



Conservative Group for Europe

Factsheet 10: Europe, the Environment and Climate Change

Summary

- A review by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Select Committee has concluded that EU membership has ‘been positive for the UK environment’.
- Many environmental challenges are best tackled through international action since pollution doesn’t respect national boundaries. There are also strong linkages between environmental policy and those covering, for example, agriculture and the regulation of chemicals.
- EU legislation has had a hugely positive effect on the quality of Britain’s beaches (95% now meet EU cleanliness standards), on our water and rivers and on our air quality. It has helped to protect many of our rarest birds, plants and animals and their habitats and to drive the reduction of landfill waste and of power station emissions.
- The EU has amplified Britain’s international influence on environmental policy. It has been a key actor in shaping international agreements on climate change. Apart from the extra heft which the EU has in such negotiations, it makes sense to tackle the shared target of reducing greenhouse gases together so as to ensure fair competition within the Single Market.

Conservative Philosophy on Environmental Policy

‘For generations, we have assumed that the efforts of mankind would leave the fundamental equilibrium of the world’s systems and atmosphere stable. But it is possible that, with all these enormous changes (population, agricultural, use of fossil fuels) concentrated into such a short period of time, we have unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of this planet itself.’ *Margaret Thatcher Speech to the Royal Society 1988*

‘The core of Tory philosophy and the case for protecting the environment are the same. No generation has a freehold on this earth. All we have is a life tenancy—with a full repairing lease’ *Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Party Conference 1988*

Overview of key environmental achievements during Britain's EU membership

- A substantial decline in most industrial sources of air and water pollution, particularly in improving urban air quality and in tackling diffuse water pollution, for example from farming.
- A big cut in greenhouse gas emissions and rapid recent growth in the deployment of renewable energy.
- Significant reductions in the pressures on human health from environmental pollution.
- A significantly improved system of protection for species and habitats.
- A transformation in waste management, with a major increase in recycling rates and the first steps towards the creation of a more ‘circular’ economy.
- The establishment of a thorough system for the review of the safety of chemicals that can be expected to lead to the eventual withdrawal and substitution of various toxic substances.
- The foundations for addressing mounting pressures on the marine environment in the form of a legislative framework which is starting to have an effect.
- Improvements on access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters at an EU level.
- The wide application of environmental impact assessment and strategic environmental assessment procedures (also adopted and used by the European Investment Bank as a condition for all infrastructure investment decisions inside and outside the EU).

EU membership has been overwhelmingly positive for Britain's environment

As David Cameron, has commented: 'EU membership underpins many crucial environmental protections in the UK, while amplifying our voice in the world on vital issues like cutting global emissions.'

"Working with other countries at the EU level has led to cleaner British beaches, fewer people dying prematurely because of air pollution, and stronger protection for our nature and wildlife. It is not possible to tackle the global environmental challenges of the future - be it climate change, air pollution, or the destruction of the natural world - alone." *Friends of the Earth 2016*

An independent expert review of the impact of EU membership on the UK environment, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council and led by Viviane Gravey and Professor Andrew Jordan (University of East Anglia) and Dr Charlotte Burns (University of York), examined over 700 academic publications. The review concluded that the net environmental impact of Britain's EU membership has been overwhelmingly positive. These findings are broadly in line with a similar analysis by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee and by the Institute for European Environmental Policy.

A survey of environmental professionals from the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management reveals 93 per cent of respondents believe that EU membership has benefited the UK's natural environment. Over 85% do not believe that current UK environmental policies would have been delivered to current standards if the UK had been outside the EU.

Pollution and Climate Change don't respect national borders

Collective action on climate change gives all EU Member States the confidence to reduce emissions together, safe in the knowledge that their main trading partners are doing the same and not gaining competitive advantage through unfairly retaining carbon intensive generation. By agreeing collective targets and policy mechanisms, since 1990, the EU28 has exercised global leadership and reduced CO₂e emissions by 23 per cent whilst growing GDP by 46 per cent.

EU membership amplifies UK influence

The UK has had a substantial influence over EU positions in international negotiations on climate change. It was, for example, a British diplomat who led the EU negotiating team at the UN climate conference in Paris last year, persuading the EU to champion a long-term goal and a commitment to raise the world's ambition on carbon emissions reduction every five years. This was agreed by all 194 countries in the Paris Agreement. The UK could not have exerted this influence acting alone.

On agriculture and fisheries, British governments (supported by civil society) have been strong advocates of a greener Common Agricultural Policy and more sustainable fisheries. The UK Government would have virtually no leverage over these policies post-Brexit.

Green jobs and businesses are the future

UK entrepreneurs developing new low carbon energy solutions need easy access to the Single Market to achieve scale and to be competitive. For example, 53% of the output of the UK's nascent ultra-low emissions vehicle sector is exported to the EU.

The emerging EU initiative to build a "circular economy" could expand this market considerably. According to strategy consultants McKinsey & Co, adopting circular-economy principles could not only benefit Europe environmentally and socially but could also generate a net economic benefit of €1.8 trillion by 2030. <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability-and-resource-productivity/our-insights/europes-circular-economy-opportunity>

Fears UK environmental standards would decline outside the EU

The green movement's fears of a dismantling of the hard-earned environmental progress achieved in recent decades in the event of Brexit, have not been allayed by the Leave campaign's marked reluctance to discuss environmental matters and the number of climate change sceptics in its ranks.

According to the Huffington Post, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the World Wide Fund for Nature both support remaining in the EU. They say that 'years of uncertainty' would follow a vote to leave, casting serious doubts over wildlife protection policies.

