frankly, it was woeful. In the closing plenary, non-governmental organisations warned:

“Biodiversity and the ecosystems across our planet are on the brink of collapse, and so is the CBD process itself right now. If nothing changes, we are heading towards failure at COP15. We cannot afford for that to happen.”

Indeed, while Nairobi saw positive development on the goal for halting extinctions and the mission to achieve a nature-positive world by 2030, even those proposals are absolutely littered with brackets, meaning that they have yet to be agreed multilaterally. As a reminder, following the earlier talks in Geneva, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, the executive secretary of the UN convention on biological diversity noted:

“Most of the recommendations...have many brackets. Not few—many brackets.”

According to observers there was an apparent lack of political leadership and urgency in those negotiating rooms in Nairobi, with countries failing to build consensus and with the text as a consequence being described as “messy and lacklustre”. As one campaigner with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds put it, “We have a marathon to finish before we can say that we are close to a successful outcome, but no one seems to be running let alone sprinting.”

As the Minister will know, the world failed to fully achieve any of the 20 UN biodiversity targets that were agreed back in 2010. Here in the UK, we missed a shocking 17 out of 20 targets, again leading the RSPB to declare that we had seen a “lost decade for nature.” The world simply cannot afford another lost decade. It is essential that an ambitious framework is agreed at COP15 and that we learn from the failed efforts of the past to ensure that its targets are met.

Here in Parliament today, there has been far less scrutiny of this summit in comparison with November’s COP26 summit in Glasgow. In some ways that is understandable given that COP26 was a UK-hosted summit, but it is still concerning that, to date, there have been no debates or ministerial statements on COP15 in the House of Commons, all the more so given that Ministers have themselves acknowledged that nature and climate are two sides of the same coin and that we needed a joined-up strategy both for COP26 and indeed for COP15.

While MPs have been able to engage with the COP26 President at COP26 oral questions for which I am very grateful, no parallel mechanism exists for COP15. As a consequence, I just do not think that we have the same familiarity with the UK’s negotiating objectives or, indeed, the milestones in the run-up to that Montreal summit.

I have some crucial questions for the Minister. Ahead of the summit in Nairobi, it was reported that the UK Government were helping to co-ordinate a High Ambition statement, which called for, among other things:

“An ambitious global biodiversity framework to halt and reverse biodiversity loss globally, with goals for 2050 and targets for 2030 and strong reporting and review mechanisms.”

That, of course, is very welcome, but will the Minister provide us with a more specific breakdown of the UK’s negotiating objectives? What steps is his Department taking to secure them? Will he commit to regularly updating this House as we progress towards the summit in December? Will he commit to raising the profile of the summit across government?

I appreciate, particularly this afternoon, that we have no idea who the Prime Minister will be in December, but regardless of who wins the Conservative leadership race, they should attend in person as a practical and tangible way of demonstrating their commitment to securing an ambitious global agreement. As we know from Glasgow, attendance of world leaders focuses minds and sets the pace of negotiations, and all of the evidence suggests that that will be much needed in Montreal.

Let me highlight several critical elements that will be essential in ensuring that that global biodiversity framework does indeed reverse nature loss. I welcome the strengthening of the 2030 mission, which now includes words on “halting” and “reversing” biodiversity loss, meaning that it is aligned with the Leaders Pledge for Nature, which is a vast improvement on the previous draft that aimed only to put biodiversity on a “path” to recovery by 2030. We also need to see specific and ambitious commitments from Governments to ensure that that mission is delivered, underpinned by robust accountability mechanisms and, of course, the necessary finance.

Looking at the agreement first, there should be a set of 2030 targets to prevent extinctions, recover species populations, and to retain and restore the extent and quality of habitats. Secondly, we need accompanying 2030 action targets that genuinely tackle the key pressures and drivers of biodiversity loss. Thirdly, we need agreement on the prominent target to effectively and equitably protect and conserve at least 30% of land, inland waters, seas, and coasts by 2030. I welcome the fact that the Government have championed this goal in negotiations so far. I hope in their role as a member of the High Ambition Coalition and as Ocean co-chair they continue to persuade others to do so.

Fourthly, in addition to a strong implementation mechanism, the UK Government should also champion a ratchet mechanism similar to that enshrined in the Paris agreement, to encourage countries to strengthen their plans over time.

Fifthly, the framework must recognise the important role of indigenous peoples and local communities in protecting biodiversity. Globally, their lands cover one third of the Earth’s land surface and 85% of biodiversity conservation areas. It is essential that the global framework respects and strengthens their land rights.

Sixthly, while target 16 includes some positive language on consumption, it is notable that the framework is missing a clear target to reduce countries' ecological footprint. That is particularly crucial for our food systems, which are responsible for 80% of deforestation. The Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member, has recommended that the UK advocate for stronger wording on developed countries' reducing unsustainable consumption and production, but as well as stronger language we need a clear target. I ask the Minister whether the Government will champion the need for an outcome on halving our global production and consumption footprint by 2030.

Then we come to funding. Any framework must be underpinned by the resources necessary to implement the targets and hold countries accountable for their progress towards achieving them, yet finance has been one of the most challenging parts of the negotiation so far. When he appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee last month, the Minister of State for the Pacific and the International Environment in the other place told us that, on finance:

“The UK has a particular role to play, given the networks and relationships that we built in the run up to COP 26... We intend to use and are using those networks to try to plug at least that part of the gap.”

That is welcome, but can the Minister tell us what kind of financial figures the Government are looking at? Can he tell us if that will be enough to meet the so-called biodiversity funding gap?

In the final plenary session in Geneva, developing countries called for richer countries to provide at least \$100 billion a year for biodiversity, rising to \$700 billion by 2030. That is obviously a large sum but, as the Minister for the International Environment reminded us, the top 50 food-producing countries spend about the same amount every year in subsidising often destructive land use. Regardless of the final figure, funding for biodiversity must of course be new and be additional to climate finance and overseas development aid and, at the very least, harmful subsidies must be redirected towards nature-positive activities and investments.

It may be that in his response the Minister will point to the fact that the Global Environment Facility saw its funding increase by almost 30% for 2022 to 2026. That is welcome, but let us remember that that funding supports countries to meet their obligations under not only the convention on biodiversity, but several other agreements, including the climate change agreement. Totalling just \$5.25 billion, its funding remains vastly insufficient to respond to the growing crisis.

Domestically, the UK must meet the Paris agreement for nature with renewed commitment and determination to deliver on the ambition of the 25-year environment plan, to leave the environment in a better state. We all know that the Government are not short of warm words when it comes to being a global leader on the environment, but too often the reality tells a different story. Nature in this country is under pressure from every angle: industrial agriculture, climate change, pollution such as microplastics, which are now widespread in our environment, and untreated sewage regularly dumped in UK waters, creating a risk for the environment and public health.

The Government's failure to ban peat burning meant that vital carbon stores were set alight just weeks before COP26, and its Environment Act 2021 targets fundamentally lack ambition, with a target of increasing species abundance by just 10% by 2042 compared with 2030 levels leading some to say that England will have less nature in 20 years' time than we do today. That is hardly a helpful target, and it has led the Office for Environmental Protection to conclude that it

“will not deliver nature recovery”,

or achieve the aims set out in the 25-year plan.

Warm words need to be replaced with meaningful action. Given the scale of the biodiversity crisis, the Government must also go further and faster than the commitment in the Environment Act to halt the decline of species by 2030, strengthening it to reversing biodiversity loss by 2030. Simply stopping things getting worse is no longer enough. The pledge to protect 30% of land and sea for nature was welcomed by the environment sector, but research shows that as little as 5% of land is currently effectively managed for nature, not the 26% the Government sometimes suggest. For 30 by 30 to genuinely deliver, it must ensure that protective areas are effectively managed for nature in the long term, with effective monitoring.

Barry Gardiner >

(Brent North) (Lab)

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Does the hon. Member recall that we set out a biodiversity target to halt the decline in nature by 2010, and we set out a target again in 2010 under the Aichi targets to halt the decline in nature loss by 2020, but we achieved neither? Is there anything in the papers in advance of COP15 that gives her any hope that our ability to implement a reverse or even a halt in the decline in nature by 2030 is more likely this time than it was in the previous two decades?

Caroline Lucas >

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I am genuinely struggling to know how to answer the hon. Gentleman's question. I want to say yes, and in a sense awareness is greater now and the general public's anger at seeing nature decline before their eyes is perhaps stronger. However, although there are some good words, unless we get rid of all the brackets in the texts and get them agreed, and unless, crucially, we have both the finance and the implementation, with a real focus on putting this stuff into practice, I am afraid I cannot stand here and tell him with any degree of certainty that we will have a better outcome.

I am coming to the end of my comments, as I am sure you will be pleased to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will touch briefly on the marine environment, because I do not want us to leave that out. I was lucky enough to join Greenpeace as part of its Operation Ocean Witness to see for myself the destructive fishing practices that are still happening, even in our supposed marine protected areas. We came across a French-flagged industrial fly shooter fishing vessel in the Bassurelle Sandbank MPA, and it was shocking to see the destruction in its wake. Fly shooting is hugely damaging not only for our marine ecosystems, but for local fishing communities, including those in my constituency, who are increasingly unable to make ends meet.

Will the Government finally please use their powers under the Fisheries Act 2020 and take action to restore our depleted seas? Will they make all MPAs in UK waters fully protected and immediately restrict the fishing licences of industrial vessels so that they cannot fish in those precious ecosystems?

I also want to underline how crucial it is that we address climate and nature together. They are two sides of the same coin. In Parliament I have championed the climate and ecological emergency Bill, which would address the climate and ecological crises in a holistic way, and I urge the Government to pick up that Bill in this new Session.

Finally, at the core of the climate and ecological crisis is our broken economic model, which prioritises growth above all else, including the health of people and planet. There is a growing body of evidence showing the dangers of our current economic model, with a report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services by 82 of the world's top scientists and experts saying that the

“focus on short-term profits and economic growth”,

often excludes the value of nature.

The Minister will be aware that the Treasury-commissioned Dasgupta review called for an

“urgent and transformative change in how we think, act and measure economic success to protect and enhance our prosperity and the natural world”.

Yet we are still not really seeing what follow-up there will be to the Dasgupta review. Another inquiry by the Environmental Audit Committee on biodiversity in the UK made it clear that

“Alternatives to GDP urgently need to be adopted as more appropriate ways to measure economic success”.

We must now look to build an economy for the future, following countries such as New Zealand, which is already leading the way with the world's first ever wellbeing budget. The nature of our economy must be on the agenda at COP15 and the Government should join other countries in showing leadership by urgently introducing alternative indicators of economic success that prioritise the health of people and planet.

Much of this debate is around global challenges, but I want to end by focusing on the local and talking about the round-headed rampion, of which I am a proud species champion. The round-headed rampion is a beautiful blue wildflower, which is known as the “Pride of Sussex” and is the official county flower. However, it is increasingly rare, since it grows only on chalk grasslands such as those on the South Downs, and those chalk grasslands have declined by 80% just since world war two. Its fate relies on the protection, preservation and restoration of these important habitats.

Jeremy Corbyn >

(Islington North) (Ind)

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The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and I agree with her on protecting habitats, grasslands and other places. However, does she also accept that isolated protection does not really work, and that there has to be a connectivity between preserved areas, just as there has to be a connectivity between forests and natural grasslands?

Caroline Lucas >[Share](#)

I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely right: that connectivity is crucial to a thriving natural environment. Unless we ensure that we have not just isolated protection areas, but a genuinely joined-up corridor of environmental improvement and even widen out from that, we will not be successful in our aims.

I will just wind up by saying that as we head towards COP15, let us remember the beauty of this world and what we risk losing by failing to protect it for ourselves, for our children and for future generations. I urge the Minister once again to do all he can to ensure a positive outcome from this important summit.

 2.10pm**Chris Grayling** >

(Epsom and Ewell) (Con)

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It is a great pleasure to be speaking in the debate this afternoon. While I do not always share the views of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), I agree with much of what she said. She is absolutely right to highlight the imperative this year to deliver a good outcome at COP. I very much welcome the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), to his new position. Nobody is expecting him to be able to rewrite the world in one afternoon, but I hope he will be able to secure or stay in his position, and that he will listen to this afternoon's debate and take a steer on a subject that brings together Members from all parts of the House.

This issue does not divide us—fundamentally, every one of us agrees that the loss of the natural world is a disaster in every respect that has to be reversed step by step. We have to take an approach that begins to rebuild nature. I happen to believe that we can do that and achieve other things as well—I do not think this is an either/or, as I will explain. This is such an imperative, and this year it is so important that the world acts and, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion rightly says, starts to deliver.

It is a matter of regret to me that the COP summit is not happening in China. In reality, we need the Chinese in particular to take a lead on this, because they are by far the world's biggest consumers right now. Given the scale of China and the emerging demand for natural products and agricultural products in China—apart from the issues we all know about relating to the parts of the wildlife trade that we all abhor and detest—we need the Chinese to be at the heart of the necessary changes, so it is a shame that they are not hosting the summit. However, I very much hope they will still play an active part in it.

Chris Skidmore >

(Kingswood) (Con)

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I am listening with interest to the comments that my right hon. Friend has made. It is unfortunate that COP15 was unable to take place in China. Does he not agree that to try to ensure that China recognises the global importance of its chairmanship of COP15, albeit in Canada, we need as many world leaders as possible to attend in Montreal, including whoever is the next Prime Minister of the United Kingdom? They should put the date in their calendar and make it a priority to attend in Montreal, to take part in those negotiations and to demonstrate that we need a Paris moment for nature. The UK's leadership at COP26, delivering the Glasgow climate pact and also our leadership on net zero have been conditional on ensuring that leaders at the very top take part in negotiations. Does he agree that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom should also be there in December?

Chris Grayling >

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I absolutely agree with that. I hope that he or she—whoever is elected—will do that. One of the questions I have been asking the candidates is, “Will you protect and keep up the agenda that this Government already have on the environment?” We are seen as leaders internationally. Yes, the strategies need to be actioned, but nevertheless we are doing good work in this area. We are targeting aid in the right places, and we are doing as much as any nation on Earth, but that does not mean there is not an awful lot more to do, and that is one of the things I will be talking about this afternoon. I absolutely agree with the point he is making.

Let me start by touching momentarily on what we are doing here, and then I will go on to talk about the international challenge. First, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion is absolutely right to talk about the decline in native species. She is parliamentary species champion for a sadly rare flower in Sussex. I am parliamentary species champion for the not yet very rare, but much too reduced in number, hedgehog. There used to be 35 million hedgehogs in the UK, and there are now probably 1.5 million. The numbers are recovering in urban areas, but not in rural areas. The decline has been appalling, and if we do not do something to reverse it, they will rapidly move from the vulnerable list to the very endangered list. For a creature that we all love and adore, that must not be allowed to happen.

It is about protecting and extending habitats, a smart approach to the management of our countryside and doing things differently. I happen to believe that we have to be pretty robust in trying to change the nature of the pesticides we use. It seems pretty clear that they have been a factor in the loss of biodiversity. We have to do that in a smart way—we cannot compromise our food production.

As we know, we have a crisis in Ukraine that is feeding through to food supplies around the world. Last Monday, I visited a regenerative farm in Gloucestershire, which I thought mapped out a pretty good path towards sustaining our agriculture, but in a much more nature-friendly way, and I am encouraged by those who have started as pioneers in regenerative agriculture, which involves a much closer relationship between farming and the natural world, leaving aside more space for nature, much more careful management of the land and taking advantage of natural approaches to manage pests, rather than simply covering the countryside in pesticides. It is encouraging to see that that movement, which started small, has now grown and the number of people in the farming world expressing an interest in it is growing. We have to protect the interests of our farmers, and we have to look after and support our farmers, but I am yet to meet a farmer who wants to trash the countryside. If we can help them farm in a more environmentally sustainable way, that has to be the right thing.

I very much support the work that the Campaign to Protect Rural England is doing to try to encourage more planting of hedgerows. For a creature like the hedgehog, hedgerows in the countryside are vital, as is a good field margin. It creates the kind of corridors that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was talking about. It is no good having wildlife in a little pocket. We need more hedgerows, more corridors and more space for them, and farming does not have to be done in a way that kills everything around. A wider field margin can still be part of a successful field with a successful crop, where the creatures can live side by side with the crops. If we do not take a much more enlightened approach to the management of our countryside, we will not be able to reverse the decline of species that we have sadly seen. That is our task here.

I very much welcome the steps the Government have taken so far. The structures put in place for farming, with a much greater focus on environmental stewardship, are good. There are challenges in the farming world as they adapt to that, but we should not move away from an approach that says, “We will reward farmers who can look after our countryside and we will encourage the use of farmland in the best way to sustain the wildlife that is so important to our countryside.”

I want to focus today on deforestation internationally. To my mind, it is one of the biggest global challenges we face. The destruction already done to forests around the world has had a huge environmental impact. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion made reference to what is happening in the Amazon. It is a scandal and a disgrace. It is mostly illegal, and it is a matter of extreme regret to me that as we in this House continue to challenge the Brazilian Government over what is happening, warm words are sent back via the embassy here, but on the ground nothing seems to happen.

Many of us in this House have met people from the indigenous communities who have told us in no uncertain terms about the illegal logging and illegal mining happening in those areas. It has to stop. I have said it before and I will say it again: Brazil cannot be treated as a good member of the international community unless this stops, and we should not sign trade deals with the Brazilians unless this stops. All our diplomatic contacts with Brazil should be focused around saying, “If you want us to work with you normally, this has to stop.”

It is not as if there are no alternatives. I know from discussions with people in Brazil that there are 19 million hectares of degraded land in Brazil, and there are programmes to restore parts of it. That is good, but they are still chopping down the rainforest at the same time. Why not focus on the restoration of land in areas where deforestation has already taken place and where that land has become substantially degraded, rather than simply cutting down and cutting down? It needs tough enforcement action and political willpower, and it must happen, because as the hon. Lady said, the consequences globally of the loss of the Amazon rainforest are simply enormous.

It is a matter of enormous discredit to Brazil and the international community that this illegal action is being allowed to take place. Month after month we hear from Brazil that the situation is getting worse, not better. It really has to stop. I praise the Government for the work they are doing to try to protect the other great forest, in the Congo basin. The noble Lord Goldsmith has been at the forefront of supporting efforts to protect that rainforest. We must keep that important work up as the Administration evolve towards a new leadership, but the Brazilian issue has to be solved. We simply cannot go on like this.

The biggest subject that needs to be on the agenda for the discussion at COP about how we should start restoring biodiversity around the world should be the restoration of degraded land. The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that the amount of degraded land around the world is equivalent to an area the size of South America, and we can see it. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am an active member of the International Conservation Caucus Foundation, along with the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner)—we are very much of the same mind on these issues. I went with the ICCF to Kenya in April to visit projects in the Maasai Mara. As I flew back to Nairobi, looking down from the plane, I could see what has gone wrong. Areas that were forest have been cleared and the land has been poorly farmed. It is now degraded and will gradually dissipate into desert.

That exists all around the world, whether it is that kind of land in Africa, derelict mangrove swamps or areas of arid land in other continents. If we are to solve the issue of biodiversity loss, and at the same time provide livelihoods for the people living in those areas who have chosen to chop things down because they see it as their only option, we will have to start restoring that degraded land. That is the biggest thing that I want to see come out of the COP summit: a global programme to start to restore the land that we have lost, with some of it returning to habitat, some of it used in a proper way for farming—not subsistence farming where people scrape a living, but properly managed agriculture that can create genuine livelihoods—and some degree of sustainable logging and forestry, because that can be done in a nature-friendly way. The key, however, is to bring that land back into proper use.

Jeremy Corbyn >

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I absolutely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. Does he not also think that we have to do something about the market for very rare, valuable tropical hardwoods? That market acts as a huge economic incentive for people in forest areas, because it is their only way of surviving economically. We have to do something about that as well, because we are indeed the market for those products.

Chris Grayling >

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I do not often agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but I absolutely agree with him on that point. None of us in this country should be buying tropical hardwoods for furniture or other purposes.

At the same time—this is perhaps where I differ slightly from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion—for communities in developing countries where we want to see the restoration of the natural habitats that are so crucial to some of the world's most iconic endangered species, our starting point should be the people themselves. We have to ensure that there are proper livelihoods, so that people can earn a living and at the same time benefit from the restoration of nature. That means helping them to establish proper, viable farming on part of that land, on a much larger scale and more efficiently, it means ecotourism to bring wealth into those areas, and it means sustainable logging and the sustainable management of forests. All those things are necessary. This is, to some extent, about GDP growth, because that is how we give those people the sense that, by properly managing that land, they benefit from it and also benefit from the restoration of nature.

Caroline Lucas >

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Just to be clear on the record, I absolutely agree that people in developing countries who would otherwise be deprived of their livelihoods if current unsustainable practices are not stopped should be supported into more sustainable practices. We have an absolute responsibility to do that, but the idea that we should go out there and treat increasing GDP as an overall abstract aim is wrong. If GDP happens to go up, then fine, but surely our aim should be to allow those people to thrive by giving them sustainable livelihoods, not chasing some kind of GDP figure, which is what I worry about both here and there.

Chris Grayling >

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But if we do not help them to grow their GDP—and do that in a sustainable, nature-friendly way that enables them to derive real benefits from the proper stewardship of that land, the restoration of natural habitats and the restoration of degraded land for other purposes—in the end, we will not create the kind of local ownership that will break the cycle of illegal logging, poaching, the illegal wildlife trade and the rest.

My message to the Minister is this. This COP is enormously important. It is a vital moment for the world. In my view, it is as important a moment for the world as COP26 was last year. The hon. Lady is right: climate and nature are two sides of the same coin. We have played a really important leadership role at COP in securing agreements, which might not do everything we wanted but took us a step forwards. We need to do the same this year. We need to send a senior delegation, we need to push for a proper agreement, and we need to be leaders ourselves in what we do in this country, but we cannot let the global community miss this opportunity. So my message to him, as he takes up this role and as we prepare for a reshaped Administration—I hope he stays where he is—is this. Will he please do everything he can to ensure that the United Kingdom plays the cornerstone role in the COP discussions this autumn, which will be so important to ensuring that we manage to reverse a global decline in nature that should be a matter of shame to the whole of mankind?

🕒 2.26pm

Olivia Blake >

(Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab)

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I am so glad to be called in this important debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for the debate, and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for opening it and getting the attention of the House.

As has been said, these are twin emergencies. We have a crisis in nature and a crisis in our climate. It is often forgotten that the two are intrinsically linked. We will not be able to play our part in keeping temperature rises below 1.5° C without a plan to restore the natural environment. This is also something that many constituents are concerned about, and there are some great projects up and down the country. In Sheffield, we have had our swift summit this year, which was sponsored by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust. We have also had amazing opportunities for friends groups, one of which has been doing work—it is called climate work, but really it is nature work—in Whirlow Brook park. The friends group is doing a fantastic job to tackle the issue locally.

But the COP discussions are obviously global, and they are not a peripheral part of the climate diplomacy that we need to see. They are integral to co-ordinating global action to halt rising temperatures. That is why the Government's failure to deliver the renewal and restoration of nature in the UK is so alarming. The fact that we are such a nature-depleted island is very concerning. I will not say that there has been a lack of action, because the Government have had plenty to announce. Doubtless the Minister will reel off a list of initiatives, strategy documents and pots of money in his response to the debate, but the stream of press releases seems to be driven more by the need to say something than the need to face up to the reality of the challenges ahead and do something.

It is not just me who thinks that. The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee has said:

“Although there are countless Government policies and targets to ‘leave the environment in a better state than we found it’, too often they are grandiose statements lacking teeth and devoid of effective delivery mechanisms.”

The Environmental Audit Committee has previously commented:

“There is no strategy indicating how new biodiversity policies will work together. Implementation of these policies could be piecemeal, conflicting, and of smaller scale as a result.”

The 2021 Climate Change Committee progress report agreed and said that the Government should

“Publish an overarching strategy that clearly outlines the relationships and interactions between the multiple action plans in development for the natural environment”.

The CCC’s verdict in 2021 was damning: the Government planted less than half of the trees and committed to restore less than half of the peatlands recommended. It is alarming that, after a whole year, the 2022 progress report reads so similarly. Peatland, woodland and hedgerow restoration are not the start and finish of nature restoration, but they are a significant part of lowering our national emissions. Since 2021, the Government have made little to no advance in meeting the targets they have set. In the case of peatland, they have actually enshrined into law regulations that leave huge swathes outside protections. Again, it is not me saying this; it is the CCC.

Despite pledging hundreds of millions for new trees, the Government have done nothing to address the skills shortages and the availability of training for new arborists, to ensure that we have the mix of trees we need and to increase the capacity of domestic tree nurseries so that we do not risk new diseases coming into the UK. Ministers even sat on their hands while the Wykeham nursery was closed.

It is shocking that, in its assessment of the Government’s policies and plans for agriculture and land use, the CCC can identify not one credible plan to abate emissions. It is a wasted opportunity that emissions have been flat in this area since 2008. We should be using the power of our natural environment to lock away carbon. A lot has been said about our rainforests, but in the UK the peatlands are our rainforests. Other countries would be thrilled to have that natural environment, and we are not valuing it. That means we need a proper plan to restore and protect all our peatlands. It means we need real action to increase tree canopy cover and renew our hedgerows, and it means protecting important water and marine habitats such as salt marshes and seagrass meadows. All these measures will reverse the decline in nature at the same time as developing natural carbon sinks to help us meet the challenge of the climate emergency.

I have one message for Ministers today. They cannot spin their way out of the nature and climate emergencies. A press release for a badly thought through pot of money or a strategy that is light on detail might give them something to say in a debate such as this, but sooner or later the rhetoric will meet reality. It is well past time Ministers started to deliver.

🕒 2.32pm

Jeremy Corbyn >

(Islington North) (Ind)

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I am really pleased that this debate is happening today and that we are able to have a serious discussion about the effects of climate change on biodiversity. We have to be realistic: what is happening now is absolutely unprecedented in known human history, given the rate at which we are losing wildlife, biodiversity and insect life, and ultimately this is extremely damaging to human life itself. There has to be a much more thought through process of linking up all the environmental consequences of our lives, of industries and of the pollution that takes place.

Conferences such as COP15 are very important because they are a way of bringing people together. They are a way of trying to persuade all countries that the issues of CO₂ emissions and their effects on climate change and global warming are absolutely huge, and that something has to be done about them. However, that is not the whole story, because to some extent we are guilty of exporting our pollution and our emissions elsewhere. This country, most of Europe and some parts of north America have increasingly strict environmental protocols—on river waste, air pollution and so much else—which I absolutely support and endorse, but the effect of that is to shift manufacturing and polluting activities somewhere else. That means we are not actually improving the global environment; all we are doing is shifting the pollution to some other place.

I hope one conclusion from this debate—I am sure the Minister will understand all this—is that we have to be very active internationally in trying to bring about a more sustainable world everywhere. This is about joined-up actions being taken by the UK Government. A very lengthy letter sent to them recently talks about the need for joined-up action by the British Government, as well as reducing the

“ecological footprint, domestically and globally”,

ensuring that

“biodiversity loss has been halted and reversed by 2030, against a baseline of 2020”,

and creating

“robust and well connected natural infrastructure across all UK nations”,

as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) pointed out in her excellent contribution to the debate. If we do not have that sense of joined-up thinking, we will be missing the whole point altogether.

There are many issues we could discuss today, but the one to which I want to draw attention first is water pollution in this country. I grew up with the idea that, somehow or other, the appalling levels of pollution created in all of our major rivers in this country by industrialisation and the industrial revolution of the 19th century were gradually becoming a thing of the past and that we were beginning to clean up our rivers. Yes, rivers in some places are a lot cleaner than they have ever been. The Thames, just outside, was biologically dead at one time, but it was eventually—very slowly—restored quite considerably. There used to be a huge tank in County Hall showing all the varieties of fish now found in the Thames.

Sadly, for many of our rivers, the trend is now going in the opposite direction, as the water companies routinely discharge raw sewage into our rivers, which obviously has a devastating effect on fish and natural life, and clearly becomes dangerous for the rest of the population as well. Yesterday, right on cue, Thames Water sent a very long letter to all of us who represent constituencies within its area telling us how much it is going to do to try not to pollute rivers, mainly the Thames, in the future by better management of the tributary rivers, the drainage system and so on. That is good, if it is actually going to do it, but its record, like those of most other water companies, is pretty terrible. At the same time, the water industry is dragging vast profits out of the water supply and allowing pollution levels to get so bad.

I do think we have to be extremely tough on the water companies and their management of rivers. That includes managing rivers upstream, as well as managing our paved-over areas in our urban communities to deal with the flooding issues in this country. It is not as if any of this is not known, but this is a question of joined-up thinking between planning and local authorities, water suppliers and central Government to try to achieve something much more sustainable.

If we are to deal with increasing levels of unusual rainfall, that obviously means better management of rivers. It is not all going to be done by flood protection. It would be done much better by upstream planting on rivers in this country, which to some extent has been done in Somerset and the west, and the use of the floodplains as what they are intended for—the key is in their name—so that we end up with less flooding and damage to property through better environmental management of those water resources. This is about the biodiversity of our river systems, which is central to so much of our thinking.

There is a debate everywhere about rewilding. Anyone who has read Isabella Tree’s excellent book about Knepp, and the way that that rewilding took place, knows that initially, many of the neighbouring farmers objected to it and said that she was creating a scruffy place that had lots of weeds on it and was damaging their crops and so on—I have heard many of these arguments for a very long time. She reports in a fascinating section of her book that eventually, after the rewilding had grown a great deal and become much more biodiverse, crop production rates went up because of the high levels of pollination by higher levels of insect life surrounding those farms. As the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) said, there is an interesting phenomenon of joined-up thinking on farming, because it is about the biodiversity surrounding crop production as well as the preserved areas that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion talked about in her excellent contribution. We must think about that aspect.

This is also about how local authorities behave. I have the honour of representing my constituency, which I believe is the smallest urban constituency in the country and, I am pretty sure, the most densely populated in the country. Most people in my constituency have no open space of their own whatsoever, not even a balcony. Bringing up our children in that atmosphere, it is not easy to get them to understand the interaction between human life and natural life, because they live in an entirely concrete environment. What we do in our schools and our parks is important, as is the message that those young people get.

I have always visited each of the primary schools in my constituency as often as I can, usually once a year, and I have been to two primary schools and one secondary school in the past week to hold a discussion with students about their views on the environment. These are children growing up in a very urban environment, but they absolutely get the connectivity between the natural world and themselves, and they get what is possible in the small growing spaces that they have in those schools.

Yesterday morning I was in Ambler Primary School near Finsbury Park. It is a very densely populated urban area, with high levels of traffic around it. We were talking about biodiversity, growing flowers and so on, and one student asked me what I meant when I said that we should not be cutting grass too short. I was explaining about wildflowers and biodiversity, and he wanted to know whether

that included football pitches. I explained that there had to be a balance between keeping grass on football pitches the right length and growing flowers and other things—it is a serious practical question if your interest is mainly in football.

Winning people over to these arguments is so important, and today's debate will help us to do that. We must also encourage local authorities to have more permeable surfaces and fewer car parks with impervious layers, and to end the appalling practice in many parts of the country of paving over front gardens to park cars, when those front gardens are an important point of nature. Indeed, paving them over increases the danger of flooding, and thus the pollution of rivers further downstream. Some local authorities have done well on that. For example, Rotherham Council has done an excellent job in ensuring a huge level of biodiversity on all its roadside borders, and a number of other councils have done exactly the same. We should support them in that.

Those are the things we can do ourselves, through farming policy, the use—or non-use—of pesticides, and building up a sense of biodiverse resilience, which in turn will protect endangered species. Sadly, as the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell pointed out, the hedgehog is not far off being an endangered species. Obviously I hope its population recovers, but it seems to be recovering in urban rather than rural areas. That is deeply disturbing and suggests that it is due to a combination of farming practices and dangers from roads, whereas urban areas seem to be maintaining or even recovering their hedgehog population. We can do an awful lot, and we must bring up our young people to understand that.

I pay tribute to teachers in schools who do their best to achieve that. During a visit that I made recently to another local school, Newington Green Primary School, there was another brilliant set of children who were concerned about these issues. Older students, such as those at the Arts and Media School Islington, who are preparing to do their GCSEs and later their A-levels, believe—this view has also been put forward in the House—that there should be much more environmental education at all stages of our education system, so that children grow up understanding such things.

To add to what has been said already, the loss of biodiversity on a global scale is huge. The number of animal species that are becoming extinct year on year is increasing fast, and there will come a time when the elephant, the tiger, the lion and so many other large species will be on the danger list, as well as very many smaller species that are almost extinct at the present time. As such, I agree with what the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell said about changing the story and the narrative.

In some places, such as the Indonesian, African and Amazon rainforests, there is a huge economic advantage to be gained from selling tropical hardwoods. On the way to get one tree—iron tree, mahogany, or whatever else it happens to be—the whole forest around it is destroyed or, in the case of the Amazon rainforest, wantonly burned down in order to create the short-term advantage of growing soya for a few years, leaving a virtual desert behind. I discussed that issue with a lot of environmental campaigners and others from Brazil, both from Rio and from the Amazon, during the COP in Glasgow last year, and the similarity of views between those from urban Rio and those from the Amazon area was very interesting. The commitment now being made by the putative and hopefully next President of Brazil, Lula, to end all the destruction of the rainforest and promote sustainability there is welcome. I hope he gets elected and is able to achieve that goal, because it would be an enormous step forward.

It is no good western countries lecturing the poorest people in the poorest parts of the world about the need to protect their environment, because we believe it is the right thing to do, when they cannot feed their children, do not have a proper education system, do not have a health service, and are living in levels of desperate poverty. Something else has to go with it. Eco-tourism does help, as do sustainable agriculture and our purchasing practices and powers, but this is also about bringing people on board. If we just fence off an area and say, “This is preserved, and we are going to put armed guards in it to protect the animals that may become extinct”, we are not sending a very good message to the people who live in that area. The most effective conservation, whether marine or land conservation, is done with the participation, support and involvement of the entire community that lives locally.

I will give one example. In Mexico, the turtle on the Atlantic coast was rapidly depleted in numbers and was not far off extinction. There was an idea to create a protected zone for sea turtles, with lots of guards to prevent people from stealing turtle eggs. What would have happened then? Corruption would have come in, somebody would have started stealing the eggs, and so on. What they actually did was recruit all the turtle hunters to become turtle protectors as a way of making money out of visitors going there. There is nothing like a poacher turned gamekeeper to look after a species that was at great risk. Conservation can work if people bring the population along with them; it does not work if security companies, armed guards and everything else are sent in. It is so important to achieve that more universal buy-in.

I am delighted that we are having this debate. We have to ensure that the generation going through school—the next generation coming up—understands that our lives and the survival of this planet depend on how we interact with nature. That means bringing children up to understand that insects, wildlife, and wild places are not their enemies—that we have to live alongside nature, not destroy it through our activities and our greed. They will then get the message about connectivity: that when a person drops a plastic bag in a river, it ends up in the sea, and we end up eating that plastic with the fish we consume. It is about conserving and preserving

the natural world and the environment. Of course, that includes the big global conferences and the international agreements, but environment is basically a state of mind: whether we live with nature, or destroy it and see it as something solely to be exploited. Today's debate is a good example of how we can advance both of those agendas at the same time, ensuring that we get the international agreement that is essential, but bringing that debate into all the other actions of our lives and all the services that are administered by the public in this country.

🕒 2.49pm

Hilary Benn >

(Leeds Central) (Lab)

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I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing the debate and on making such a terrific speech. As she said, the forthcoming COP matters enormously for all the reasons she set out. We need targets so we can measure progress—that is the great benefit of them—and we need funding to help make that progress. We need every country that makes a commitment to have a plan back home to deliver it. We need progress to be measured and above all we need leadership. We need leadership internationally, leadership domestically in communities and leadership by us as individuals.

The decline in biodiversity and the loss of species across the world is well documented, but sadly not well known enough. I should declare my interest, as one or two other Members have, as the water vole species champion. That is an extremely grand title, especially when it is held by someone who, despite his best efforts, has yet to see a water vole in the wild. I did once hear the characteristic plop sound that water voles make—I know Ratty well from reading “The Wind in the Willows” to my grandchildren—when they come out of their mud tunnels in the riverbank and drop into the water. Perhaps it is very hard to see them for the very simple reason that since the end of the 1990s, a nationwide survey showed that water voles had disappeared from 90% of the sites where they were found a decade before—90%! There has been a further decline in the decade thereafter. In the case of water voles, one particular problem is predation by mink, who need to be controlled. What is really needed, however, is to improve water quality and to encourage farmers to restore and protect healthy waterways—in other words, places and rivers where water voles can thrive.

The heart of the problem we must address—colleagues touched on this in their contributions—is that we as humankind have been making use of the earth's gifts, those on the land and those beneath the seas that surround us, as if there was no consequence and no end to nature's bounty. That is what we have been doing and the pace at which we have done that has accelerated enormously in the last century or so. Just as with the climate crisis, we know now that that is not true: there is a limit and we have to start taking proper care, because we rely on the natural world and biodiversity for our very existence, including our economic welfare. We should applaud the work of Pavan Sukhdev—I had the privilege to meet him when I was the Environment Secretary—and Sir Partha Dasgupta, who have taught us about the economic value of biodiversity, if we wish to measure it in that way, just as Nick Stern told us about the far greater cost of not dealing with dangerous climate change, as opposed to the far lower cost of dealing with it, saying, “You make the choice.”

As we know, the natural world provides us with the very essentials of life: clean air and water, and food and fuel. It regulates our climate and helps to deal with pollution. It stems floodwaters and produces medicines. It is the very foundation of our economic and social wellbeing. A few years ago, I had the honour and privilege to visit the World Agroforestry Centre in Nairobi. We went into a lab and there was a range of plants on a bench. I went along, asking “What's this? What's this?” One was a small artemisia sapling and another rather odd-looking bit of bark apparently came from the prunus africana tree. I happened to know, because of my job, that artemisia is essential to making combination anti-malarial drugs more effective. I learned that pygeum—I do not know if I have pronounced that correctly—from the bark of the prunus africana tree has properties that help to treat prostate cancer.

We stood there discussing malaria, which is predominantly a disease of the poorer world, and prostate cancer, which has been a disease predominantly of the better off world, although that is beginning to change. We rely on both those plants to treat those diseases. Let us imagine that some clod-hopping human being millions of years ago had walked through the forest and decided to pull up to examine the only artemisia sapling and the only prunus africana sapling on the planet—think what we would have lost. That is why there is such a strong argument for looking after both what we have and know about and the plants that surround us of which we have not yet discovered the properties.

Despite the gravity of the crisis in biodiversity, it is important to try to address the task with optimism, because in the end, making ourselves depressed about the scale of the challenge is not, in my experience, a great motivator for action. We know that we can make progress. We can look at the creation of the national parks: that extraordinary bit of legislation from the post-war Labour

Government came out of a time of great conflict, economic crisis, debt and so on, with the support of politicians right across the House who were legislating to preserve beauty for posterity.

We can look at the size and commitment of the wildlife trusts. They have about 870,000 members, look after 2,300 nature reserves and provide some of the connections that my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who spoke so well, was talking about. Bits can be looked after, but the connection between them will help us truly to restore nature, which is why, towards the end of my time as the Environment Secretary, I asked Sir John Lawton to produce a report precisely on how those connections can better be made.

We can look at the marine conservation zones, which were created thanks to the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

Jeremy Corbyn >

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My right hon. Friend's point about connectivity is very important. Is he aware of the agreement between a number of central American countries to create a wildlife corridor for the jaguar to survive, because it travels over a huge range? If it is cut off in certain isolated bits, it will simply die off.

Hilary Benn >

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I was not aware of that—I am now—and what a great idea for countries to work together in that way.

When we were taking the Bill that became the 2009 Act through Parliament, I was really quite surprised to discover how little we appeared to know about what was on the seabed surrounding these islands. Some very intrepid divers, some of whom I met, went down and took photographs. If the photos were shown to me or to anybody else and the question was asked, "Where was that picture taken?", most people would say, "Is that the Great Barrier Reef?" No—it was under the murky waters of the North sea.

One thing we know about nature is that although we have been destroying it at a rate of knots, if we give it the chance, it can recover with astonishing speed. The North sea was originally covered abundantly in oyster beds, coarse peat banks and rock deposited by glaciers, and it was home to a rich community of marine species. A lot of that was sadly destroyed by bottom-trawl fisheries over the past century and it is now a relatively poor community of species.

Let me say a word on bottom trawling. It is an incredibly destructive practice, but it is unseen because it takes place beneath the waves. To make a slightly absurd analogy, let us imagine that to collect apples, someone decided to drag a net across the countryside taking with it all the hedges, tree saplings, bird nests and the trees on which the apples hang just for the purpose of collecting the apples in the process. People would be outraged and appalled, but that is what we have been doing on the surface of the seabed for a long time and no one sees it happening. It is about bearing witness to what is going on. The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who is not in his place, talked about the deforestation of the Amazon. The thing about technology is that, with satellites, we can see how the rainforest is reducing over time. It is really important that we use all those means to bear witness to what is taking place in order to motivate change.

We find the recovery of nature in some surprising places. There has been a lot of debate about the impact of wind farms on birds, but research has shown that, in effect, wind farms act as artificial reefs. They can host a very wide range of marine species once nature has had a chance to recover.

My final point is about the contribution that nature makes to our health and wellbeing.

Kerry McCarthy >

(Bristol East) (Lab)

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I am sorry that I could not be here for the beginning of the debate. Is there not a concern that although many marine protected areas have been designated, they are really just paper parks because things like bottom trawling are being allowed to continue? Does my right hon. Friend also share my concern that there is now a move towards deep-sea mining, which could be hugely environmentally damaging?

Hilary Benn >

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Yes, I do. There was cross-party support in the House of Commons for the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and the creation of marine conservation zones. We basically have a planning framework; we have had one on land for a long time, but we did not have one for the sea at all. We are now confronted with a choice about what we permit. The ability to understand the consequences of what is happening beneath the waves is important. We now have the means to do something about it, but we cannot just say “We’ve got the designation —job done,” and move on to something else. That is not sufficient at all.

Yesterday, my wife and I were discussing what I might talk about in this speech. Apart from telling me, “You must mention the water voles,”—I have now duly done so, and I hope that she has noticed—she said, “Tell them about our oak trees.” For the past 30 years or so, we have been planting oak trees from seed, along with ash and silver birch trees. “Nature reserve” would be a very grand title for the eight acres of former farmland in Essex that my mother set aside, where nature has been left to do its work. The tallest oak tree is probably about 20 or 25 feet now. Over the years, the trees that we have planted—the trees that nature has brought—have brought with them cuckoos, owls, adders, foxes, muntjac deer, the odd badger and white campion, as well as loads of brambles that I attempt to do battle with whenever I can. Every time I walk on that piece of land, I feel the same sense of anticipation about what has changed, what has grown and what is different.

Why do we feel like this? Because nature is part of our very soul. It is about who we are and where we come from. Think of how we encounter it—looking out of the window of a train as it rushes through the countryside, seeing the first crocus of spring, encountering the wonders and glories of the Yorkshire dales, seeing a view of Ditchling Beacon or a view of Scafell Pike from Great Moss, or hearing the buzz of a bee at the height of summer. We do not hear that buzz as much as we used to, or see as many moths. I remember when moths were really common in the summer. When did I last see one? There was an extraordinary experiment in which people were asked to put a bit of sticky plastic on their number plate, drive around and count how many insects were caught. That showed that there has been a catastrophic decline.

Chris Grayling >

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rose—

Hilary Benn >

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Ah! The right hon. Gentleman has returned.

Chris Grayling >

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I apologise for popping out briefly for a family call. Last summer, I went to the far north of Scotland. The further north we got, the more insects hit the windscreen. As more arable farming happens in the south of the country than in the north, that seems pretty clear evidence of the link between the disappearance of insects and pesticides. That is one reason why I was so attracted by the regenerative farming model.

Hilary Benn >

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I agree completely. There are one or two insects in the north of Scotland—midges in particular—that can cause a certain amount of distress, but just think of the glory of the Scottish countryside and the mountains. Who does not feel a sense of awe and wonder as they contemplate the astonishing biodiversity and landscape that our small islands reveal unto us?

Jim Shannon >

(Strangford) (DUP)

I commend the right hon. Gentleman for the planting that he has done on his acres of land. He spoke about the changes that he has seen. I am fortunate to live on a farm, where we have had the opportunity to plant trees directly. We have planted some 3,500 trees, retained the hedgerows and put in two ponds. We regularly see bees, moss and lots of wildlife. The Government have committed to replanting across the whole United Kingdom. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that there should be more of a commitment to tree planting, to ensure that we can become the lungs of the world?

Hilary Benn >

I agree completely. There should be no limit to the number of trees that we can plant. We can each play our part if we have the opportunity. As MPs, because of the nature of our job, we probably get invited to plant the odd tree in our constituencies.

The point that the right hon. Member for Islington North made about front gardens is really important. One of the things we did after the floods of 2007 was to change the planning rules. People cannot hard pave over their front gardens any more unless they use permeable paving, because if we pave, tarmac and concrete over all the land in a town or city and huge quantities of rain fall out of the sky, of course the water is going to flood into people's homes. That makes us realise the inter-connection between our choices as human beings and the consequences of not paying sufficient attention to nature.

I would argue that to be disconnected from nature is to be disconnected from the Earth itself, so it is not just self-preservation that should urge us to confront the threat of climate change and biodiversity loss, which are absolutely connected, but our love for the soil from which we all came and to which one day we will all return—but not just yet.

🕒 3.05pm

Barry Gardiner >

(Brent North) (Lab)

I am delighted to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), whom I congratulate on securing the debate.

Here is my perspective. Life on this planet has been going for 4.5 billion years—4,500 million years. Human beings have been on this planet for 6 million years. That means that we have been around for 0.013% of the time that life has existed on this planet. We are cashing in 4.5 billion years of planetary saving bonds and blowing it on bling, and nothing but our own hubris gives us the right to do so. Exponential growth within a finite system leads to collapse, and that is what is happening—collapse. We know it is happening. Only last weekend, as I was in Durham, the IPBES report set out again what we already know: the global rate of species extinction is between 10 to 100 times higher than the average rate over the past 10 million years. We are living in the Anthropocene—the sixth great extinction event. Human activity is actually being compared to the asteroid that obliterated the dinosaurs—except that unlike the asteroid we know what we are doing. We know that 12% of tree species and over 1,300 wild mammal species are threatened by unsustainable logging and hunting, more than 25% of the world's forests are subject to industrial logging, and 34% of marine wild fish stocks are overfished—but the plunder goes on.

We politicians are strange creatures: we say we want to do the right thing but so often we end up doing the easy thing instead. We spend our lives trying to win, but in this struggle between ourselves and our planet, there is always going to be just one winner: planet Earth will continue in a new form long after we have made it impossible for our own species to live on it. Reversing the trend of biodiversity loss requires urgent, transformative change. That is code for saying that we need to consume less, because at the current rate of consumption, we would need three planets-worth of resources by 2050. That means that we must examine our economy. It is not just about reducing our consumption; it is about changing our economic accounting model in order to account properly for the free goods and services that we are destroying. Pollination services, clean air, the purification of water by forests and the protection of coastal cities by mangroves are all regarded as externalities by classical economics.

Let me now enter into the earlier debate between the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion—my hon. Friend on this side—and the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), whom, certainly in terms of conservation, I am happy to call an hon. Friend on the other side. Our obsession with GDP suggests that the coastal surge that destroyed cities such as New Orleans—under hurricane Katrina—resulted in the growth of GDP owing to the economic activity when all the new levees were built. The disaster that

destroyed so many lives and so much wealth is counted in our economic system, GDP, as a positive, but the loss of the tupelo and cypress forest swamp, which had previously—when the trees were not being taken down—reduced the surge swell and protected the city, was not counted as a negative in any economic calculation.

The Dasgupta review, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central referred, set out with great economic force the consequences of what Professor Dasgupta termed “impact inequality”: the imbalance between humanity’s demand and nature’s supply, and the need to reconstruct economics so that nature is an essential part of it and ecosystem services are properly valued. It was disappointing that when the then Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee to discuss the Dasgupta review, it became clear that she had not read it. Yesterday, when the chair of the Committee on Climate Change appeared before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and was asked about DEFRA’s plan for net zero, it was notable that he said not only that there was no clarity for others, but that there was no implementation that it was possible to judge because the metrics were not there. Just as the Government should implement net zero stress tests for all budgets, so they should implement net nature tests against all expenditure to ensure that alignment with our post-2030 biodiversity framework is maintained.

That brings me to the importance of data. We are extraordinarily blessed in this country to have more than 250 years of amateur scientific data-gathering. We have baselines against which we can say, with real confidence, that 41% of all UK species have declined in the past 52 years, since 1970, but under-employed Church of England vicars and other gentlefolk going back to Georgian England provide us with a database that other countries can only dream of. May I ask the Minister to ensure that our support for COP15, and the financial assistance that we make available to countries, focus on enabling them to have an accurate dataset of their own natural and biological assets.

Kerry McCarthy >

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Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn >

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Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner >

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I will give both ways, but not simultaneously. I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy).

Kerry McCarthy >

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I thank my hon. Friend. What he is saying about data is a huge issue for the small island developing states, because there is so much biodiversity, particularly in the territorial waters, and populations of perhaps a few hundred are somehow expected to manage a vast space. I agree with what he said about the importance of supporting them, and our overseas territories, so that they can do that work.

Barry Gardiner >

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My hon. Friend is entirely right. One of the constant problems, particularly in our overseas territories, which do not have the resources to be able to establish their own datasets, is the gaming between them and the Foreign Office, because technically, through the convention on biological diversity, we are responsible for the biodiversity in those overseas territories.

It is a great tragedy that this palming off of responsibility between the two continues. I know that the Minister is new in post, and I welcome him to his post, but I hope he will have robust discussions with his colleagues in the Foreign Office about this. Perhaps he could whisper something to that effect in Lord Goldsmith's ear, given that he is Minister of State in both DEFRA and the Foreign Office. This really does need to be sorted out. The overseas territories need that support to get the database.

Jeremy Corbyn >

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I absolutely agree that there has to be a measurement of the effect on the natural world and the environment, measurements of human inequality and all the normal GDP measurements. Would it not be better if the UK Government set an aim to come away from the next round of discussions with an agreed position on how we will measure the effect on the natural world of economic activity as part of the whole measurement of GDP? In that way, it would be factored in and give a legal status and entity to the environment and the natural world, as opposed to just discussing it as a separate thing as a consequence of our own activities.

Barry Gardiner >

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Indeed. One of the things COP15 is grappling with at the moment is how to reconcile the different metrics that different countries use to assess their national biodiversity and sustainability action plans, and how to integrate them into a common measure. It is much more difficult to do this with biodiversity than it is with climate change. We know the common measure in climate change—it is CO₂—but we do not have an easy common measure for biodiversity. My right hon. Friend is right. It is one of the things that COP15 really has to grapple with.

I mentioned the national biodiversity and sustainability action plans—NBSAPs—that are produced by many countries. The truth is they are simply inadequate, not from a lack of goodwill on the part of those countries but often because of a lack of the robust scientific data we were speaking about.

We also know that, even when NBSAPs are based on sound scientific data, they have to be implemented. There is no point in simply putting them into your action plan and not implementing them. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central spoke about the Lawton report. Professor John Lawton set those principles in place over 15 years ago and those principles are clear. We have to act. Whether it is in the UK, sub-Saharan Africa or south-east Asia, we have to act at a landscape scale. As John Lawton suggested, we need “bigger, better, more joined-up” habitat. That in effect is the response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on the metrics. We need to see at a landscape scale that that is happening.

The COP is setting out its target to halt the loss of biodiversity, but as I said earlier, sadly that has been our 10-yearly target for nearly three decades now. For effective implementation, we must ensure that there are key staging posts to show that we are on the right track to achieving the long-term objective. Interim objectives around the amount of reforestation and the amount of marine protection zones must be used as staging posts in the same way as we in this country use the five-yearly carbon budgets as staging posts towards our 2050 net zero target.

Chris Grayling >

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This is why my argument is around a real focus on the restoration of degraded land. Semi-desert subsistence farmland will never deliver anything for anyone except an impoverished lifestyle and poor biodiversity, but the restoration of land is a tangible that can be addressed in the COP because it can be measured and tracked.

Barry Gardiner >

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I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. He is right that we need to look at land restoration as one of the key indicators. It is particularly the case in sub-Saharan African countries, which are facing an increasing challenge of desertification from climate change, which they are having to fight against, rather than just looking at the land that is already semi-desert and trying to see how to restore that. It is a huge problem. The NBSAPs must be living documents, which is why they need to be ratcheted up, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion said, every five years between major COPs.

Let me turn to finance. I pay tribute to Mia Mottley, the Prime Minister of Barbados, who spoke at the beginning of COP26. For my money, she was the most powerful speaker at the whole event. She pointed out to the politicians assembled for the launch of COP26 that the promise we had given was for \$100 billion a year to be put into the global planet fund to help the global south to cope with climate change and to take effective mitigation efforts. We have not delivered that, and we are nowhere near delivering it. She pointed out that it was not because we could not afford it, because we had just spent \$9 trillion—trillions, not billions—bailing ourselves out over the covid pandemic. The funds are available and they must be made available.

The extent of quantitative easing that the global north has allowed itself since the 2008 global financial crisis has been more than \$36 trillion. What is COP15 asking for? It is asking for the same as was promised at COP26: \$100 billion a year, rising to \$700 billion a year. That is essential. If we are to enable those developing countries in the global south to do exactly what the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell was talking about with regard to the restoration of degraded land, and if we are to deal with these problems, we have to be serious. As the human species, we do not have the right not to be.

Kerry McCarthy >

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On the amount of money we need to give to help countries in the global south to cope, those countries are often faced with crippling debt—we had the whole jubilee debt campaign. Belize, for example, is a small island state that is right in the forefront of the impacts of climate change. It has incredible biodiversity that needs protecting, but is crippled by debt repayments. If we do not deal with that side of the equation, there is not an awful lot of point giving such countries money to help them invest in the sort of projects my hon. Friend is talking about.

Barry Gardiner >

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I am delighted that my hon. Friend made that intervention at precisely that moment, because it enables me to talk about green finance, and the importance of involving the private sector and ensuring that critical private finance is coming in. Green bonds and debt-for-biodiversity swaps are innovative and fundamental ways in which we should facilitate countries such as Belize to tackle the environmental problems they face. It cannot be done without money, and it cannot be done simply with public money. In fact, green bonds are now classed as more attractive than ordinary, vanilla bonds, because they tackle not one issue, but two; they mitigate risk on two factors. The secondary market in green bonds has really taken off.

I want to talk about the way in which the financial sector needs to be regulated and guided through the issue. The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell spoke about the way in which our financial sector was incentivising deforestation, particularly in Brazil. He is absolutely correct. We should not simply say, as is the Government's position, that companies need to declare their climate and sustainability actions in their mandatory annual reporting, and that they should not fund any activity, such as ranching in Brazil, that drives illegal deforestation. That is not good enough. When those stipulations were put in place, countries such as Brazil simply changed the law to make it legal so that they could continue to receive the finance. There must be objectivity about whether something is or is not deforestation.

I am conscious that I should not take up too much more time, but it is critical that COP15 addresses access and benefit sharing. We will not have global agreement and global co-operation on the environment and our failing global biodiversity unless biopiracy by pharmaceutical companies is addressed. These companies must not go into communities—my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central referred to this—and say, “We are going to take the genetic sequences of these two trees and use them in our pharmaceutical products, but you will not get any advantages from it.” That is why the UK must be foursquare behind access and benefit sharing at COP15.

An ecosystem has the right to exist, to flourish, to regenerate its vital cycles and to evolve naturally without human disruption. Nature has rights. We often think that rights apply only to us, but trusts and institutions have rights, and those rights are safeguarded by trustees and guardians. That is us. Nobody else is here to argue for nature. We must be the guardians of that trust. We have been on this planet for only 0.13% of the time that biodiversity has existed. We have no right to destroy the world around us.

Madam Deputy Speaker >

(Dame Rosie Winterton)

I call the SNP spokesperson, Deidre Brock.

🕒 3.27pm

Deidre Brock >

(Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)

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I commend the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it. She began with a typically well-informed and passionate speech, and one thing among many that struck me is that our only world is on fire and being bulldozed, which set the scene for a debate that can only lead those viewing it to agree entirely.

The hon. Lady spoke of the recent negotiations in Nairobi, and how the proposals are littered with brackets, as they remain to be ratified. We all devoutly hope those brackets will be removed, because Governments must provide robust commitments, with action targets, at COP15. Governments cannot be allowed off the hook and to fudge the commitments with warm words; they must have the targets, monitoring, enforcement and funding required to achieve them.

I also commend the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for highlighting how alarmingly quickly this is happening. The speed of biodiversity loss, even among wildlife in the UK, is terrifying. We are clearly guilty of taking biodiversity for granted.

So the COP15 biodiversity conference in December comes at an extremely critical moment. As we have heard, biodiversity is declining more rapidly than at any point in human history. The Aichi biodiversity targets set in 2010 have largely been missed, and nature continues to decline, with more than one in five species globally at risk of extinction. In the UK alone, more than 1,000 of the more than 8,000 species assessed in the 2019 state of nature report are threatened with extinction. As we have heard, once common species such as the swift, the house martin and the greenfinch have been moved on to the red list in the latest “Birds of Conservation Concern” list for the UK, meaning that they are in critical decline and in need of urgent action.

Scientists are warning that the Amazon rainforest is at a dangerous tipping point that could trigger a mass and irreversible loss of trees. Warming seas and ocean acidification are wreaking havoc on coral reefs. As any of us who heard Sir Patrick Vallance and his colleagues’ evidence the other day will know, biodiversity loss and the biodiversity emergency are intrinsically linked with the climate crisis. It is therefore imperative that all countries at COP15 recognise the scale of the biodiversity crisis that faces us all and that international leaders use the conference to urgently set the most ambitious targets possible for biodiversity and nature protection.

The IPBES—Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services—assessment report on the diverse values and valuation of nature, released this week, bears stark witness to the catastrophic extent to which humans are overexploiting wild species and habitats, and concludes that a key driver of biodiversity loss is the failure of national Governments to include nature and wildlife as a consideration in their decision making. It also found that where nature has been considered, it has been primarily for its economically productive aspects, such as food production. That is why it is such a disappointment to see the UK Government’s recent abandonment of wildlife protection conditions for farm subsidies in England in favour of sheer food production capacity. We all recognise, of course, the food security issues we face globally, but in addressing those we cannot ignore the pressing need for action on these matters.

Whoever the UK Prime Minister is in December, they must attend the conference and fully commit the UK Government to addressing this biodiversity emergency. The fight against climate change and the biodiversity crisis cannot be abandoned to placate uninformed naysayers, and we fully support the call by a range of non-governmental organisations for the new Prime Minister to convene a meeting of leaders in advance to help foster international consensus. I would be very interested to hear the Minister’s response to that suggestion.

If the UK Government need an example of how to demonstrate global leadership on this issue, they do not need to look far. The Scottish Government were among the first globally to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency. Scotland was also the first country in the world to complete and submit a full report on all 20 Aichi targets, doing so in 2016. Scotland’s national economy and its marine economy will be vital to securing a net zero future, with nature-based solutions accounting for about 30% of the emissions reductions needed. But in turn, we must ensure it is protected and enhanced.

Mr Alistair Carmichael >

(Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

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rose—

Deidre Brock >[Share](#)

I had not noticed the right hon. Gentleman coming in, but of course I will give way to him.

Mr Carmichael >[Share](#)

I have been here for quite a while now—I am just a quiet presence, so I would not be noticed.

With all that the hon. Lady has set out being the case, does she agree that it remains incomprehensible that the Scottish and UK Governments both continue to allow industrial-scale fishing with gillnets, which not only leaves a massive amount of plastic pollution but is an utterly unsustainable way of catching fish?

Deidre Brock >[Share](#)

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. Absolutely, these are things that the Scottish Government are of course looking at—I am not sure about the UK Government's position. He will know that Marine Scotland and its partners have developed a Scottish marine protected area monitoring strategy, which will look at issues such as he has raised. It also intends to add to the existing marine protected areas network, which will cover at least 10% of Scotland's seas, and is introducing a strengthened framework to help address situations such as the one he describes. I am well aware of the issues associated with gillnet fishing and the accumulated debris that it results in. We should certainly continue to press all Governments on that matter, at all times. I am very much aware of that.

I know that Members here quite often roll their eyes about these sorts of things, but I have to say that Scotland is pressing ahead on this matter. It is taking action, and it would be useful if we all shared best practice rather than rolling our eyes and thinking, "Here's Scotland talking about itself again." We can all learn from each other at all times.

Barry Gardiner >[Share](#)

I certainly would not roll my eyes, and I pay tribute to the Scottish Government for setting up the natural capital convention. It must be almost 10 years ago now that the first natural capital convention in the world took place, so Scotland has shown leadership on these matters. The point is that we must all try to learn from each other and make sure that we get the best out of it.

Deidre Brock >[Share](#)

I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Further to that, a global partnership led by the Scottish Government produced a statement of intent known as the Edinburgh declaration, calling for transformative action to be taken at all levels to halt biodiversity loss. With signatories from every continent, the declaration called for greater prominence to be given to the role that regional Governments, cities and local authorities play in delivering a new global framework of targets. The Scottish Government are backing this up by enshrining nature protection in law and prioritising biodiversity across a range of policy areas.

The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who is no longer in her place, and other Members who have spoken in this debate, will be pleased to hear that, since 2012, the Scottish Government have funded the restoration of more than 25,000 hectares of degraded Scottish peatland, with further plans for the next 10 years, backed by £250 million of funding. Peat stores more

carbon than all other vegetation types in the world combined and is a vital nature-based solution to protecting biodiversity.

In Scotland, we are also revitalising our woodlands and forests. In 2019 alone, 22 million trees were planted in Scotland, comprising nearly 84% of the UK's mainland tree planting. The Government are supporting the restoration and expansion of Scotland's rainforest and establishing a national register of ancient woodlands.

The preservation of marine habitats, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion mentioned, is equally crucial. That is why the Scottish Government plan to designate a suite of highly protected marine areas covering at least 10% of Scotland's seas. That will provide additional environmental preservation over and above the existing MPA network by establishing sites that will be protected against extractive, destructive or depositional activities.

We have talked about biodiversity spreading across a range of sectors, but it is also one of the main principles of the new Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, under which Ministers, relevant authorities and organisations must have regard to halting and reversing the loss of biodiversity when preparing national food plans, as planned under the Bill. One of the everyday ways that we can halt biodiversity loss is by reducing food waste. Currently, about 30% of all food produced globally goes uneaten.

Last month, Scotland also became the first part of the UK to implement a ban on many of the most problematic single-use plastics. Plastics and waste, as we know, can wreak havoc on our natural environments, as Everyday Plastic and Greenpeace highlighted just yesterday as they launched the results of their big plastics count.

By the end of 2022, the Scottish Government will publish a new biodiversity strategy for the next 25 years, which will propose to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 and reverse it by 2045. That will help guide the way that Scots use and manage land and Scotland's approach to protecting habitats and ecosystems, which will mean a substantial restoration and regeneration of biodiversity across our land, freshwater and sea. Vitally, a series of outcomes will be developed across rural, marine, freshwater, coastal and urban environments. The plans to introduce a natural environment Bill will put in place a robust statutory enforcing, target setting, monitoring and reporting framework. Those targets will be based on an overarching goal of preventing any further extinctions of wildlife, halting declines by 2030 and making real progress in restoring Scotland's natural environment by 2045. The Scottish Government will also ensure that a review of environmental justice and the case for an environmental court takes place during this parliamentary Session.

At COP15, we need to see similar transformational action targets from all the world's Governments. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) notes, it is important that we address the task with optimism. That is where we need the UK Government to step up, raise the political profile of biodiversity to the highest level, show global leadership and press hard for international commitments to halt and start to reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. Ministers should listen to their chief scientific adviser on this. At COP15 we must see a commitment to sustainable solutions that offer real results.

🕒 3.40pm

Ruth Jones >

(Newport West) (Lab)

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I rise today in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who is on an Inter-Parliamentary Union visit to Kosovo and hence is not able to be in the Chamber today. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), the shadow Secretary of State, is visiting Yorkshire, so I am afraid the House is stuck with me. I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing this debate and for her speech. I have enjoyed listening to all the powerful, interesting, educational and unifying calls for action among the speeches we have heard here.

When we were notified last week that this motion would be considered by the House, many of us were concerned that we would be Minister-less, but our fears have thankfully been calmed, because the people's business must go on despite a caretaker Government and its outgoing Prime Minister. We are also relieved to find the Secretary of State safe in his caretaker position at DEFRA. I welcome the Minister formally to his place; I look forward to his completing his eight-week job interview, and I hope he will be able to stay on.

I place on record my genuine thanks to the hon. Members for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) following their resignations from the Front Bench last week. We did not always agree, but we developed a respectful working relationship, and more than once we joked that we saw more of each other than we did of our spouses, children and loved ones, due to the constant flow of DEFRA-related business in the House.

It has been a very quiet week here in Westminster, with not a lot going on at all. As such, I was grateful to be able to use this time to reflect on the critical work required to preserve our planet and protect our environment. I am very clear that we need the upcoming COP15 summit to do more than just contribute to global warming through lots of hot air; we need it to deliver for the planet's wildlife and for its people. It will be no surprise to the House that I am here to reiterate Labour's approach to the environment, which has always been driven by those twin priorities. We on the Labour Benches believe that those priorities are even more important now, because in a time of such cost of living desperation, both internationally and here at home, we cannot deliver for one without the other. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for his stark example of GDP versus biodiversity with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

Delivering for the natural world requires social and economic justice. That is something that the Leader of Opposition recognises, and I hope the Minister will recognise it too. The approach of protecting a few isolated green spaces and relying on markets is failing and gets us nowhere near far enough, and certainly not fast enough, as the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) highlighted earlier.

In any case, we are seeing protections eroded because commercial demands for land are insatiable and some in this House have the wrong spending priorities. Time and again, across the world and at home, we see the most disadvantaged communities suffering the worst impacts of environmental degradation: their homes flooded and swept away in deadly landslides, their fields and livestock left parched by drought, their homes left draughty, cold and damp through lack of insulation while fossil fuel-dependent energy bills soar, their children's health blighted by fossil fuel-generated air pollution, sewage pumped into their local rivers and over playing fields, and their neighbourhoods devoid of the green space and nature that lockdown surely taught us are so essential for human mental and physical wellbeing.

The United Kingdom has been among the most nature-depleted countries for decades. The Natural History Museum's biodiversity intactness index revealed that the world has crashed through the "safe limit for humanity" level of for biodiversity loss, and saw the UK's 53% score place it in the bottom 10% of countries.

That is well below China, and humiliatingly we are last in the G7—so much for global Britain. In practice it means that even some of our most iconic and much loved animals are being added to the growing list of endangered species. Eleven of the 47 mammals native to Great Britain are at imminent risk of extinction, including the red squirrel, wildcat, water vole, dormouse and hedgehog. I pay tribute to the Members who have declared their animal championing pedigrees, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). A further five native mammals have a realistic possibility of becoming threatened with extinction in the near future, including the mountain hare.

Kerry McCarthy >

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I was under instruction, had I been able to make a speech, to mention that I am parliamentary species champion for the swift and to make a plea for us to protect and to increase their habitats by ensuring that there are swift bricks in every new building. I have got that on the record.

Ruth Jones >

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I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the great work she does on biodiversity and as a swift champion. I will add that to my list of champions in the House. We know that puffins are projected to decline across Britain and Ireland by up to 90% within 30 years, and they are among 14 seabird species regarded as being at risk of negative climate change impacts. The shadow Minister for the natural environment, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West recently visited RSPB Bempton Cliffs, renowned for its puffins, but was not able to find a single one.

Ministers, notably Lord Goldsmith, often pat themselves on the back claiming they are doing all they can to advance the environmental agenda, but the fact of the matter is that our nature teeters on a cliff edge. I hope when the new Prime Minister takes office on 6 September that she or he will set out clearly how they will pull nature back from the brink. Under this caretaker Prime Minister, we all see a Tory Government consistently making the wrong choices, failing to engage with stakeholders properly, delaying action and ducking the urgent challenges facing us all.

Rather than setting the international agenda on biodiversity and leading the debate, the Budget last year—delivered as world leaders began to arrive for COP26—did not even mention climate change. The former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) found time to give a tax break for domestic flights and fell woefully short on the investment needed to deliver green jobs and a fair transition. It does not bode well for how he would approach the top job.

The Conservatives' Environment Act 2021, which was well known as the “missing in action” Bill as it worked its way through the House, set a target on species abundance, and the Minister will recall that DEFRA Ministers were forced to concede that action was needed. Sadly, they only went as far as promising to halt the decline in species by 2030. Just halting the decline is not good enough—our ambition should be nature-positive here at home and in our work with colleagues on the world stage through COP15.

In 2020, the Government managed to deliver less than half their target of 5,000 hectares of new trees in England, and we had empty words from Lord Goldsmith that they would do better. The planned spending on tree planting is dwarfed by subsidies to Drax to ship and burn wood pellets from around the world, particularly from the US, with a lack of due diligence to make sure it is not from virgin forest. Meanwhile, the Government are doing far too little to protect the trees we do have. Deforestation is increasing across the planet and our consumption in Britain is driving deforestation abroad, which impacts here and across the world. Here, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central for his dogged tree-planting over the past 30 years.

In the Environment Act 2021, the Government's due diligence measures cover only illegal deforestation. Why are we agreeing trade deals with countries such as Brazil, Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia while they continue to destroy rainforests? Just yesterday, we saw reports that deforestation of the Amazon is at its highest level for six years. The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell highlighted that in his speech earlier. We must remember that human rights are always threatened when rainforest deforestation happens, and the best stewards of those rainforests are the indigenous people who have cared for them for thousands of years and for whom they are home. Funding men with guns to guard empty rainforest is not a sustainable or ethical policy, but sadly it appears to be one that this Prime Minister and DEFRA have pursued up until now.

Action has been inadequate across DEFRA policy for far too long. Water companies have continued to be allowed to pump sewage into rivers, and that has only hastened the decline of endangered species. After the Government finally got an ivory ban on the statute book in 2018, their dither and delay meant that it did not actually come into force until years after many other countries had acted. They have failed to deliver promised wildlife protection legislation to ban trophy hunting and fur imports. Last week I had a very good meeting with former President of Botswana Ian Khama, who, although out of office, is a really doughty and dogged campaigner for the rights of animals. Obviously he backs a global ban on trophy hunting.

Meanwhile at home, thousands and thousands of badgers continue to be killed. The Government have also authorised bee-killing neonic pesticides and have failed to act to stop illegal hunting or effectively limit peat extraction and moorland burning, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) outlined in her speech. Of course, I cannot forget foxhunting. The killing of any animal will have an impact on our natural world and biodiversity, and hunting is no different. We have so many more priorities; I urge the Government to clean our waters, clean our air and protect our green spaces as a starter for 10.

Labour will deliver the change that we all want to see. Action at home must showcase for the world how a positive nature policy can practically be delivered across Government. The shadow Chancellor has committed a Labour Government to a robust net zero and nature-positive test for every policy. That will be backed with a £28 billion a year investment to meet the challenge of the climate and nature emergency, create certainty for business, and provide leadership as we seize all the opportunities before our United Kingdom.

Earlier this week I attended the online meeting with Patrick Vallance. Nobody who was there could have failed to leave fired up and ready to do whatever is necessary to protect our planet and preserve our environment. We can address both the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis. I say to the Government: if they cannot do both, they should get out of the way because we will. The truth is that, when we want them to, Government can and do make real change to the lives of people and our environment, too. The clock is ticking on the Prime Minister's time in office, and it is ticking on our mission to save our planet, too. Now is the time for transformational change for our people and our planet. I wish COP15 well and hope that all those round the table will heed the warnings, wake up and smell the coffee, and get back to work.

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I welcome the new Minister to his position.

🕒 3.52pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs >

(Steve Double)

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Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this debate to take place and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for the way she opened it. It is truly an honour to respond to this my first major debate in the Chamber since I took up this post. It has been great to see such widespread agreement across the House on the importance of COP15 ahead of the conference. This is a vital moment for nature around the world and a real call to action.

We are reaching the culmination of a three-year-long nature campaign, and we are not taking our foot off the pedal now. In fact, just last week my hon. Friend Lord Goldsmith was in Gabon discussing the actions needed to halt forest loss and seeing the remarkable work being doing in the Congo basin.

All the evidence shows us how rapidly nature is in decline. Between 1990 and 2015, we lost 290 million hectares of native forest cover globally. That is more than 10 times the size of the UK. Live coral cover of reefs has nearly halved in the past 150 years, with dramatically accelerated decline in the past 20 to 30 years, and a million species face extinction. We know that so many things are reliant on nature, from food to security, clean air to water, and our health and wellbeing to our very economies, so reversing these trends is vital.

That is why this Government have committed to leaving the environment in a better state than we found it in, and the good news is that we know we can turn things around. There is someone, somewhere in Government, who is leading the way on all the changes that we need to see. It is this innovation that we need to champion, and global platforms such as CBD give us the opportunity to share these ideas and build momentum behind them. This is a colossal challenge. Even as we confront the impacts of conflict and the ongoing effects of the pandemic, we know that we need to deliver an ambitious global biodiversity framework at CBD COP15 that will help us to bend the curve of biodiversity loss globally by 2030.

COP15 should, and indeed needs to be, the Paris moment for nature. If we can agree, and we must agree, an ambitious post-2020 global diversity framework in Montreal in December—with a clear mission to halt and reverse biodiversity loss globally by 2030, including targets to protect at least 30% of the world's land and at least 30% of global oceans by 2030, and to see ecosystems restored, species' population sizes recovering and extinctions halted by 2050, with mechanisms to enable us to hold countries to account—then we will be in a strong position to make this the decade we put nature on the road to recovery. This is why the global biodiversity framework is so important, and we are leading from the front to ensure that we have the policies and finance in place so that this ambition is realised.

Olivia Blake >

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Given the significance of COP15, will the Prime Minister—whoever that may be—be attending it on behalf of the UK?

Steve Double >

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I was going to come to that later, but I will respond to it now. I am sure the hon. Member would not expect me to be able to speak for whoever may win the election to be leader of our party and the next Prime Minister. However, I can assure her that I know that our party is committed to this issue, and that is not going to change suddenly. The Conservative party is very aware of its importance, and I am sure that, whoever takes over as Prime Minister in a few weeks' time, we will continue to champion nature recovery globally and that there will be a senior level presence at COP15. I would not dare to say whether that will be the future Prime Minister, but I join her in saying that I would certainly like that to be the case.

Deidre Brock >

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The Minister is obviously not able to give an indication yet of whether the Prime Minister will be attending COP15, but can he indicate whether a role equivalent to that of the COP26 President will be created to reflect the importance of that summit?

Steve Double >

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I am slightly disappointed that the hon. Member does not think that is me, because it is very clearly part of my new role as a Minister to take up this cause. To be serious, I take her point. We do need to take this issue seriously, as this is a critical moment for nature globally. The UK is proud to be playing a leading role, and I am sure that, whoever attends and whatever title they have, we will continue to play a global leadership role in ensuring that we set the world back on the road to nature recovery. We recognise the importance of COP15 as a key moment in that.

Barry Gardiner >

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Will the Minister confirm that, even though COP15 is taking place in Montreal, the presidency is still with China and the Chinese Minister will be the president of the COP?

Steve Double >

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Yes, the hon. Gentleman is right about the presidency, which goes with the host nation, but I think the SNP spokesperson was talking about someone in the Government having that prominent role. I think that is correct.

Deidre Brock >

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indicated assent.

Steve Double >

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As I was saying, we are leading from the front to ensure that we have the policies and finance in place so that these ambitions are realised. As leader of the Global Ocean Alliance and ocean co-chair of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, we have worked closely with Costa Rica and France to bring together over 100 countries in support of the 30 by '30 target. I am very proud, and I believe we should all be very proud, of the UK's leadership to date in bringing parties together and building consensus through partnerships such as the leaders' pledge for nature, which has now been endorsed by more than 90 political leaders.

We are determined to work with fellow countries to translate our joint ambitions into action on the ground, by building consensus and finding solutions to help agree a strong global biodiversity framework. To secure not just 30 by 30, but all the targets that are so necessary to protect nature, we need urgently to demonstrate our collective seriousness about closing the large funding gap over the course of the next decade. The UK brought nature from the margins of the global climate debate into the heart of our response at COP26. Ensuring that promises made in Glasgow are honoured in full, that we build on them, and that they are translated into effective action as soon as possible are huge priorities for the UK in the year of our presidency and beyond.

Making sure that aid is aligned with our goals is also hugely important. Indeed, we are leading by example, by doubling our international climate finance, investing at least £3 billion of that in nature, including nature-based solutions, urging other donor countries to do the same, and launching a pipeline of new programmes that will help people to protect and restore biodiversity on land and sea. We are calling on multilateral development banks to mainstream nature across their entire portfolios, as well as supporting countries when fulfilling their commitments to the Leaders Pledge for Nature. We are also pulling every lever we have to get private finance flowing in the right direction, from reducing risk to increasing investment.

Adopting a new framework at COP15 will not be sufficient if we do not also put in place mechanisms to ensure that countries can implement it. Frameworks need to result in action on the ground. The global failure to achieve the Aichi targets was driven by partial and insufficient implementation. That was arguably because parties found it challenging to translate international targets into effective national action that could be delivered at the scale and pace needed. The post-2020 global diversity framework must be underpinned by enhanced planning, reporting and review mechanisms that will hold parties to account for their commitments and support implementation—that was the point about data raised by the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). It is so important that we help countries to develop those capabilities.

The UK, in partnership with Norway and the UN environment programme world conservation monitoring centre, has led a programme of workshops to support discussions between parties to enhance mechanisms for planning, reporting and review, with the aim of strengthening the implementation of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and achieving the ambitious 2050 goals and 2030 targets. To summarise, the UK remains committed to securing an ambitious outcome at COP15—one that sets the direction and leads to action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss globally by 2030. We will work closely with China as the presidency, and support Canada as host in achieving those outcomes.

Many excellent contributions from across the House have raised many important points, and I will try quickly to respond to some of them. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion asked about the UK's goals, and I tried to outline those in my response. We are clear about the goals that we need from COP15, and we must ensure that they are actionable. We need to see action. We do not need just more targets set or policies agreed; we need them to be put into action on the ground. She asked whether I would commit to keep Parliament updated, and as long as I am in post, I will be more than happy to do that. She also asked about the next Prime Minister attending COP15, and I have already addressed that issue.

The hon. Lady also raised the important matter of the maritime environment. As an MP who represents a coastal constituency—one of only three constituencies that has two separate coastlines—I am absolutely aware of just how important that issue is. We have made great progress on protecting our maritime environment, with over 100 maritime protection areas now in place, but I accept that we need to do more, and that we need to improve enforcement of the protection of those areas. I am more than happy to look into what more we can do to make sure those conservation areas are protected effectively—that it is not just a paper exercise. I would also point to the work we have already done in banning microplastics and the other measures we have taken to prevent maritime pollution, so I take the hon. Lady's point, but she can be assured that the maritime environment is something I take very seriously.

Barry Gardiner >

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I think the whole House understands why the Minister is unable or reluctant to commit the Prime Minister to attending COP15, but is it possible for him to commit that either the Secretary of State will attend it, or he or his successor will do so as the Minister responsible for biodiversity?

Steve Double >

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As I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates, I cannot do so, for the very same reason that I cannot commit the future Prime Minister: none of us knows what is going to happen in the coming weeks. What I can say is that if I am still in post, I would be more than happy to attend, but that decision is for another day. We will see what happens.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) made an excellent contribution to the debate. He made the point—with which I wholeheartedly agree—that we understand why China is not able to host the COP this time; it is a shame, though, because it would have been excellent if China had been able to do so. He also made an excellent point about farmers; I am dismayed that comments are sometimes made casting farmers as the enemy of biodiversity and nature. My experience is completely the opposite, and I would say the same about the vast majority of our fishermen, including the small under-10-metre fleet. They all understand the importance of producing food for us in a sustainable way, and protecting and enhancing the natural environment. It is right that we say that more often, and work with our farmers and fishermen to enable them to achieve that end.

Jim Shannon >

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The Minister is absolutely right: the two fishing organisations in Northern Ireland, the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation and the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation, all want a policy that gives sustainability for the fishing sector. If that sector is not sustainable, the people who work in it will not have jobs for the future. My constituents who work in the fishing sector I represent want a deal that works for them and for the environment.

Steve Double >

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The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: most farms and fishing businesses are passed down from generation to generation. That is how they operate, and they understand that if they do not operate sustainably, they will have nothing left to pass on to future generations, so I welcome his comments.

I was delighted to hear that the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) is a fan of “The Wind in the Willows”. I do not know whether he knows this, but “The Wind in the Willows” was written by a great Cornishman, Kenneth Grahame. He based the story on the River Fowey, which I am delighted to represent, as it is in my constituency. I invite the right hon. Gentleman to visit Fowey and see that river for himself, and just maybe, he will see his first ever water vole. There is much more I could say—

Jeremy Corbyn >

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Has the Minister had a chance to look at the comments made yesterday by Emma Howard Boyd, the chair of the Environment Agency, concerning the behaviour of water companies and the pollution in rivers, and her recommendation that instead of fining the chairs of the water companies that grievously pollute our rivers, consideration ought to be given to putting those people in jail for the damage they are doing to our environment? Is he going to respond directly to the Environment Agency and wish it well in that endeavour?

Steve Double >

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I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for raising that very important point. I am, of course, absolutely aware of the Ofwat report and the comments of the Environment Agency. *[Official Report, 15 July 2022, Vol. 718, c. 8MC.]* It is a matter that deeply concerns me as a representative of a coastal constituency. I regret to say that one of the worst offenders is my local water authority. This morning, I asked my office for a meeting with it, and to speak to the Environment Agency, because we need to do better. The Government have put measures in place to better hold water authorities to account. I am determined that we find a way of doing that and that we bring to an end the unacceptable level of untreated sewage being discharged into our rivers and seas. I can assure him that I take it very seriously.

I thank all Members who contributed to this excellent debate. As I said, it was great to hear such agreement across House on the importance of COP15, and on protecting and restoring our environment. As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, and as the shadow Minister said, I do feel like I am on an eight-week job interview. However, I assure Members that I am determined, however long I am in office, to take these matters very seriously and ensure that the UK does all it can and continues to lead the world in bringing together real action to protect and enhance our natural environment for the future.

🕒 4.11pm

Caroline Lucas >

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I am hugely grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in this debate. What we have not had in quantity of contributions, we have certainly more than made up for in quality. One theme that has come out is individuals' love for nature. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) talked about how it is central to our souls—nothing less. That, to me, is hugely important. I am struck by the words of the US writer Richard Louv, who said:

“We cannot protect something we do not love, we cannot love what we do not know”.

Therefore, getting more access for young people and all of us to nature, the kind of young people the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) spoke about, is absolutely crucial to protecting it.

While we talked about our love for nature, we had some hard economics, too. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for reminding us that we will not have the transformative change we need unless we change our economic system.

I am very grateful for the Minister's response and for his commitment to work for the success of COP15 and, in particular, the funding necessary to make it a success. He explained why he cannot commit future Ministers to future actions, which I completely understand. What I hope he can do is undertake to urge his Conservative leadership colleagues not to step away from net zero. There have been some deeply worrying statements in the last few days around that. I hope he will play a role in trying to urge them not to put net zero in question.

A number of questions still remain unanswered about the detail of the UK's negotiating objectives, for example its position on the global ratchet when it comes to policy ambition and on increasing our domestic environmental targets in the Environment Act 2021. We need to be more ambitious at home if we are to have credible leadership abroad. I look forward to the opportunity for further conversations with the Minister over the coming weeks and months to ensure we can make a success of COP15. All of us have said, from every angle of this House, how important that is. It has been underlined by today's debate and I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to hold it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered protecting and restoring nature at COP15 and beyond.

Richard Foord >

(Tiverton and Honiton) (LD)

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On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The *Health Service Journal* is reporting that the Minister of State, Department for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) incorrectly told the House yesterday that a contract was in place to provide surge capacity for ambulance services, despite the contract not having been awarded yet. Have you, Mr Deputy Speaker, had any notification from the Minister that she plans to come to the House to clarify the record?

Mr Deputy Speaker >

(Mr Nigel Evans)

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I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and for forward notice of it. I have not been given any notification of any statements likely to be made by any Ministers. As he knows, the Chair is not responsible for the content of any statements that have been made. If inaccuracies happen, I expect them to be corrected as soon as possible. However, if the Minister's interpretation of what has happened is not quite the same as the hon. Member's, then clearly that is a matter for debate. The Treasury Bench will have heard his point of order and I am sure they will pass it on to the Minister.