

House of Commons Petitions Committee

e-petition 266770 – “Ban Driven Grouse Shooting Wilful blindness is no longer an option”

Video call transcript

Kerry McCarthy MP: So thank you very much, Chris, for joining us today. I'm here as a representative of the House of Commons Petitions Committee. And you're here because you initiated a petition last year on driven grouse shooting and it was slightly beset by problems along the way. It's been so chaotic in Parliament over the last year or so, but the petition was brought to a halt on 6th of November 2019 because an election was called. And at that stage, it reached 111,965 signatures. The highest concentration of petitioners, which I think is quite interesting, actually were from the Calder Valley, Sheffield Hallam, the High Peak, and the Derbyshire Dales constituencies, which is quite interesting when you think they're quite rural and they will be having this sort of activity on their doorstep.

So we hoped to initiate a debate on this petition, as we tried to do when they reach 100,000 signatures. That was cut short by the election. And then we just about penciled in a date at the end of March once Parliament resumed and then coronavirus happens. That's why we're trying to reach out to petitioners and do these virtual sessions instead, still with a view to provoking a response from the Government at the end of it. So I suppose my starting question is: you're involved in so many conservation issues, many causes that you feel very strongly about. Why was this the petition that you chose to bring forward?

Chris Packham: I think that in recent times, not just the conservation fraternity, but the wider public who have an interest in the health of the environment and the wildlife that lives there have become more broadly aware of some of the negative issues that surround driven grouse shooting.

And I really want to say at the top, this is not an anti-shooting petition, this is very much focused on one shooting practise, that of driven grouse shooting, which seems to encompass a very broad range of quite significant negative impacts on our environment pertaining to individual species, and also social impacts on people, too. I think it's representative of a change in people's attitudes through that awareness of wanting government to instigate changes far more rapidly. We've recognised that we're in a climate, an environment

emergency, and also that we're looking at catastrophic biodiversity loss. We're looking into our landscape and seeing how we can make it a healthier and more sustainable place to be. And driven grouse shooting produces a landscape which is very unhealthy, and therefore it becomes one of the first targets that we choose to look at when we're asking for significant reform.

We've had previous petitions, one of which initiated by my colleague Mark Avery, which also reached 100,000 signatures. There was a debate at that time. We were dissatisfied by the results of the debate. So after a period of time, we relaunched the petition, which, as you say, despite these interruptions very rapidly reached its number of signatures. Again, I think representative of a growing concern amongst those people who look for a healthy landscape about the impacts of driven grouse shooting.

Kerry McCarthy MP: Yes, we had that debate in October 2016. I took part in the debate, although I wasn't on the Petitions Committee at the time, so another member of the Committee presented it. And I think it's fair to say that the majority of MPs that turned out for that debate were quite pro-driven grouse shooting. There were a few voices like mine that were perhaps raised in dissent. But before that the Petitions Committee, as part of the inquiry, it's not just that they hold Westminster Hall debates, they did also take evidence from the RSPB, the Moreland Association and the Countryside Alliance on that petition. But as you say, the Government didn't take any action as a result of that. What did you think with these petitions? When they get to 10,000 signatures, they get a Government response in writing. What did you think of that response this time round?

Chris Packham: Well, I'm going to struggle to be polite, Kerry, if I'm honest with you. It was pathetic and derisory and encompassing...

Kerry McCarthy MP: That's you trying to be polite is it Chris?

Chris Packham: Well, yes I'm afraid. Well let me say it was enormously disappointing because it showed a depth of ignorance and willful blindness that we didn't want or expect. And I might run through some of the points in that reply, if I may. Obviously, the Government cited in the first sentence, in fact, that grouse shooting is a legitimate activity, providing benefits for wildlife and habitat conservation and investment in remote areas. Well, I could make a pretty strong case to say that all of those are untrue. Legitimate activity? Well, it certainly is. Of course, it's legal to pay and go and shoot grouse, but that whole industry seems to be underpinned by criminal activity, which will move on to when it comes to the persecution of Raptors and the damage to habitat. Benefits for wildlife? Well, not really. Benefits for

large numbers of grouse, but precious little other wildlife, when one considers the potential biodiversity of these regions. Habitat conservation, with all of that burning, all of that draining, all of that medicated grit going out there, all of those mountain hare culls and relentless persecution of any predators? That's not my sort of habitat conservation. And then investment in remote areas is fraught with ambiguities when it comes to the degree of investment and the importance of that investment to those rural communities. And again, it's something that we can come on to again.

Moving further into their statement, they said that it brings benefits to the rural community. I mentioned we can discuss that. They say, and one of the most emotive issues, you'll understand, is the relentless persecution of our birds of prey on driven grouse moors. And they say that they've identified raptor persecution as a wildlife crime priority. But we've heard this for so long, an investment into solving this problem has been precious little and ineffective. They cite the Raptor Persecution Priority Delivery Group. But as I'll tell you in a moment, that group is beleaguered by a surfeit of cases which have come to the fore in just the last few weeks under lockdown.

They go on to say that they wish to work with stakeholders to try and eradicate these crimes. Well, I can assure the Government that the conservation fraternity have been trying to work with those selfsame stakeholders for many years and come up against a brick wall of ignorance and arrogance. They will not make any concessions because they can get away with it, and they continue to get away with it. And until they can't get away with it any longer. I don't think we'll see any concessions in place. What is notable in the Government's reply, however, is that they recognise that this is a very important habitat. They write here that, in the UK, uplands have 75 percent of the world's remaining heather moorland and about 13 percent of the world's blanket bog. So there is no ambiguity in DEFRA's mind that the habitat that we're talking about here is extraordinarily valuable. Now they say that healthy, active peat provides good habitat for grouse. Well, it does when it's managed for grouse, as well as numerous environmental benefits and ecosystem services.

Natural England is working with landowners of grouse moors to develop management agreements which include vegetation management principles for various habitats on grouse moors. Well, let's take a cold, hard look at Natural England. They've had their budgets slashed to the core. They are struggling to choose what to do. And a lot of the time they don't have the time, the effort, energy or personnel or finance to conduct any of that work. And they've struggled to work with any of the stakeholders. They've frequently had their ideas and recommendations snubbed. So, again, I would

say that this is just brushing it under the carpet. It's, you know, it's putting the ball in the court of a beleaguered small section of the police force, which are underfunded, to try and solve the crimes, which are very difficult to solve in the first place. And then saying this is all down to Natural England and then pulling all the funding from Natural England and making their life difficult in every department, not just looking after driven grouse moors.

The last part of the report is perhaps the most galling because when it comes to the value to the economy of driven grouse shooting, they've gone to all of those people with a significant vested interest there. And all the figures that I'm looking at here that are written down, the various millions I can find, no published validity for, I can't see where these figures have come from. And this is, unfortunately, one of the handicaps that we have when we confront the financial aspects of drive grouse shooting that we don't have good data. We cannot get our hands on the actual figures because they won't tell us. The one thing I can tell you about the many millions that was mentioned here is quite a considerable amount of that money comes from you and I as taxpayers through public subsidies. So whether we like it or not, both you Kerry and I are contributing to the management of driven grouse moors through the subsidy system, the environmental stewardship and subsidy system, which is appalling. I'd rather my money was going elsewhere, of course.

Kerry McCarthy MP: OK so perhaps, if we talk through a little bit, I mean, some of the people that will be watching this won't be aware of how driven grouse shooting actually happens. So perhaps you could, sort of, almost take us on a little journey through if somebody is setting up a grouse moor, what does that mean in terms of how they manage it? You've mentioned things like burning, removing other predators from the area. How does that work? And then we can talk to about the consequences. And in terms of the fact that it's driven grouse shooting that is a particular concern.

Chris Packham: Yes. Well, essentially, driven grouse shooting is about maximising the number of grouse, because the way that the shoot is actually practised is about driving large numbers of birds pass past rows of guns out on the moorland so that they can have multiple shots at multiple birds flying over. And in order to satisfy that, because of the vagaries of weather, the movement of birds, the productivity of the breeding season for grouse, et cetera, et cetera. the only way to satisfy continual good shooting for those who wish to practise it is to have very large numbers of grouse to the detriment of pretty much everything else.

Kerry McCarthy MP: Could we just be clear, because I think some people think of shooting as somebody stalking through the undergrowth with a rifle until they see a pheasant or a partridge or a grouse there, this is something very different.

Chris Packham: This is rows of what we call butts, which is where the shooters conceal themselves across the top of the moor. So they're in a line so that there's, you know, safety for the shooters of course. Beaters with their dogs push the birds towards them. The idea being that the birds take off and fly very rapidly past them, making the shot difficult. And sometimes the objective, you know, from someone who's not a shooter, is perceived to be success being the largest number of birds killed. And I should note and point out, though, clearly that unlike, say, pheasants and regular partridge, which are introduced into the UK countryside in their many millions each year, non-native birds that are farmed and imported to the UK in the main, grouse are breeding naturally on these moorlands. They don't breed them in captivity and then release them. The birds are breeding out there naturally. But of course they want to maximise their breeding success.

And this brings us to the first of many concerns, which is the management of predators. And there is, again, no doubt, of course, that many predatory birds, given the opportunity, will feed on grouse or particularly their young. So they are not tolerated on driven grouse moors. And as a consequence of that, we see ongoing wildlife crime.

And again, I draw your attention to a report that's been published just recently by the RSPB saying that their investigations unit has been overrun with reports of birds of prey being killed illegally in the recent weeks of the lockdown. Amongst the cases being dealt with, the police are seeing a significant number of ongoing investigations on land managed for grouse shooting and the birds concerned are hen harriers, peregrines, buzzards, red kites, goshawk and even a barn owl. And the reason that they're being targeted at this time of year is that this is the time of year that these birds are going through their courtship displays, nest building, they're out and about finding food and mates. They are a lot more obvious. And of course, if they can kill them at this time of year, it prevents them breeding and there being more birds to handle later on.

And in that same report, I draw your attention again to Nick Lyal, who's the head of the Raptor Persecution Priority Delivery Group, that group mentioned in the Government's reply. And he says "Over recent weeks, I've been sickened by the number of raptor persecution cases that have come to my attention as chair of the RPPDG. So for all of their efforts, what we're seeing

is more and more persecution of these protected birds on driven grouse moors.

And I've got some some data here because they, you know, this is the RSPB's Life Project and good science. The hen harrier population, one of those birds, which is, you know, particularly found on grouse moors, has "significantly declined across the UK and the Isle of Man by 24 percent between 2004 and 2016, with just 575 pairs remaining. However, estimates suggest a sufficient habitat and food availability to support a population of over 2650 pairs". In England we know that there's available habitat for more than 300 pairs. And yet sometimes the shooting fraternity celebrate high numbers when they're in the low teens. I mean, it's a joke.

Kerry McCarthy MP: Can I just ask about Natural England's role in this? Because they issue licenses so that wild birds can be removed from grouse moors if I'm right, including...there was a programme where they will take the hen harriers and try to put them in another habitat. You know, try to get them somewhere else to live so that the grouse shooting can carry on undisturbed. What's your take on that?

Chris Packham: Yes, Natural England have licensed a system of brood management, or brood meddling as we call it. And this is the removal of young of eggs or young hen harriers from grouse moors where they're reared elsewhere and released elsewhere. The thing about young hen harriers, and we know this, again, from satellite tracking these birds, a large number of these birds – good data, good science – is that as soon as they released, they roam over huge areas. When I say huge areas, I'm talking about the whole of the UK and some of them go across the channel and go down into France as well. And of course, they are drawn to moorland. That's one of the areas favoured by this species where they find their food.

So even if we brood meddle hen harriers and we remove them from grouse moors in the north of England and we release them in areas which are allegedly safe in the south of England, although the release site actually was an area where there had been previously recorded raptor persecution, they fly around and they gravitate back to those grouse moors and they endure the same level of persecution as the birds that were breeding next door.

Kerry McCarthy MP: There is something quite unnatural about it as well, though. You could understand perhaps if it was for a conservation purpose.

Chris Packham: It's a sop to the shooting fraternity, you know. We're moving a rare, declining species from its optimal habitat. We're taking it to marginal habitats and releasing it. And then when it flies back to their optimal habitat, it's in the same trouble it was in the first place. I mean, it's something that we've constantly opposed for those fundamental reasons. So I think there are moral reasons to oppose that, because we should be concentrating on conserving hen harriers in the areas where they're doing best or could be doing best. And then there's a biological reason to oppose it because it's simply not going to work, because those birds will roam back to grouse moors, well, they suffer the same fate as those other animals.

[**Kerry McCarthy MP:** I want to move on to talking about the management of grouse moors itself, the things like the burning of the heather. But can I just ask about mountain hares, because you've mentioned that. Why are they suffering as a result of the grouse shooting?

Chris Packham: Well, mountain hares are our only indigenous lagomorph. So we have rabbits, mountain hares and brown hares, and both rabbits and brown hares are introduced species. They've settled here and they play a valid role in our ecology now. But mountain hares are indigenous, and they were an animal of upland areas and they would have occurred naturally throughout Scotland, parts of the higher parts of Wales and of course, down the spine of England.

Now, there is a belief in the grouse shooting fraternity that ticks carried by mountain hares are responsible for spreading a disease called Louping ill. And it can be quite a considerable and serious disease of grouse. So there is a concern. But there is, as far as I'm aware and as far as studies suggest, no direct link between mountain hares carrying the ticks and the grouse disease, incidence of disease in the grouse. However, on some estates, they have gone out and exterminated all of the mountain hares. They've removed all of them. On other estates, they use sheep as 'tick mops'. So they put a high density of sheep onto the moors because the ticks are attracted to the sheep, and they're a large animal that are really easy to attach to because of the dense fleece, the sheep are treated with chemicals which killed the ticks. And so basically you've got these sheep moving around which are mopping them up and killing them to the alleged benefit of the grouse. Of course, overgrazing with sheep is damaging to the environment. So is medicating all of the grouse.

And another thing they do Kerry, which doesn't relate to ticks, is that on most grouse moors, you'll see trays of medicated grit. And this is to treat other potential diseases which occur when you get populations of grouse at

very high levels where contagion is very quickly passed from one species to another. And paradoxically, that's most frequently passed when they visit the medicated grit trays. So they're even attracting them into places where they're spreading the disease more efficiently to one another, despite the fact that that's how they're trying to stop it. And of course, we have no data to show what impact this medicated grit is having on that environment. We know that it gets into watercourses and we know there's a potential for those toxins to get into the human food chain through water or directly through water we that consume coming out of our taps. So it's something else that should be urgently investigated.

Kerry McCarthy MP: And I suppose the underlying thing is the grouse aren't being protected for the sake of conservation. It's not because they're rare and they need protecting from other creatures. They've been protected so they can be shot.

Chris Packham: Yes. I mean, that is the bottom line. You know, all of these animals are being killed so that people can go out and kill another animal, which is being raised at disastrously high densities, disastrous for its own welfare and also for the welfare of that environment. And we should point out, of course, that whilst we've been talking about the illegal persecution of birds of prey, the legal persecution of lots of other animals also takes place on grouse moors. And again, unfortunately, we have no idea of the numbers of these animals that are killed.

But I can, again, I've got some figures from a report here, produced by OneKind. Weasels and stoats caught in spring traps. They die slowly if their injuries are such that they're not killed instantly. Crows are caught in cage traps, endure stressful confinement until someone comes to beat them to death. Foxes are caught in snares, still legal in the UK, illegal over most of Europe. In only a couple of places they're still legal, snares. Horrible way of trapping animals. And then of course, the accidental victims of these things. All sorts of other animals. I've seen dippers, red squirrels, endangered protected species that get into these traps that are set for these things. And I think that what we have to accept is that, you know, the legal protections for these animals are insufficient and they're inconsistent. They allow levels of suffering that we would never tolerate if these were domestic animals. If we were seeing our pets being trapped in the same way we would be as a nation horrified and put an end to the practise. But because this is happening out of sight, out of mind, and because perhaps they're wild animals which still carry that horrific burden of being called vermin, then this seems to be tolerated.

And these practises are applied on a sort of ad hoc basis based on tradition rather than research. Welfare is not taken into consideration at all. And it doesn't... These methods of management don't fit any of the contemporary concepts of animal welfare, conservation or ethical wildlife management. And there was just one thing I'd like to show you, because it is difficult to get figures of this. But I've got this here. This is one estate. Okay, it's in Scotland. I know it's in Scotland. And we're talking about England here. But this was a case study from 2019. And I don't know if you can see, but 42 foxes, 32 cats, 75 rats, 103 stoats, 37 weasels, 90 hedgehogs - a species which has declined by 97 percent, Britain's favourite animal, 90 of them - were killed by the keeper on this estate. Five mink, 622 rooks and 81 jackdaws. Rooks and jackdaws do no harm to anything. The level of slaughter that's taking place out there legally is quite simply beyond our comprehension.

Kerry McCarthy MP: So can we talk then about grouse moor management, the impact it has on the natural environment, particularly the impact of burning of peat lands and the impact of flooding? I think it's no coincidence that at least one of the areas, one of the constituencies where the petition attracted a lot of signatures was Calder Valley. And that's been prone to flooding. Indeed, there were floods again this winter after the petition closed. So why is the burning of the moors such a bad thing?

Chris Packham: Well, you're right to focus on this, because it's not all about the highly emotive issue of coupling of raptors and other wildlife. We were talking about significant environmental damage from the ground up. We've mentioned overgrazing by sheep, which is preventing the regeneration of the natural...what we call the climax community of this area, which would be woodland in many places despite its altitude. We've talked about the medicated grit which they put out, which gets in. It has an impact on water quality public health.

There is also, of course, the tons and tons of lead shot that rained over these moors for years, which are now in the soil being leached out into that groundwater, which could find its way into humans. The estates, to facilitate the shooting, are crisscrossed with roads and tracks which are drained and therefore that enhances the capacity for this environment to shed water very, very quickly, which it wouldn't do if it had its natural climax community, i.e. woodland.

Kerry McCarthy MP: Because it's uplands, that means the water flows down to the town, if there's no other place for it to go.

Chris Packham: But if it were not, you know, we'll move on to burning. But if it were not repeatedly drained and burned, it would be a wet upland wooded habitat. And it would soak up all of that rainfall. And it would allow all that rainfall to permeate out far more slowly. I mean, you know, when you go to a healthy piece of upland habitat, it's covered with trees, blanket bogs, deep layers of sphagnum moss, which act like a great sponge, deep peat, which is, you know, storing all of that water. It's a very wet place to be. It's up there with all the rain, of course. And then, of course, that water does leach out. But it doesn't just roll off the hills because those hills are drained to maximise the production of heather, which is the food of the grouse.

And that brings us on to burning. And the reason that burning takes place is that it promotes the growth of new fresh shoots, and red grouse, the species that we're talking about, feed principally on heather shoots. So to enhance, again, the number of grouse you enhance the amount of food that it has access to. So on many of the estates every year, strip burning takes place. And you can see this if you look onto the landscape, these sort of strips of different coloured habitat where the burning has taken place. Heather naturally has a 45-year cycle. It goes through a process of starting small, growing big, breaking apart, supporting communities within that heather. But on grouse moor we never see heather 45 years old! It's incinerated long before that. The burning doesn't only have a disastrous effect on the peat, which the Government has already acknowledged as I've said...

Kerry McCarthy MP: Can you just explain why peat is so important in terms of the carbon sequestration?

Kerry McCarthy MP: Yes, exactly. There are a couple of reasons. Our peat habitat, as we as we've heard from the Government's own admission, is a very rare habitat globally. And we have a significant proportion of it in the UK. It supports unique flora and fauna therefore, but it's also responsible for tying up lots of carbon. So, you know, it's storing carbon and storing it for hundreds of thousands of years. But if you dry it out and burn it, quite clearly that carbon is being released back into the atmosphere. And again, peer reviewed science conducted by universities in the UK have shown that the burning of grouse moors is a significant contributor to climate change. I'm not saying it's of the same significance as all the petrochemicals that we're putting in our cars, in aircraft, the by-products of farming. But nevertheless, releasing carbon that's safely stored in peat bogs is not a way of addressing our climate and environment emergency.

You have public health issues. I know this, again, in this last season, there were areas, whole villages and towns, which were blanketed with smoke. So

you have a human health issue when it comes to respiratory conditions, when birding becomes excessive. So, there are the things that go along with it as well. Obviously, if it dries out the environment, you get soil erosion, a decline in soil quality, which makes changing the habitat, restoring habitat more difficult. It leads to landslips. But ultimately, we'll come back to your initial point, which is flooding, which has a disastrous impact on people's lives, livelihoods, mental and physical health. I personally can't imagine getting up in the morning and going into my kitchen to find it a metre deep in water and not being able to solve that problem for months and not being able to get insurance for my house and my business, you know, going down the pan. And yet we see this with increasing frequency because we have climate change leading to changes in our weather patterns, but also the poor management of that water because it's simply pouring off of these grouse moors into the rivers and cascading down people's streets and into their living rooms. And that I can't see is in any way tolerable.

Kerry McCarthy MP: So you also said that you weren't happy when the Government said that this was of economic benefit to local communities. Can you say a little bit, who owns the grouse moors? Who is profiting from this? And you know, presumably it brings jobs in from the local community. So is there not an argument for saying that it ought to be allowed on those grounds?

Chris Packham: I wish I could talk with authority on that, and I can't. And therefore, I need to be guarded. But I'm embarrassed that I can't talk with any authority about it. And that's simply because I don't have the data. In England, I can't tell you with any degree of accuracy how much money is going where, who it's benefiting and who it's not. And because those figures aren't reliable, the figures that I can access, and that's something that we've long called for. We've asked for an independent assessment of the value of driven grouse shooting but we don't have one.

More work has been done in Scotland. And I know that they often cite driven grouse shooting as being a significant contributor to the Scottish economy, that there is a metaphor there. And I've been told that if the Scottish economy was the size of Ben Nevis, the contribution made by driven grouse shooting would be the size of a small banjo. And I think that what we have...a banjo, I'm not a banjo player. But that the metaphor they came up with and I'm not sure why they chose a musical instrument. But you get the scale, you know, of the concern there.

The point is that I think a large, a relatively large amount of money per capita is spent by a very small number of people over a very large area. And

again, I'm going to talk about Scotland because I have figures for that. And I know that that's inviting criticism from the people who will oppose this because we're meant to be talking about England. But we don't have the figures for that for England. It's somewhere between 12 and 18 per cent of Scotland's land surface is given over to driven grouse shooting. Now, in terms of its productivity economically, the banjo is not significant. And we know full well that there are far better ways to manage that landscape to create sustainable and healthy rural communities and benefit the wider population. Bear in mind that, you know, the vast majority of people in the UK don't go grouse shooting. So it's a tiny minority. And even amongst the shooting fraternity, it's a minority. It's a sport that many people who'd like to shoot can't afford to practise. So we are, I'm not going to call it elitist because I don't like those sorts of separating words. But I think, when I read shooting magazines, which I do occasionally for research purposes, even there I see words like elitist being used.

Kerry McCarthy MP: Can you give us some idea of the numbers of birds that are shot each year? The number of grouse that are shot as a result of drive grouse shooting?

Chris Packham: I'm very pleased that you've asked me that question because I'm so pleased to be able to say no. It's extraordinary that an industry that brags about its ability as a conservation agency, as it were, doesn't have that sort of figure. But then we don't have bag totals anywhere, Kerry, in the UK. If you go to Europe, the numbers of birds shot each year are very carefully and diligently recorded by all of the shooters, and they are nationally assessed to inform conservation decisions in terms of habitat and looking after those species. Obviously, if you are going to harvest the species, you need to know the impact of that harvesting, how many you're shooting, how many are surviving. These are basic things.

But in the UK, I'm sure it will strike you and everyone else is unbelievable, but we do not have those bag totals. So again, this makes a mockery of this part of the shooting fraternity saying that they are effecting good conservation. How can they effect good conservation if they don't even know how many birds they're killing for their sport and how many animals they're killing to produce that number of birds? You can't do that. That's not, as I said, good 21st century conservation management practise. It's a joke, like so much of their other posturing when it comes to conservation.

They will tell you that because of the huge numbers of predatory animals they kill on grouse moors, that those areas still sustain high populations of various declining waders, golden plover, snipe, curlew in particular. Well, of

course they do, because you've killed all the predators. Anyone could manifest that sort of curlew farm. But we don't want a curlew farm. We want healthy, sustainable, dynamic, beautiful environments which need predators to manage those populations. And curlews and these other species are not declining because of an abundance of predators. They're declining because of wholesale practises, changes in the practises of agriculture. They're being pushed into these marginal areas.

And of course, there if you've got lots of predators, they have an impact. But this shows this fundamental disconnect between any level of basic understanding of ecology to inform conservation. I'm afraid to say that the, you know, the metaphor that I use is that they haven't got past page one of the Ladybird Book of Ecology. How can you exterminate all of the mountain hares and take out all of the predators and then say, you're a conservationist? Not in my book.

Kerry McCarthy MP: OK. Can we get on to talking actually about why then you feel that there isn't perhaps a middle way? I think they do actually talk about a middle way approach, some people do, in terms of licensing. We've got the Werritty Review in Scotland that is looking at sort of how we would deal with this issue. And I know various other people have put forward this idea of licensing. Could the issues that you talk about be dealt with other than by a ban, or do you feel that a ban is the only answer?

Chris Packham: I sadly feel it's the only answer. I like creative dialogue and I like creative compromise and I don't like restrictions. I don't like people telling me what I can and can't do. I would, you know, but we've tried so hard for that compromise for such a long time. We've asked for voluntary agreements, we've seen them flouted. There have been voluntary moratoriums on burning. But they've still been out with the matches. It just hasn't worked.

What I worry about when it comes to things like licensing is, you know, who is going to implement it? Who's going to pay for it? Who's going to monitor it? And who's going to enforce it? I've already said that the Government's statutory agencies are, you know, the Environment Agency, Natural England, DEFRA themselves and their biodiversity budget, are just being cut, cut, cut. So who's going to do it? Well, we could give foxes, you know, put them in charge of the henhouse. We've tried that before and asked for them to do it themselves. Well, frankly, no thanks. Absolutely no thanks. You know, we've extended the hand of trust so many times only to have it sliced off and thrown back at us that we've run out of patience.

And I think that given the importance now of conserving our environment and particularly what we've learnt in this lockdown where so many people have found nature as a source of respite and solace, simple things in their garden, simple things that they've encountered on their walks. Well, when the lockdown finishes and they begin to walk further, they will want to get out into the natural environment to enjoy the mental and physical health benefits of that. They have a greater understanding of how productive that environment could be, how healthy it could be. They may want to even choose to live there and make a living there. And so surely we should be generating opportunities for them to live there and make a living there. And there are far more opportunities in a better and healthier environment on our uplands than driven grouse shooting. I think it's had its day. It's not compatible with contemporary conservation. It's incapable of self-regulation when it comes to burning, when it comes to the illegal persecution of birds of prey. And there isn't the will within any government to properly police it. So on that account, I say ban it and ban it now.

Kerry McCarthy MP: OK. And I just, I mean, on that point, you were saying about how so many people do feel strongly about a return to nature, and this was before the coronavirus pandemic. We did have another petition and we had a debate in Westminster Hall. It was on restoring nature and climate change, and was partly talking about those natural climate solutions to climate change, including the peatlands. The then-minister Zac Goldsmith, at the time he was an MP, he's now still a DEFRA minister but he's in the House of Lords, he did say that...I think he said we've almost got to the point where the voluntary, the trying to work together approach hasn't worked. And he hinted that the next step would be looking at a legislative response. That was just on the banning of peatlands. Does that offer you some hope?

Chris Packham: Well, of course it does. And Zac was offering us hope in many different directions. And I hope he continues to manifest that hope and be able to act upon it. I mean, it would be nice to know, wouldn't it, if a debate had taken place, and I fully understand why that's the case, and I'm sympathetic to everyone's endeavours to put our chat together this afternoon as a means of addressing the situation as it currently stands.

But what I wonder is, if a debate had taken place, would someone from DEFRA, a DEFRA minister have stood up in the Chamber and said "we need to follow through with what Zac said, we need to put a ban of burning in place" because we do need to see some very positive action very quickly in order to begin to recover these habitats and the species that we're losing because of this highly destructive practise of driven grouse shooting.

And I think that the lethargy that's being shown or the disinterest that's being shown by the English government at the moment is it is certainly at odds with that that we've seen in the Scottish government where progress has been far more. Well, we're moving towards progress. Reports have been commissioned. They're being studied. People are putting in recommendations. They seem to show a greater willingness to tackle these destructive issues. And given that the population, the voting population, are going to be increasingly demanding a healthier world to live in, then I think one of the things that they should do is focus upon the most disastrous practises and driven grouse shooting is one of those.

So I would urge the Government to think very seriously about reform across the board, serious investment in terms of dealing with that wildlife crime, serious investment when it comes to, you know, changing that habitat so it's more productive economically and environmentally. And ultimately, we could move, you know, a move on burning would be a great start. I'd be, I would applaud it. Of course, any small step forward at this stage is progress. But rest assured, Kerry, you know, we're not going away. And the speed at which we attained our more than 100,000 signatures on the petition suggests that an increasing number of people are aggravated by this issue. And we will continue to inform them so that they are better informed and get them to act to try and put an end to it.

Kerry McCarthy MP: Well, thank you very much, Chris. I don't know if there's anything else that you wanted to add, but I hope that people, not just people who signed the petition, because actually, I think if we hadn't been cut short by the election, you may well have got more signatures. And as you say, public opinion, partly because of the floods again over the winter period, but also because so many people have been getting out into nature. And I think seeing nature in the sort of form where it's not being interfered with by mankind in the way that it usually is, is actually wonderful, going out for a walk or bike ride at the moment and just seeing the hedgerows spring to life and, you know, wildflowers growing and birds singing and all these things that would be interrupted by us going out and about cars normally. So thank you for that.

And the next step is we will send a transcript of this conversation to...we're going to put the interview up online, obviously, so that people can respond to that. But we will then reach out to the DEFRA minister and see if we can get another response from them. And who knows, once Parliament's sitting, perhaps we'll have an opportunity to have a proper debate as well.

Chris Packham: Excellent. That would be great, Kerry. Thank you very much for your time this afternoon and also for allowing me the opportunity to put my case in such a way that people can better understand why the petition was motivated in the first place. Thank you.

Kerry McCarthy MP: Thank you.