

25-year-environment plan – response from Froglife

Froglife is a national wildlife conservation charity concerned with the conservation of the UK's amphibian and reptile species and their associated habitats. We focus on practical habitat creation and restoration, education, and applied research. Froglife's vision is a world in which reptiles and amphibian populations are flourishing as part of healthy ecosystems.

The proposed 25-year-environment plan from the government is a positive way forward for conservation of UK species and habitats. Overall, Froglife feels that the intentions of the document are positive, but we have questions over how it will be funded and implemented. The document envisions how different areas of the environment (e.g. water, land, waste) would be improved but does not give suggestions of timescales or whether these will be government funded projects or whether funds will come from elsewhere. We feel that a lot of work has gone into producing the document but are questioning the viability of any actions which may result.

Froglife works to enhance both terrestrial and aquatic habitats for amphibians and reptiles. The 25-year-environment plan states that improvements will be made to rivers, lakes, freshwater aquifers and the marine environment, but there is no mention or reference to freshwater ponds. Water bodies such as ponds are a highly valuable habitat for a range of vertebrate species including the protected great crested newt and natterjack toad along with five other species of native amphibian in the UK (Griffiths, 1997; Knutson et al., 2004). Ponds provide vital breeding habitats and declines in the number of common toads has been attributed to significant declines in the number of ponds in our landscape (Beebee, 1997). Froglife therefore feels that there should be more emphasis on maintaining and conserving these valuable freshwater habitats.

The 25-year-environment plan states how woodland areas will be improved. This is a positive step as these habitats provide valuable refuge for the majority of our native amphibian species especially the declining common toad and protected great crested newt. However, we have a concern that there is no mention of connectivity between aquatic and terrestrial habitats, which is of vital importance for amphibians. Preventing movements between breeding ponds and terrestrial foraging areas (known as habitat split), is a major cause of decline in amphibians which require both freshwater and terrestrial habitats for different life stages (Becker *et al.*, 2009). With an increase in the number of roads, particularly in the southeast of the UK, populations of amphibians are in decline as habitats are increasingly fragmented. In particular, the common toad is suffering significant declines which is partly attributable to lack of connectivity between aquatic breeding habitats (Petrovan & Schmidt, 2017). Froglife would like to see a mention of how key habitats will be connected through mitigation measures such as wildlife corridors and under-road tunnels.

Iconic and key species are of conservation concern and Froglife is pleased to note that the 25-year-environmental plan seeks to address these species. However, less noticed species, such as amphibians and reptiles, are often overlooked in conservation documents and require constant conservation action, particularly in areas of high urban development, to prevent significant population declines. Once ubiquitous species like the common frog and common toad are under increasing threat from a variety of sources including habitat loss and fragmentation, introduced disease, climate change and, increasingly, chemicals in the environment (Hayes *et al.*, 2006).

The 25-year environment plan contains proposals to help connect people to the natural environment. At Froglife we welcome these ideas and believe that it is valuable to enhance this connection with the natural world as it helps people improve their health and wellbeing by using

green spaces, including through mental health services. We would like the plan to encourage children to be close to nature, in and out of school, with a particular focus on disadvantaged areas. Froglife is already delivering aspects of this through our Natural Achievers and Leapfrog schools programmes. These activities will enable our younger generation to be better equipped to conserve our declining species and fragmenting habitats in future years. In addition, we would like 2019 to be a year of action for the environment, working with Step Up To Serve and other partners to help children and young people from all backgrounds to engage with nature and improve the environment.

Overall, Froglife's view is that this 25-year-environment plan from the government is a positive step forward, but we would like more information on how the proposed changes will be funded along with an increased number of measures which will help protect our valuable amphibian and reptiles.

References

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