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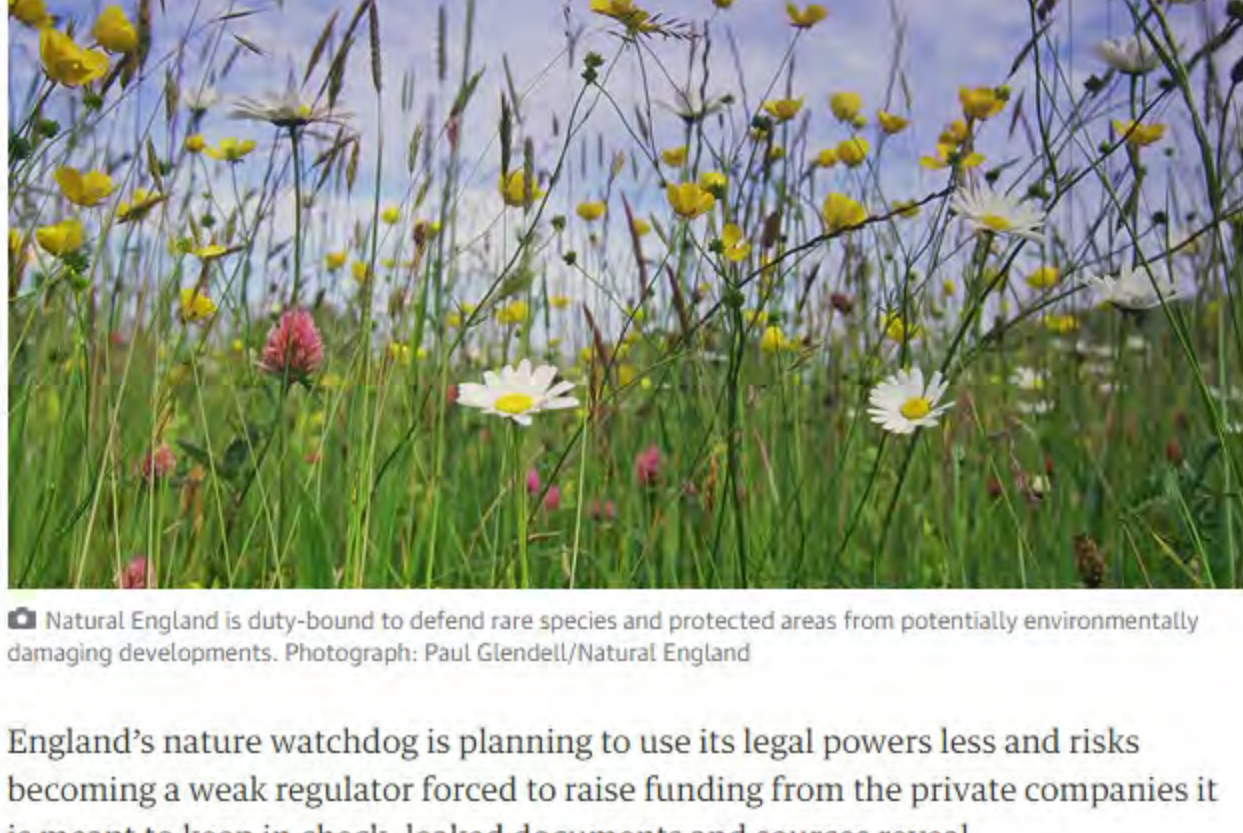
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Natural
England

Budget cuts threaten to weaken powers of England's nature watchdog

Leaked documents and sources show Natural England will use its legal powers less and seek funding from the private companies it is meant to keep in check



Natural England is duty-bound to defend rare species and protected areas from potentially environmentally damaging developments. Photograph: Paul Glendell/Natural England

England's nature watchdog is planning to use its legal powers less and risks becoming a weak regulator forced to raise funding from the private companies it is meant to keep in check, leaked documents and sources reveal.

Natural England is duty-bound to defend rare species and protected areas including national parks and England's 4,000 sites of special scientific interest from potentially environmentally damaging developments.

But the regulator faces a budget cut of 27% and a reduction in headcount of 20% by 2020 due to cuts to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). This means it will have a "significantly reduced national capacity", it admits.

An internal document from June, seen by Greenpeace and shared with the Guardian, says the agency will "make more proportionate use of our regulatory powers" and "retain our regulatory powers but will use them more proportionately and more efficiently, while increasingly operating through advice and partnership."

Internal sources say this amounts to using its powers less and to agreements that "compromise wildlife".

A source at the regulator told the Guardian: "Stepping back and not using regulation so often is basically saying: we won't regulate if people break the law, or persecute a species or destroy habitats, we will never take them to court."

"If people see us as a weak regulator, then they will take advantage of that. We've already been like that in the last few years. We're much, much less likely to go to court than we were five years ago."

Conservation organisations say they have already seen Natural England stepping back or not engaging in cases at a local level.

The Wildlife Trusts cited Natural England failing to stop the ploughing of a wildflower meadow in Coventry, and the watchdog withdrawing an objection related to a housing development in Chudleigh, Devon, that the trust claimed threatened greater horseshoe bats in a protected area.

The RSPB pointed to the case of Walshaw Moor, a shooting estate in the Pennines where Natural England dropped an inquiry into peat-bog burning. It believes the regulator is in breach of its duties under European habitats and birds directives.

Martin Harper, the RSPB's conservation director, said: "Nature is in trouble – and so it is vital that we have a strong and effective statutory nature conservation agency able to do whatever nature needs."

"Natural England has already been subject to huge reductions in its capacity to do its vital job, and the current political context means that it has increasingly moved away from using the full range of tools available to protect and restore nature."

Stephen Trotter, the director of the Wildlife Trusts, a network of 47 local groups, said: "We have for some time seen evidence across the trusts of less engagement with planning issues by Natural England than would have been the case previously. We find that particularly around non-designated but local wildlife sites, it has a reluctance to get involved in defending those sites."

Other changes to the way the agency operates include providing "advice to government that is politically aware". The regulator is meant to provide science-based and independent advice. A source at Natural England said the idea was "ridiculous" as its advice was meant to be "based on the science, not on anything else".

The watchdog's ecologists will also get out less to see the wildlife and habitats they are meant to protect and understand.

"Fewer ad hoc site visits will be necessary because more information, data and evidence about sites and the local area will be captured remotely and by others," says the document. Conservationists warned earlier this year that Natural England risked losing its "eyes and ears" after it cut funding for local environmental record centres.

In order to raise more money as its budget is cut £30m by the end of 2020 on 2015-16 levels, the agency also plans to raise more money by charging the private sector, such as water companies, housebuilders and windfarm developers, for its services. It raised £1.43m in 2015-16 by charging £110 an hour for such services, and hopes to increase this to £12m a year by 2020.

"It's blurring the vision of what we do," a source at Natural England said. "It's commercialising something that's very hard to commercialise. People find it quite a conflict in what they do. Previously we would prioritise what is important in terms of biodiversity rather than profit, so it's quite a different mindset."

The agency tried to allay such fears in another document shared with staff. "There were some concerns that a move towards charging might be perceived as a shift towards 'supporting development', with us working for, rather than with, our customers. Thankfully, that criticism has rarely been directed at us," it said.

Hannah Martin of the Greenpeace Brexit response team said: "First, we had the environment minister calling EU environmental protections 'spirit-crushing' during the referendum campaign. Now we learn that Defra's nature watchdog is being forced to get more of its funding from the very companies it's meant to keep in check."

"A picture is emerging of a government out of step with the British people's love for the countryside and the wildlife that lives there."

A Natural England spokeswoman said: "There has been absolutely no change in Natural England's statutory role or driving mission to protect and enhance the country's nature, habitats and landscapes as laid out under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006."

"However, we are improving the way we operate through implementing recommendations that were made in Sir John Lawton's independent Making Space for Nature report (2010) and welcomed by government and NGOs alike."

"Working with communities and stakeholders ever more efficiently, we will assess challenges and implement solutions on a 'landscape scale', always focussing on the ultimate outcome: an improved environment for all of us."

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**Nigel Chesterman** 6m ago
Yes, it is time for private individuals to step up and fund these organisations directly.
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**MarkNFisher** 7m ago
I suppose it is always possible that Unnatural England will be able to take a cut of future agri-environment scheme funding that they hand out, as some sort of performance incentive, since this will no longer be subject to EU regulation. Hundreds of millions every year were channelled out by Unnatural England over the last decade, often under pressure of achieving spending targets, by staff untrained in the task of dealing with such large sums, and with little evidence as to the effectiveness of the funding.

The convenience for Unnatural England, and for successive Governments, was that this was seen as fulfilling any state function on the protection of nature, and thus little other activity or funding was required. Worse still, while agri-environment funding was intended to mitigate the effects of farming, the link between conservation dogma and agri-environment funding became self-fulfilling, with the conservation sector becoming major beneficiaries of this, as it is now the business model on which all nature conservation in England rests, and which is increasingly based on the transfer of control of large areas of the public realm into these unaccountable third sector organisations.

So - do we really want to put a sticking plaster on this?!"

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