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The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
House of Commons
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19 November 2021

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 9 August on behalf of your constituent,
about the protection of upland landscapes. I
apologise for the considerable delay in responding. Defra is currently dealing with high
volumes of correspondence.

Defra recognises the important role that access to nature can have in improving people's health and wellbeing. This is reflected in our 25 Year Environment Plan, which sets out our ambition to connect more people with the natural environment, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Access to nature can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression and it can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases. This is even more important in the context of COVID-19.

New measures announced in the Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution will help us deliver on this ambition. We will start the process for designating more of England's beautiful and iconic landscapes as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, safeguarding these areas for future generations and bringing more people within closer reach of nature.

On the opportunities to use uplands to tackle climate change sustainably: through the three environmental land management schemes, farmers and other land managers may enter into agreements to be paid for a variety of public goods including mitigation of and adaptation to climate change. All eligible farmers will be offered the opportunity through the Sustainable Farming Incentive to be paid to deliver improved soil health through the Arable and Horticultural Soil Standard and Improved Grassland Soil Standard which aim to deliver benefits such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, storage of carbon and reduction of flooding. In June 2021, we also committed to rolling out a Moorland and Rough Grazing Standard within the early roll out of the Sustainable Farming Incentive from 2022.

We agree that better management of our peatlands can produce a range of benefits, including biodiversity, carbon storage and flood protection. So, we are committed to restoring and sustainably managing England's peatlands. The Chancellor announced last March that as part of the Nature for Climate Fund, 35,000 hectares of peatland restoration would be achieved over the next five years. A restoration grant scheme, delivered by Natural England, has now been launched. This represents a significant step forward in our restoration efforts and will require us to work closely with a wide range of stakeholders. The England Peat Action Plan, published in May 2021, has set out further measures to restore, protect and manage England's peatlands as part of a package of measures to protect England's landscapes and nature-based solutions.

Alongside this, we have always been clear of the need to phase out rotational burning of protected blanket bog to conserve these vulnerable habitats. There is an established scientific consensus that burning of vegetation on such sites is damaging and that is why we have taken action to prevent further damage by bringing forward legislation that will limit burning of vegetation. This represents a crucial step in meeting the Government's nature and climate change mitigation and adaptation targets, including the legally binding commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

And finally, on the points raised on wildlife, and particularly the persecution of raptors: the Government takes wildlife crime seriously. Significant sanctions are available to judges to hand down to those convicted of wildlife crimes. Most wildlife crimes carry an unlimited fine and/or a six-month custodial sentence. To address concerns about the illegal killing of birds of prey, senior Government and enforcement officers have identified raptor persecution as a national wildlife crime priority.

Additionally, since 2016 Defra has contributed approximately £165,000 annually to the National Wildlife Crime Unit, which monitors and gathers intelligence on wildlife crime, including raptor persecution, and aids police forces in their investigations when required.

The Hen Harrier Action Plan sets out what will be done to increase hen harrier populations in England and includes measures to stop illegal persecution. We are committed to securing the long-term future of the hen harrier as a breeding bird in England and I hope that all partners in the plan will continue to work together positively to see this iconic bird thrive. The long-term plan was published in January 2016 and we believe that it remains the best way to safeguard the hen harrier in England. A copy of the plan is available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/491818/hen-harrier-action-plan-england-2016.pdf



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