

# *WILDBELT*

*A DESIGNATION FOR RECOVERY*

Produced for the Labour Party by



The  
**Wildlife**  
Trusts

**The UK is one of the most nature depleted countries on Earth with one in six species threatened with extinction. Where there is nature, access to it is deeply unequal. A mission to halt the decline of nature by the end of the next Parliament can help us to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis, as well as securing the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the space to help us feel secure, happy, and healthy.**

Wildlife rich habitats are becoming smaller and more disconnected than ever been before, often as a result of poor management, neglect, inappropriate development, disturbance, and pollution. Currently, just 3% of land and 8% of English waters are properly protected for nature.

To achieve the UK Government's commitment to protect and restore at least 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030, we need to think bigger. We need a new designation of land in England that extends beyond simply protecting the nature we have to protecting the space that nature needs for the future. This new designation could be called **Wildbelt**.

In England, there are numerous landscape designations but none of them exist for this explicit purpose. The Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) designation is critical for preserving areas of land that have been identified as most important for wildlife, and the National Park, National Landscapes (previously Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and Greenbelt designations are each focused on protecting landscape and amenity value but do not consider biodiversity value. As a result, much of the Greenbelt is currently of low biodiversity value.

A new designation is needed to support nature's recovery. This would support land that is currently of low biodiversity value to be designated for nature's recovery at small or large scale and enable more people to access nature on their doorstep.

# A WILDBELT FOR RIVERS

Nowhere is more in need of recovery and protection than England's rivers. Poor water quality affects every single river, lake, estuary and coastal water in England. Our rivers are amongst the most polluted in Europe, with pollution beyond legal limits caused by a toxic cocktail of chemicals, sewage and agricultural pollution. In 2022 alone, raw sewage was discharged into waterways over 300,000 times.

A Wildbelt could run alongside our rivers, creating and protecting a network of uncropped buffers to trap and prevent agricultural pollutants from running off fields and into waterways. In doing so, valuable progress could be made towards reducing nutrient pollution while simultaneously allowing vegetation to slow the flow of flood waters, thereby reducing flood peaks and protecting valuable farmland and communities downstream. Buffers also play a critical role in creating corridors for species like otters and water voles to move between habitats.

Alongside this must be recognition that the best way to manage water supply and pollution pressures is by taking an integrated approach across a whole catchment with the delivery of catchment action plans backed by new funding to improve all water bodies in England.

# PROTECTING INVESTMENT

To ensure any public money spent on nature's recovery is protected for the long-term, The Wildlife Trusts believe that the Wildbelt designation should be a condition of receiving public money for investment in habitat creation or restoration. **By protecting land as Wildbelt, the taxpayer is assured that public money is being invested for the long-term public benefit.**

Wildbelt would not compete with existing designations; instead, it would overlay these in the same way that National Landscapes, National Parks and SSSIs overlay one other. A Wildbelt designation would provide a new impetus for nature's recovery and rewilding in areas that are currently of low biodiversity value. It would go beyond simply protecting sites by allowing more space to be created for nature and, crucially, helping to connect existing sites.

# A WILDBELT FOR PEOPLE AND NATURE

The benefits of the Wildbelt for both people and nature would be vast. Wildbelt would improve resilience and help us to adapt to the interlinked climate and nature crises. A Wildbelt designation would also help to improve air quality, suck up and store carbon, prevent flooding, boost the recreational and tourism economy, and create new environmental jobs.

By stretching round, through and between England's towns and cities, a Wildbelt would also create more places for people to exercise and enjoy nature right on their doorstep. Lack of access to nature is a significant contributor to physical and mental health inequalities – people living in the most under-served areas are ten times less likely to live in the greenest areas. By building in access to green spaces within the planning system and creating new green infrastructure, preventable illnesses such as obesity and heart disease can be reduced, saving the NHS millions of pounds.

A Wildbelt designation is an opportunity to capture the public's imagination, joining up current nature recovery initiatives and spurring action to recover England's rivers and wildlife. It would help create communities where people enjoy healthier, happier lives and improve the future for everyone across England.

Estimates of water buffer creation, river restoration, and access path costs

A 50m-wide wildlife-rich corridor could be created along our rivers, at the following approximate cost:

- A 25m wide strip of improved habitat on one side, with a surfaced footpath to provide easy public access. Cost/km: £1,855 habitat payment based on ELMS costs for 'Habitat strip next to waterbodies (£742/ha), £20,000 footpath creation based on costs from 'Paths for all'.
- River Restoration to improve habitat for aquatic wildlife. Cost/km: £20,000 based on project costs from the River Restoration Centre Conference (which are higher, but this level of restoration would not be needed everywhere).
- On the other side of the river, a 25m wide swathe of significantly-enhanced habitat to meet biodiversity aspirations . Cost/km: £2,955 based on ELMS costs for '3-dimensional (3D) waterbody buffer strip, £1182/ha).

Total cost per km = **£44,810**.

A **Wildbelt River Fund** of £150 million would enable the creation of wildlife-rich riverside habitat with inclusive access for the public along more than 3,300 km of UK rivers – enough to trace the River Severn's course nine times over.