# Chris Packham leads largest UK scientists’ rally against Planning Bill’s environmental risks



Chris Packham, a prominent naturalist and TV presenter, has taken a leading role in advocating for the integration of scientific evidence into political discourse, recently orchestrating a substantial demonstration in Parliament Square. This rally, attended by around 150 scientists—including esteemed figures like Sir David King and climate researcher Mike Berners-Lee—marked what is thought to be the largest gathering of UK scientists of its kind. The timing coincides with heated discussions surrounding the government's Planning Bill, which aims to simplify regulations surrounding infrastructure development. Packham has consistently voiced his concerns regarding potential repercussions on environmental protections, positing that the legislation could dismantle decades of careful conservation efforts.

The Planning Bill has come under fierce scrutiny from environmentalists and scientists alike who argue it would significantly weaken existing laws that safeguard ecological habitats. The UK Climate Change Committee has expressed alarm over the government's readiness to tackle climate change, noting that 6.3 million properties in England are at risk of flooding—a point emphasised by Packham in his speech during the demonstration. He asserted, “We’re in deep trouble. Climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, and detrimental political choices... However, we possess a powerful tool: impartial, independent, scientific truth.” The urgency of this rally was underscored by the committee’s implication that unchecked climate change could diminish the UK’s economic output by as much as 7% of GDP by 2050.

Concerns extend beyond immediate environmental protections to long-term job security within the ecological sector, which currently supports over 10,000 roles. Proposed planning reforms could sidestep crucial protected species surveys, integral to ecologists' work, thereby threatening job sustainability and discouraging future entrants into the field. Critics of the Planning Bill argue that the government’s claims of regulatory bottlenecks hindering infrastructure progress overlook more pertinent industry issues, such as 'landbanking', a practice where developers hoard land without utilising it.

In a parallel effort to redefine environmental governance, the UK government has proposed a significant shift in the roles of the Environment Agency and Natural England. These agencies are expected to pivot towards facilitating economic growth and diminishing perceived obstacles to nature restoration initiatives. Environment Secretary Steve Reed outlined this reorientation, which seeks to enhance compliance processes but has raised concerns over risks to biodiversity. Critics fear that if habitat restoration timelines are mismanaged, the ecological consequences could be disastrous.

Meanwhile, the foundational principle of biodiversity net gain (BNG) is designed to ensure property developers contribute positively to local ecosystems. As mandated, new developments must guarantee a 10% net gain in biodiversity. Initiatives like Avon Needs Trees serve as models for how financial mechanisms can fund reforestation and habitat creation, effectively highlighting the importance of aligning financial investments with ecological sustainability. Nevertheless, as the government seeks to expedite project approvals and tackle the housing crisis—targeting the construction of 1.5 million new homes—there appears to be a tension between construction goals and environmental advocacy.

This has led to the emergence of a contentious narrative surrounding the so-called 'pay-to-kill' provisions within the Planning Bill. Critics argue that these provisions effectively allow for the destruction of habitats without proper assessment of wildlife present, as long as developers contribute financially to the Nature Restoration Fund managed by Natural England. Such a framework has been denounced by various environmental groups, who assert it could exacerbate biodiversity decline and contradict international commitments aimed at reversing ecological damage.

As the debate over the Planning Bill intensifies, the future of the UK’s environment remains precarious. Stakeholders from both sides of the argument recognise the pressing need for thoughtful policymaking that ensures development does not come at the expense of the natural world, particularly as the ramifications of climate change become increasingly evident. With public demonstrations led by prominent figures like Packham highlighting these concerns, the intersection of science, politics, and environmental conservation remains a critical battleground for safeguarding the UK's ecological legacy.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3
2. Paragraph 3
3. Paragraph 4
4. Paragraph 5
5. Paragraph 6
6. Paragraph 7
7. Paragraph 8

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2054619/chris-packham-nature-angela-rayner> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/7a971bac-981d-447d-853e-d215f183594d> - Proposed UK planning reforms aimed at expediting infrastructure projects could lead to significant job losses among ecologists, a sector employing over 10,000 people. The changes would reduce the need for protected species surveys, a core component of ecologists’ work, causing concerns about job security and deterring new entrants to the field. The planning and infrastructure bill introduces a 'nature restoration fund,' enabling developers to address environmental obligations through upfront payments, rather than project-specific mitigation. Critics argue that this could undermine ecological protections and delay habitat restoration, potentially causing local extinctions and hindering the UK's goal of protecting 30% of its land and sea by 2030. They also dispute government claims that regulations are the primary bottleneck for infrastructure projects, pointing to industry practices like 'landbanking' as more significant factors. The bill is considered a major rollback of environmental protections, raising alarms about its rushed implementation and potential long-term impacts.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/a9896bcb-f64b-4e58-b098-5214b16287c0> - The UK government, led by Environment Secretary Steve Reed, will refocus the roles of the Environment Agency (EA) and Natural England to support economic development and reduce hurdles to nature restoration and infrastructure projects. As part of these changes, the agencies will be directed to prioritize public interest and economic growth. This move follows a review of regulatory practices across the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), led by Dan Corry. The review criticized the current regulatory system as inefficient and an impediment to sustainable growth. Of Corry’s 29 recommendations, nine will be implemented immediately, including streamlining environmental compliance guidance and assigning a lead regulator for each major infrastructure project. The government also plans to exempt low-risk activities from permits, digitize planning systems, and establish a new infrastructure board. Notably, 'trusted nature groups' such as the National Trust will gain new freedoms to undertake restoration work more efficiently. Critics warn of risks to ecosystems if timelines for habitat redevelopment are misaligned, but Reed insists the reforms will balance development with environmental protection. The initiative marks a shift from previous stringent regulations, aiming to accelerate housing and infrastructure projects like Heathrow’s third runway and the Lower Thames Crossing.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/sustainable-finance-reporting/comment-our-future-depends-biodiversity-we-must-invest-it-urgently-2024-12-03/> - The article emphasizes the critical importance of biodiversity and how human activities, fueled by financial investments, are causing significant biodiversity losses. Major banks have been providing substantial credit to sectors that contribute to deforestation, highlighting the need for financial accountability and redirection towards nature-focused projects. The concept of nature-based solutions is proposed, involving conservation, restoration, and sustainable management of ecosystems to address societal challenges and improve ecosystem services. In the UK, biodiversity net gain (BNG) policies require property developers to ensure a 10% net gain in biodiversity for new developments, promoting the creation and maintenance of habitats. Projects like Avon Needs Trees demonstrate how BNG credits can finance large-scale reforestation and habitat creation, contributing to environmental benefits and community well-being. The article advocates for a financial system that values nature, urging banks to stop funding destructive activities and start investing in nature restoration. The Green Finance Institute's roadmap is cited as a guide for governments and industries to enhance nature markets, similar to early renewable energy financing efforts. Overall, systemic financial reforms are deemed essential for achieving a sustainable future.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/aa3aa798-3f81-49cc-a32e-9988da74480f> - The UK plans to introduce new planning rules to halve the approval time for major projects, including wind farms and power stations. Housing minister Matthew Pennycook outlined that the new Planning and Infrastructure Bill aims to reduce the current approval process from four years to less than two. The bill intends to streamline application processes, minimize bureaucratic delays, restrict multiple judicial reviews, and introduce a 'nature restoration fund' for ecological compensations. This legislation is part of Labour's broader goals to address the housing crisis by constructing 1.5 million new homes and ensuring electricity is sourced predominantly from low-carbon sources by 2030. To expedite housebuilding, several measures have been introduced, such as revamping the National Planning Policy Framework, enforcing local councils to meet housing targets, and promoting compulsory purchase orders. Planning fees will be updated in line with inflation, and councillors will receive mandatory training. The bill's overarching aim is to radically transform the UK's planning system and stimulate economic growth.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/cdfbd084-2490-496a-860c-505ff370d62e> - Scotland's offshore wind energy plans are facing significant hurdles due to concerns about the impact on birdlife. The Seagreen offshore wind farm in the North Sea has been operational since October, but SSE's proposed Berwick Bank wind farm faces delays due to regulatory processes aimed at protecting marine bird species. The project has been pending approval for 21 months, impacting investor confidence. The UK aims to increase its offshore wind capacity from 15GW to 60GW by 2030 to meet renewable energy targets. Politicians and conservation groups, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), highlight the challenge of balancing renewable energy developments with biodiversity protection. Proposed compensatory measures by SSE include ending sand eel fishing and eradicating rats to protect bird nests, but the RSPB views these efforts as inadequate. The delay in consent is attributed to the complex planning system and potential legal challenges from conservation groups. The Scottish and UK governments are working to streamline the consent process and adopt a marine recovery fund to expedite projects while mitigating environmental impact.
7. <https://bylinetimes.com/2025/03/26/labour-housing-planning-and-infrastructure-bill/> - Environmental groups and conservationists have criticized the UK Government’s Planning and Infrastructure Bill, branding it a 'pay-to-kill' system for developers that will lead to 'the injury and killing of protected species.' The Bill, which aims to tackle the housing crisis and boost the economy, proposes to legally allow developers to bulldoze habitats without finding out what wildlife lives there, as long as they pay into a newly established Nature Restoration Fund administered by Natural England. Critics argue that this approach undermines the guiding principle of avoiding harm to natural heritage and could result in significant biodiversity loss. The article highlights concerns from organizations like the Bat Conservation Trust and ecological consultants, who warn that the Bill promotes a 'pay to kill' system and could lead to increased biodiversity loss while pushing up house prices. The article also notes that the UK’s planning reforms are at odds with international commitments to reverse biodiversity loss, as agreed in the 2021 Environment Act.