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**Minister for Climate Action
Scottish Government**

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Dear Minister,

Thank you very much for your time on 29th January and for the discussions on the Natural Environment Bill, invasive non-native species, Schedule 1 license monitoring and beaver translocations.

Natural Environment Bill

LINK members welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to a Natural Environment Bill with statutory nature recovery targets. We discussed what approach LINK thinks the Bill should take.

The nature targets will need to be more complex than the current climate targets due to the multifaceted nature of biodiversity. LINK has [published a report](#) on how targets should be designed, which recommends setting a framework for targets in the Bill with specific metrics in secondary legislation.

The Bill itself must have a clear structure and clear objectives for halting biodiversity loss by 2030 and restoring it by 2045, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. This structure must be broad in scope to address the complexity of nature as well as recognise its historical decline.

The Bill needs an action planning cycle that links the nature targets to delivery, monitoring and accountability. The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 already has provisions for the Biodiversity Strategy which should be amended to provide a clear link between this action planning, reporting, and delivery of the targets as established by the Natural Environment Bill.

The Bill must also designate an advisory body to provide expert advice on target setting and to ensure accountability by appropriate monitoring and reporting. This would mirror the Climate Change Committee's role in relation to climate targets. [LINK's report on nature targets](#) advises that Environmental Standards Scotland should be the advisory body responsible for nature targets, subject to ESS being adequately resourced and able to access/commission appropriate scientific expertise to undertake this additional function.

LINK looks forward to continuing engagement with the Scottish Government's Natural Environment Bill team and we would welcome another meeting with you once the draft Bill has been introduced to the Scottish Parliament.

Invasive Non-Native Species

LINK published [Invasive Non-Native Species in Scotland: A Plan for Effective Action](#) to guide the development of a Scottish National INNS Plan, outlining best-practice principles for managing INNS. While well received by NatureScot and MSPs, LINK members feel these recommendations have not yet been fully considered in the plan's development.

There is concern that the forthcoming INNS plan relies too heavily on the Great Britain INNS Strategy without accounting for Scotland's specific context. A tailored action plan is essential.

Key Proposals for the Natural Environment Bill:

- **Regulating Non-Native Gamebirds** – Remove legal barriers preventing ministers from regulating mass releases. These birds damage habitats, impact native species, and contribute to avian influenza (HPAI) outbreaks. Scotland currently has weaker regulatory provisions than England, and the Bill is an opportunity to address this, in particular in giving ministers powers to regulate releases when HPAI has not yet been recorded but where it is likely to arrive, eg in imported gamebirds.
- **Land Access for Eradication Efforts** – Grant NatureScot powers to access land for control of mobile INNS (eg mink, stoats), ensuring a balance between biodiversity priorities and landowner rights. The designation of Species Control Areas, where major eradication projects are underway, would facilitate.
- **Managing Invasive Seeding of Commercial Conifers** – Sitka Spruce and other non-native conifers are invading sensitive habitats, including peatlands and ancient woodlands, threatening ecosystems and carbon sequestration. We seek an action plan that will address the issue effectively, both in current and legacy plantations and in future planting. This will require both legislative and policy approaches, including the 'Polluter Pays' Principle – Require commercial forestry to mitigate the spread of invasive conifers onto neighboring land, ensuring responsible management, through changes to the 2012 Ministerial Exception Order which makes forestry trees exempt from INNS regulations.

LINK looks forward to continued engagement in stakeholder workshops to shape the Scottish National INNS Plan.

Schedule 1 License Monitoring

NatureScot is proposing a highly impractical and unnecessary condition to notify land owners/managers in advance of visits for those holding a Schedule 1 license to conduct nest visits. This shift appears to have been influenced by lobbying efforts from the Scottish Gamekeepers Association. This organisation has a track record of calling into question the efforts and diligence of those undertaking monitoring of birds of prey to help assess their conservation status.

There does not appear to have been any call for this type of notification from the many farmers, crofters, foresters etc beyond grouse shooting areas.

LINK is concerned that this new requirement may result in less fieldwork being carried out, particularly in grouse shooting areas, due to the effort required to undertake this exercise. It should be remembered that this monitoring is conducted primarily by volunteers. Additionally, the proposed condition could result in giving land managers, in wildlife crime hotspots, the opportunity to remove any incriminating evidence of raptor persecution upon notification that monitoring will be taking place on their ground.

LINK would like to see a lighter touch, more practical solution found which builds on the many good relations enjoyed by those involved with raptor monitoring whilst offering the option to allow fieldworkers to advise NatureScot that the land owner/manager is not known or that there is a risk to the birds.

There is also a broader call for a **full ban on lead ammunition**. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has formally recommended this measure to all four UK governments, and further advocacy is needed to ensure its implementation.

Beaver Translocations

We identified several policy challenges that the LINK Beaver Subgroup has observed as barriers to the effective implementation of Scotland's Beaver Strategy.

- **Beaver-land management conflict** - A key issue is the need to create space for beavers in areas where their presence may lead to conflicts with landowners and land managers. Greater efforts are required to support and incentivise landowners to accommodate beavers and their natural behaviours.
- **Translocation bottleneck** – There is concern that not enough beaver translocation sites are becoming available which will lead to more beavers needing to be removed from the Scottish population, either by translocation to England or by lethal control.
- **Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs)** - NatureScot should prioritise rolling out more SEAs of catchments, particularly in places where beavers have already arrived naturally. Currently only a handful of catchments have been assessed.
- **Natural range vs. 'within range'** - NatureScot classifies sites that fall within a catchment to which beavers have been formally introduced following the completion of an SEA and a formal stakeholder consultation as 'within-range'. This is different from the Habitats Directive's definition of a species' natural range (i.e. places that a species spreads to on its own, or when a species has been reintroduced into its former natural range). This means that sites that are technically within the beaver's natural range, but which are not part of a catchment that has received an SEA, nor been part of an official consultation, are currently off-limits as translocation receptor sites. This exacerbates the translocation bottleneck issue.
- **Public education and outreach** - the group believes that in places where beavers have already arrived naturally, and where they are expected to arrive in the next few years, a programme of public education and outreach would be more appropriate and proportionate than official consultation.

For more information please see the Scottish Wildlife Trust's [Blog](#) and [Briefing](#) on this subject.

Once again, thank you for your time. If you require further information on any of the issues we have raised, we would be delighted to supply that.

Yours sincerely,

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Dan Paris, Director of Policy and Engagement at Scottish Environment LINK
Juliet Caldwell, Senior Advocacy Officer at Scottish Environment LINK
Lloyd Austin, LINK Honorary Fellow and Convener of LINK Governance Group
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