

The anger over the Sycamore Gap tree shows us why we must halt decline in nature

What happened at Sycamore Gap earlier this year angered the nation. Not only because of what the tree meant to the people of Northumberland, and the many thousands who visited it every year. But because it reminded us that once we damage nature, it can take generations to recover.

5 Yet the remarkable reaction to this act of vandalism told us something else, too – something hopeful. The British people have a deep love for our natural world. They want us to turn this moment of anger into a moment of action, so that Sycamore Gap becomes a symbol not of loss, but renewal.

10 That’s why we’re setting out the next steps to deliver our ambitious plans today, not just to halt the decline in nature, but to restore it and improve access to it right across the country – especially for children and young people.

First, we will create a further 34 landscape recovery projects. Stretching across 200,000 hectares – an area one and a half times the size of Greater Manchester – we will restore woods, peat bogs, wetlands and Britain’s unique temperate rainforests. (...)

15 Second, we want to encourage a new green generation of children to get out into nature. Some of my most cherished memories are taking my two daughters out to walk and play near our home in the breathtaking Yorkshire Dales National Park.

20 Yet research shows that children today spend less than half the time in nature that my generation did. I find it deeply troubling that so many of the next generation could lack any connection to our natural world, with all the benefits to physical and mental health it provides. That’s why today we’re announcing millions of pounds of new funding to support children to get out into nature.

25 But third, it’s wrong to think that you can only enjoy nature in the countryside. Being close to nature might also mean playing in your local park – something I’ve long promoted through the pocket parks initiative or enjoying the trees in your local area. (...)

30 And fourth, we know that you can’t tackle climate change without nature. That’s why at the Glasgow climate summit in 2021, we put nature into the centre of the climate debate for the first time, including a historic agreement to halt and reverse global forest loss and land degradation this decade. Later this week, I will travel to this year’s climate conference in the United Arab Emirates determined to once again champion nature. (...)

All this builds on the Government’s proud environmental record. (...)

35 For Conservatives, protecting nature is in our DNA. Every generation has a responsibility to steward the landscapes we inherit, passing them on in a better state than we found them, through what Burke called a partnership of ‘the living and the unborn’.

40 Our connection to nature is often the subject of Britain’s greatest art, literature, and music, and binds us together as a people and a country. The instinct to conserve our natural world could equally be said to be the instinct to conserve that which makes us who we are.

That’s why today we have set out the next steps to deliver our commitment to restore nature at home and around the world.

45 Rishi Sunak, *The Telegraph*, 29 November 2023.