

Nature check: Leading environment groups warn Government over failing nature record.

The Government is failing to deliver on its wildlife and landscape promises, according to a report compiled by 29 of the UK's leading environmental groups.

The study highlights some of the most controversial environmental issues of the year – including the proposed reform of the planning system, a planned cull of badgers and the public debate on the future of UK forestry.

The Nature Check report, published by the umbrella body Wildlife and Countryside Link, assesses the Government's progress on the 16 commitments it has made to the natural environment using a traffic light rating system.

Just two of the promises have been fully met, and have been given a green seal of approval. Seven have received an amber rating, meaning not enough progress has been made, and a further seven have been given the red card by environmental experts.

The report shows the Government's commitments to wildlife overseas are being met – with green lights given for new legislation opposing ivory sales and commercial whaling. However with a new proposed planning system placing economic needs above environmental ones, confusion over the future of nationally owned forests, and a badly thought through plan for tackling bovine TB – it is the domestic issues that ministers are falling down on most.

Other failing policy areas include lack of controls to prevent inappropriate development in areas of flood risk and a failure to consider seabirds and other mobile species when creating the new network of Marine Conservation Zones around our coasts.

Neil Sinden, Policy and Campaigns Director for the Campaign to Protect Rural England, said: "The Government's aspires to be the greenest government ever, but it will not achieve this admirable ambition with a 'business as usual' approach to economic growth.

"The state of the economy is, of course, a major preoccupation for everyone, but there need be no conflict between growth and greenery. As the National Ecosystem Assessment demonstrated, a healthy natural environment is not only valuable for its own sake, it has great economic value. Strong environmental policies can underpin strong economic performance.

"At present the Government is falling well short of its aspirations. Planning reform gives it an early opportunity for improvement. It should introduce a radically revised National Planning Policy Framework with strong safeguards for nature and the landscape."

Martin Harper, RSPB Conservation Director, said: "With a combined membership of over 8 million concerned nature lovers, conservation groups have an obligation to speak out on behalf of our countryside and our wildlife. When the Government fails in its commitments to protect nature, we are here to make a noise about it.

"These are 16 policy areas where the Government has promised tough action, but that is not what we are seeing. In these financially straightened times politicians may be tempted to ignore the natural environment in favour of economic growth – but this kind of short-termist attitude won't wash with a British public which expects the Government to protect the countryside and wildlife we all hold dear.

"This report should be a wake-up call to David Cameron and the Coalition Government. A healthy natural environment is not an aspirational luxury for times of plenty – it is vital for the future well being of our economy and our society."

Paul Wilkinson, Head of Living Landscape for The Wildlife Trusts, said:

“Government performance on the natural environment is a very mixed bag. We see leadership when it comes to economic recovery, but what about nature's recovery?”

“The Wildlife Trusts were encouraged by the hugely ambitious vision in the Natural Environment White Paper but see no evidence that this is being driven forward across Government. We need strong leadership now, more than ever.

“There is a powerful evidence base which shows investing in nature is good for people, and the economy. We need Government to 'get it' and urgently. It must take decisive action to support nature's recovery.”

The 16 Government commitments rated by progress

1. **Green** - We will oppose the resumption of commercial whaling
2. **Green** - We will press for a ban on ivory sales
3. **Amber** - We will introduce measures to protect wildlife and promote green spaces and wildlife corridors in order to halt the loss of habitats and restore biodiversity
4. **Amber** - Make the case for significant reform of the CAP as part of the EU's negotiations for the period beyond 2013
5. **Amber** - Publish a White Paper and legislate for reform of the water industry to ensure more efficient use of water, protect poorer households, enhance competition and improve conservation
6. **Amber** - We will maintain the Green Belt, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and other environmental protections, and create a new designation – similar to SSSIs – to protect green areas of particular importance to local communities
7. **Amber** - Work to secure changes to the Common Fisheries Policy
8. **Amber** - We will tackle the smuggling and illegal trade on wildlife through our new Border Police Force
9. **Amber** - We will introduce measures to make the import or possession of illegal timber a criminal offence
10. **Red** - We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live
11. **Red** - We will take forward the findings of the Pitt Review to improve our flood defences, and prevent unnecessary building in areas of high flood risk
12. **Red** - Consult on a new strategic approach to forestry in England
13. **Red** - As part of a package of measures, we will introduce a carefully managed and science-led policy of badger control in areas with high and persistent levels of bovine tuberculosis
14. **Red** - We will publish and present to Parliament a simple and consolidated national planning framework covering all forms of development and setting out national economic, environmental and social priorities
15. **Red** - We will create a presumption in favour of sustainable development in the planning system
16. **Red** - We will take forward the Marine and Coastal Access Act and ensure that its conservation measures are implemented effectively