

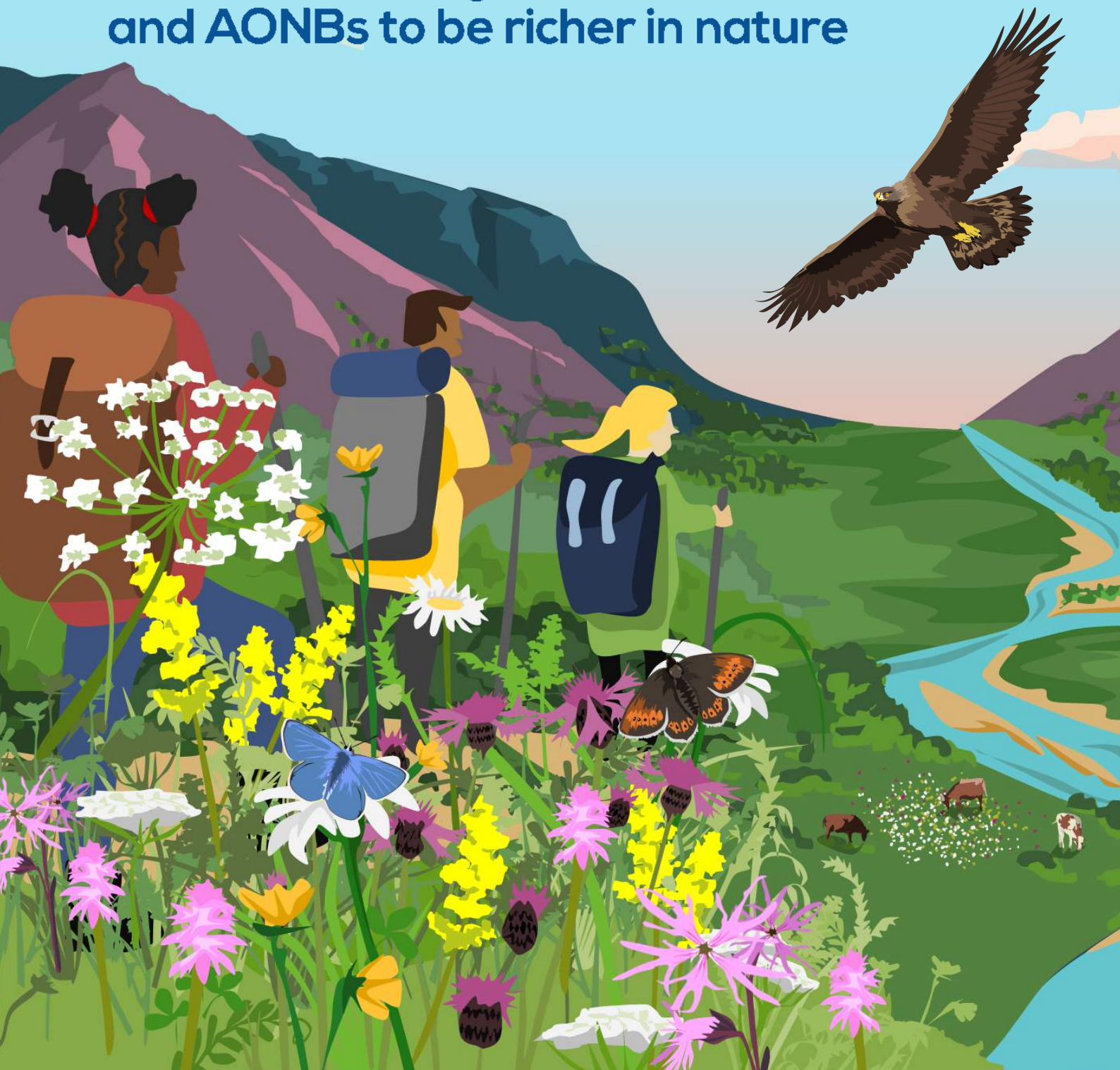


giving
nature
a home

Natural?

National Parks

People want England's National Parks
and AONBs to be richer in nature





Picture a National Park...

What image comes to mind? For many of us, a National Park is a place where wild things live in wild spaces. They're green, they're lush, and they're thrumming with life.

We instinctively know that protected places, like National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), should be places where wildlife thrives. But this isn't always the case. National Parks are not natural parks. Neither are AONBs. These protected landscapes have been heavily modified and, in recent decades, damaged by human activity.

We have 44 of these places in England. Some of them are mountainous; rocky crags, home to ring ouzels, or soggy bogs with plush carpets of peat-forming mosses. Some of them are flat, and wet; reed-covered fens, veiling elusive bitterns and shoals of shimmering fish.

From wildflower meadows, to coastal islands, to amethyst heathlands – almost half of England's wildlife habitats are found inside these places. They cover a quarter of the country, from Northumberland to the Isles of Scilly, and store much of the country's carbon.

Our National Parks and AONBs are landscapes that are loved by people. They're home to rich cultural heritage; generations of people who've lived connected with the land under their feet. They're also a place of escape. A place many of us seek to feel a sense of the wild, connect with the outdoors and see nature.

These are landscapes for everyone, and we believe everyone should have a say in their future. As the Government consults on reforms to National Parks and AONBs, we wanted to know how people in England felt about these special spaces.





The headlines

In February 2022 a survey conducted by an independent research agency on behalf of the RSPB sought the views of adults in England on our National Parks, our AONBs and the wildlife in them.¹

The results show that regardless of whether people live inside or outside these protected places:

- **Wildlife is the most valued feature of our National Parks and AONBs.**
- **People think wildlife should be doing better in these areas than it is outside them.**
- **When people find out wildlife isn't thriving in National Parks and AONBs, this concerns them and they would like to see nature restored. In fact – it's their number one priority.**
- **People are willing to change the way the land is managed to achieve this, and for these landscapes to look different as a result.**



The results

Top 3 most valued features of National Parks and AONBs



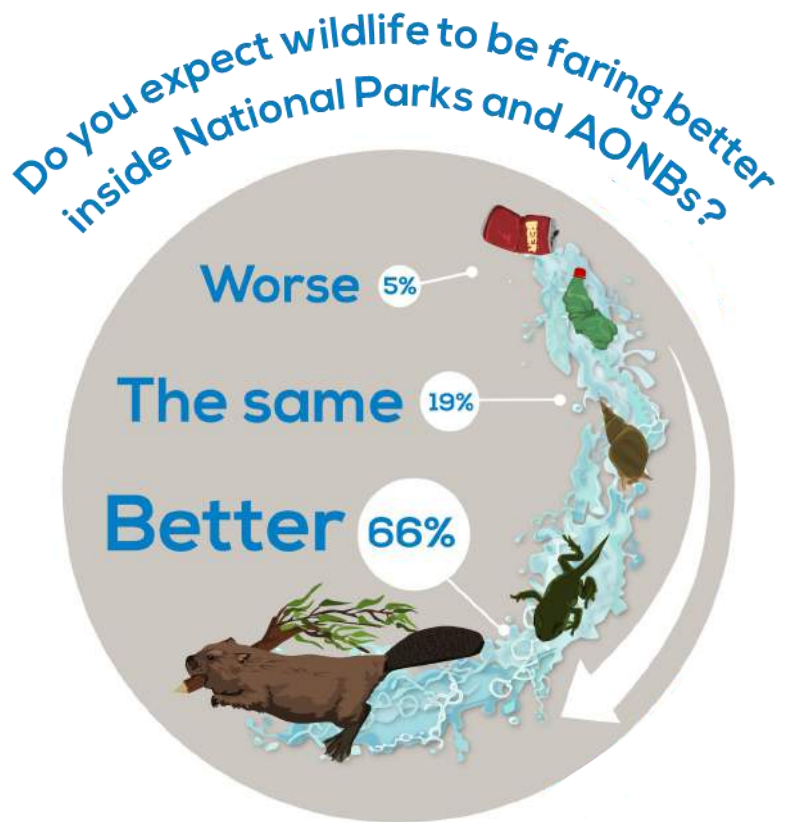
We asked:

For you personally, what are the features of National Parks and AONBs that you value the most?

- Wildlife and nature was by far the most highly-valued feature of National Parks and AONBs. We instinctively know that these beautiful landscapes should protect thriving ecosystems.
- Across England, two-thirds of respondents ranked this as their top feature.
- This figure was even higher for people living inside National Parks and AONBs. Three quarters of the residents of these landscapes value their wildlife and nature the most.
- The landscape and the fresh air were the second and third most-valued features.

We asked: Would you expect the wildlife inside National Parks and AONBs to be doing better, worse or the same as wildlife in the rest of the English countryside?

- People value National Parks and AONBs for their nature and wildlife; but people think it's doing better than it actually is. Two-thirds of adults in England thought wildlife inside National Parks and AONBs would be doing better than in the rest of the countryside.
- This belief was even stronger for those living inside these areas too – with nearly three-quarters thinking the same.



Wildlife is doing no better inside National Parks and AONBs than in the rest of the English countryside.

An example can be seen in the Lake District; this landscape has lost a lot of wildlife even after it became a National Park in the 1950's. Corncrakes, water voles and most recently golden eagles are all now extinct in this National Park.

A similar story has unfolded across the country despite the best efforts of many National Park and AONB Teams. The Government has not equipped them to fight the nature and climate emergency.



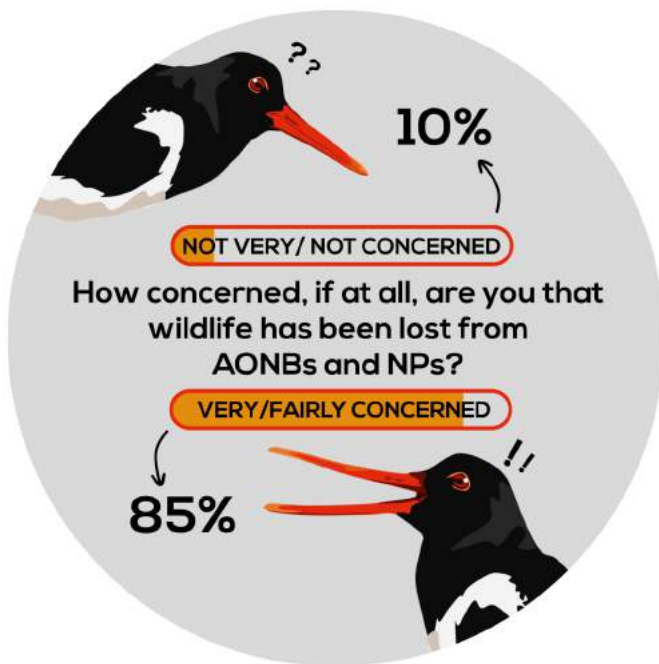
Corncrake
Crex crex
Extinct: 1990s



Water vole
Arvicola amphibius
Extinct: 2000s



Golden eagle
Aquila chrysaetos
Extinct: 2015

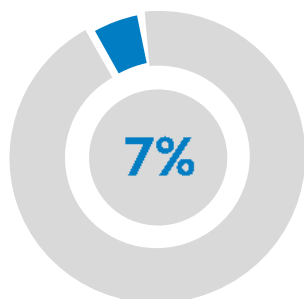
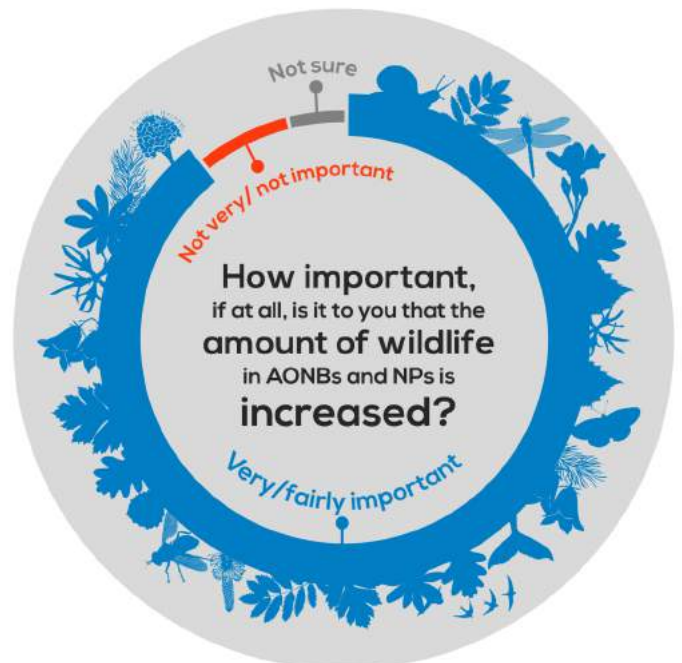


We asked: How concerned, if at all, are you that wildlife has been lost from National Parks and AONBs?

- When finding out that nature was, in fact, declining inside these spaces – people were concerned.
- 85% of adults across England were either very or fairly concerned about the poor state of nature inside National Parks and AONBs.
- This increased to 91% amongst people living inside these landscapes.

We asked: How important, if at all, is it to you that the amount of wildlife in National Parks and AONBs is increased?

- There was overwhelming support for a wilder future for our National Parks and AONBs.
- 90% of respondents in England thought that increasing the amount of wildlife inside these areas was very or fairly important – this rose to 96% for people living inside National Parks and AONBs.



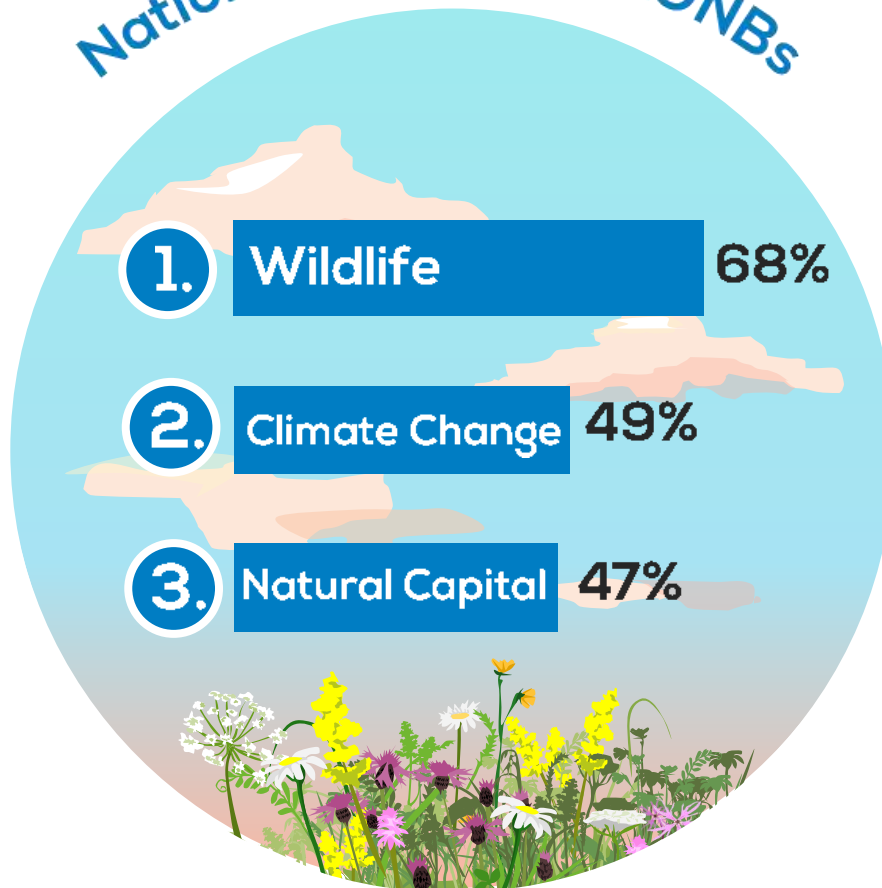
of adults in England don't want land management that is damaging to nature to change.

We asked: Would you like the organisations responsible for National Parks and AONBs to try to change farming and other land management practices that are harmful to wildlife but which some may argue are part of the cultural heritage of the area (such as high numbers of grazing animals and moorland burning)?

We've sometimes heard it argued that the way the land looks and is managed today can't be changed because it is part of the cultural heritage of the area, even where the evidence shows this is preventing nature's recovery.

Only a tiny proportion of people supported this view – both across England and even fewer amongst the people who live inside National Parks and AONBs.

Top 3 priorities for National Parks and AONBs



We asked:

Thinking of the future, what should be the priorities for National Parks and AONBs?

- Increasing the wildlife was by a long distance the public's top priority. 68% of people in England chose this, increasing to 75% of National Park and AONB residents.
- Tackling climate change was second most popular. Promoting natural capital – which is defined as natural resources such as soils, freshwater, forests and wildlife that provide benefits to people – was third.
- The other priorities people had for these landscapes were – in this order – improving the landscape, promoting access to the countryside for all and promoting cultural heritage.
- This sends a clear message to the Government and National Park and AONB teams about where action should be focussed. Taken together with the other results, this shows that restoring nature should be the main objective of these landscapes and that other objectives should not be used to justify actions that are damaging nature.

We asked: Would you support making these 3 changes in National Parks and AONBs to help increase wildlife even though they will alter the visual appearance of the landscape?

1. Restoring wildflower meadows

2. Increasing broadleaved trees

3. Fewer grazing animals

81%

of people in England are supportive of these changes in the landscape.

85%

of people living in National Parks and AONBs are supportive of these changes in the landscape.

Intensive farming funded by inappropriate subsidies is the main reason England's National Parks and AONBs have lost so much of their wildlife.

But we can produce food using nature-friendly methods and managing the land less intensively, for example by reducing grazing pressures.

This will change the way our landscapes look; more broadleaved trees, more wildflower meadows and more animals taking advantage of these new habitats. People want to see this change and this opinion was stronger for those who live inside National Parks and AONBs. They don't want these landscapes preserved as they are today in their nature-depleted state, they want them revived.



What needs to happen?

Recovering damaged habitats and bringing species back isn't easy.

It requires painstaking planning and monitoring, alongside conservation work on the ground. National Parks and AONB teams have a major role to play.

Action plan for nature



More than 80% of people in England want National Park and AONB teams to:

- Know the state of their landscapes' nature
- Have an action plan with targets for recovering nature
- Monitor progress



National Park and AONB teams can't do more with less.

Their budgets have been cut and they have nowhere near the resource they need to rise to the enormous challenge of turning around decades of wildlife loss.

AONBs have suffered the worst with each one only employing an average of four members of staff. This means that each member of staff is responsible for 50 square miles of land or 26,000 football pitches.

More resources

Three quarters of people want to see the Government give these authorities more money, and most people support AONBs getting the bulk of new funding.





What needs to happen?

To tackle the nature and climate emergency our National Parks and AONBs need inspirational leaders who know how to do this.

A review for the Government found National Park board members lack this knowledge and don't reflect our diverse communities.



Expert and diverse leadership



- 80% of people in England and 84% of National Park and AONB residents want board members to be appointed based on their expertise in the objectives of these landscapes.
- 83% of people in England and 90% of National Park and AONB residents want boards to have a balance of expertise across these objectives.
- 70% of people in England and 67% of National Park and AONB residents want boards that are socially diverse.

The Government has pledged to protect 30% of England for wildlife by 2030.

A quarter of England is already covered by National Parks and AONBs but we know that wildlife is declining inside these places, like it is outside them.

Restore nature in existing protected landscapes



More than two times as many people want the Government to focus on making our current protected landscapes richer in nature than creating new National Parks and AONBs or extending their boundaries.



Notes

1. The online research was undertaken by *Critical Research* – an independent market research agency with a sample drawn from the *Dynata* panel database. The sample was designed to be representative of the adult population aged 16+ living in England but with oversampling of those known to be living in National Parks and AONBs. Fieldwork was conducted between 14 – 22 February 2022. A total of 1,750 interviews were carried out, of which 250 were undertaken with those living in National Parks and AONBs. The remaining 1,500 were undertaken across the rest of England. In the data analyses stage, two stage weighting was applied. The first to address the deliberate oversampling of those living in National Parks and AONBs. The second was applied to ensure the whole dataset was representative by age within gender and English region.



The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654.

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