

**Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy & Biodiversity Speaking Note**  
**SELINK Parliamentary Reception**  
**18 May 2022**

Good evening and thank you Deborah for the introduction and thank you so much for inviting me to speak.

Our cause is urgent. I know that all the people in this room understand that when we talk about a climate and nature emergency and the actions we need to take, that we are talking about the work we need to do to keep our planet habitable. To keep our crops growing, our climate bearable, our ecosystems alive.

The window to act is closing. This is the decade when we must redefine our relationship with nature, or the degradation of our natural environment and climate breakdown will have gone past the point where it can be managed. In this room we know that our natural environment is in a state of crisis with more species being eliminated and habitats destroyed all the time. And communities around the world, people, are experiencing the effects now. Climate and nature are not separate but are one and the same.

It is my privilege to be with you here today as Minister for Biodiversity, at a critical time for the future of Scotland's environment – and our planet.

Thank you to all of you for your work, time and effort, particularly Link members, who have done so much to protect and restore our wildlife and natural environment.

Thank you also for the work many of you have done in recent months to support the development of Scotland's biodiversity strategy, something that I hope will be game-changing for our natural environment.

In this time of crisis, It is action that counts – and I think we got out of the gate quickly. In the first six months in this role I have, I hope, sought to accelerate action and set a direction of travel for the rest of this session.

First, we established the Nature Restoration Fund, which provides a £65 million, multi-year fund for projects reversing biodiversity loss and tackling climate change. The Fund is supporting large-scale, multi-year, multi-partner projects which deliver transformative change to drive forward nature recovery. I have been to see one of these projects in action where they are reforesting riverbeds to provide shelter for spawning salmon and other species while protecting towns downstream from flooding. The fund is in its infancy and I can't wait to see what other transformational projects it will make happen.

And it shows that we can work together successfully to end the relentless stories of decline. To tell new stories – hopeful stories – of lost species reintroduced, our native woodlands restored, the buzz of insects and songs of birds returned.

Last Autumn I also indicated a change of approach to beavers. Once hunted to extinction in Scotland, this lost species is now expanding once again and I have been clear that we will facilitate this expansion while supporting those affected to minimise and mitigate any conflict. Since then, NatureScot has led a broad and deep stakeholder engagement exercise to look at how we deliver this, and the National Strategy for Beavers will soon be completed - by summer 2022 - with any available translocations taking place in the trapping/translocation window between the end of the kit dependency period in mid-August and Autumn 2022.

I was so excited to see the first beaver translocations taking place last year after having this commitment in the Bute House Agreement. My father grew up in England and didn't see a beaver until he emigrated to Canada in his 30's. But kids growing up today in Scotland will see beavers and consider them to be an integral part of the Scottish Landscape. That's what we're talking about here. Changing the Scottish landscape and our relationship with it.

To that end, just last week we set out a route-map to expand Scotland's National Park network. I am determined that our National Parks be re-invigorated and properly empowered and resourced to take a strong lead when it comes to nature restoration and biodiversity. My priority isn't just for more National Parks, but for

better ones too. Parks that do more for both people and nature.

I hope that you can all see the change of direction for example in the ambition shown in the draft Cairngorms Park Plan.

Landscape Scale projects like the Cairngorms Connect show us the Parks' potential. I am determined that they deliver on this potential.

I want to ask you to please get behind this work and engage with the consultation on National Parks and help me and the Scottish Government take our Parks into a new era where they have the tools and resources they need to lead national efforts to restore Scotland's nature and tackle the climate emergency.

Over the spring and summer months, we will seek the views of stakeholders to build consensus on what National Parks should be delivering for Scotland, communities and visitors. This consultation will shape the development of an Evaluation Framework to assess nominees for National Park status and inform the work of existing National Parks going forward.

National Parks are uniquely placed to promote and facilitate nature restoration at scale and share that learning to the rest of the country.

Our new Biodiversity Strategy will be published this Autumn and we greatly welcome the enthusiastic participation of Scottish Environment LINK and its members. I am grateful for your input into the development of the new Strategy. It will build on and cement the commitments laid out in our Statement of Intent, and we will be publishing a consultation on the Strategy early in the Summer.

My intention for this strategy is that it should be an evidence-driven, outcomes-based approach to identifying what we need to do to tackle the nature crisis in Scotland, which has been so clearly laid out in the State of Nature report that was published by NatureScot. A 24% decline in nature over the last 30 years. That's while we've been trying to conserve it. The existing approach hasn't worked; a new approach is

needed - a landscape scale approach. This is why we've committed to protecting 30% of our land for nature by 2030. This is a huge proportion and will allow for the nature corridors and the landscape scale protection and restoration that we need to meet our climate and nature targets.

Identifying appropriate areas to contribute to the 30% target, and ensure their management for nature will require collaboration with private, voluntary and public sectors, and I very much look forward to your contributions in this.

At sea, we have already exceeded the 30% target, with 37% of our seas now designated as marine protected areas. But I am, of course, aware that this is not enough. Work is ongoing to complete the crucially important management measures for these sites by 2024, adding to the protections already in place. This work is essential if Marine Protected Areas are to deliver on their promise.

From my point view, the real step change in this area, however, has been our commitment to designating at least 10% of Scotland's seas as highly protected marine areas by 2026. These sites will provide an additional level of protection by excluding all extractive, destructive or depositional activities while only allowing non-damaging levels of other activities, such as recreational diving. Again, I ask for your full engagement in this process. It's a huge opportunity to make a big difference to our seas and to develop a sustainable blue economy, but it will only be realised to its full with your participation.

We will also develop Nature Networks, which will be a key tool to deliver the ambitions set out in our new Biodiversity Strategy. Effectively functioning Nature Networks will connect high-quality, nature-rich areas through habitat corridors and 'stepping stones'. These will be delivered through local partnerships that address local priorities for nature, bringing about positive benefits for wildlife and bringing people closer to nature. Work is ongoing alongside NatureScot and other delivery partners to facilitate co-design and delivery of effective Nature Networks across Scotland.

The management of invasive non-native species is fundamental to our efforts in protecting and restoring nature. Some of these are a danger to human health and cost the Scottish economy around £300 million per year. In recent years, funding has been prioritised for INNS projects that are of strategic and national importance and which are likely to be more sustainable in the long-term. One excellent example is the Scottish Invasive Species Initiative. This 5-year partnership project led by NatureScot is tackling invasive non-native species including giant hogweed, Himalayan balsam and American mink in rivers and water courses in an area of 29,500 square kilometres in northern Scotland – over a third of Scotland's total area.

Deer management is another crucial mechanism to deliver our nature restoration goals in the uplands. And I know that means taking firm action. I have therefore established a project under the Scottish Biodiversity Programme Board to take forward this work, including recommendations on use of regulatory powers, and will be saying more about our new approach in the coming months.

As you will know, forests and woodlands also have a crucial role in reversing the effects of climate change and nature loss. As world leaders commit to end deforestation by 2030, we are planting 80% of the UK's trees and making bold commitments to protect and enhance Scotland's own temperate rainforest. Our ambitions do not stop there. We have increased our new woodland creation targets from 12,000 hectares a year to 18,000 hectares by 2024/25. By then, we will be planting 36 million new trees every year in Scotland.

And we have now committed to an ambitious target of increasing woodland cover from nearly 19% of the total area of Scotland, to 21% by 2032.

To achieve these goals, the Scottish Government has allocated an additional £150 million for forestry and woodland creation through Programme for Government commitments. We have commissioned Scottish Forestry and NatureScot to develop options to take forward our commitment to restore Scotland's rainforest.

Scotland isn't alone in our challenges, which is why we have taken a leadership role with the Edinburgh Process to support the development of a new global biodiversity framework, to be agreed at COP15 in China later this year. This has produced the Edinburgh Declaration, which 240 subnational governments, cities and local authorities have signed so far.

Biodiversity loss profoundly affects us all – as the Dasgupta Review of the Economics of Biodiversity demonstrated, we need to recognise that humanity is a part of nature, not apart from nature.

I look forward to learning more about the work of LINK members, and how we can work together to protect and restore Scotland's natural environment.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you all tonight, I hope you have an enjoyable and inspiring evening.