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Management

The United Kingdom's Membership of the EU and the Natural Environment

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On 23 June 2016 the United Kingdom will vote on whether or not to remain a member of the European Union. This is likely to be the most important decision which will impact on the environment that people will make in their lives.

In March 2016 CIEEM published the results of a survey of our members on the UK's membership of the EU and the natural environment. The survey results showed overwhelming support for the UK to remain a member with 93% saying that the EU has been beneficial for the UK's natural environment. CIEEM therefore believes that the UK should remain a member of the EU.

Moreover, the natural environment, trade and membership of the EU are inter-related issues. In order to prevent tariffs on exports it is necessary to have consistent environmental standards across all EU Member States, enforced by an independent body, to ensure that there is a level playing field for free trade across the common market.

The UK's biodiversity and ecosystems continue to decline and there is an urgent need to manage, protect and enhance the natural environment. A functional, diverse, interconnected natural environment underpins our economy and society. It provides the food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the raw materials we use; not forgetting the less tangible benefits on, for example, tourism, property values and mental health and well-being. CIEEM believes that protecting and enhancing the natural environment is best accomplished, at a European level, through co-operation with our neighbours in the EU.

Nature does not recognise national borders. Europe needs joined up thinking to focus on a number of issues related to the natural environment. These include addressing diffuse pollution and air quality, protecting migratory species, keeping our seas and marine resources in good condition, implementing climate change mitigation and adaptation, managing cross-border water catchments (such as is the case in Northern Ireland), and having a consistent approach to controlling alien invasive species.

Such joined-up thinking already exists within the EU. As a member state the UK benefits enormously from the European legislation that gives protection to our environment. This includes an international framework for protection of wildlife habitats and species and rigorous standards for control of pollution, including, for example, air and water quality, the use of agricultural pesticides and the cleanliness of bathing beaches.

The Natura 2000 network of protected areas is one way in which we have started to create a coherent and interconnected mechanism across the continent for the benefit of many species and habitats. To date, no scenarios have been proposed as to how the natural environment would be regulated should the UK leave the EU other than "the status quo would remain". In fact, CIEEM believes that leaving the EU would leave environmental legislation in limbo for many years, and inevitably create the knock-on

effect of uncertainty in other sectors, for example construction and engineering, which may result in a decrease in activity and investment in these sectors until certainty is restored. This would be detrimental for jobs, the economy and society.

Air pollution can affect people's health and quality of life. It particularly affects the most vulnerable in society – the very young, older people and those with existing heart and lung conditions. The EU has set limit values for many air pollutants, which are designed to protect human health. These provided the basis for the UK Air Quality Strategy which sets health-based objectives. But levels of certain pollutants (particularly nitrogen dioxide and small particles) exceed the EU limits in many large cities. This is a serious problem for public health. The existence of EU limits has acted as a spur to find solutions through co-operative research and innovation across Europe. If the UK were to leave the EU we would not only lose many of the benefits of such co-operation but there would be no requirement on the UK government for action to be taken.

Leaving the EU would mean losing the influence that the UK currently has to co-ordinate our environmental standards with those of other Member States. CIEEM believes that the UK must continue to be a spearhead in the EU, to drive the better management and protection of the natural environment across the continent. The EU is held up as a leading light in global environmental protection and should seek to influence, for example, China and the USA, on critical issues, especially climate change. The EU has played a major role in combatting climate change. As one of the world's largest economic blocks its voice has been extremely influential in setting the agenda for action agreed in Paris in 2015. Being a Member State of the EU has enabled the UK to have considerable influence. UK research on climate change has contributed enormously to this issue, but if we were to leave the EU our influence would be much diminished.

EU legislation is not without its problems. There are concerns with the impacts on the natural environment of both the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy. However, there have been recent changes – such as to environmental stewardship and to fish discards – that move us in the right direction. As a member of the EU the UK will continue to be able to influence ongoing improvements to these policies as they are reviewed.

It is also clear that EU legislation has been beneficial to the environmental sector – and the economy as a whole – in supporting many jobs. In particular the Habitats and Wild Birds Directives – which according to the government are themselves beneficial to the UK economy and our long-term sustainable prosperity – have been responsible for creating many new environmental professional jobs since their implementation.

The UK's membership of the EU allows UK expertise and services to be provided to other EU Member States. This is a not insignificant export market for the UK and itself supports many jobs. Added to this is the opportunity that EU membership allows for scientists and academics to work and collaborate with colleagues and institutions across the EU.

Although the UK makes a considerable financial contribution to the EU budget it should be recognised that we receive substantial funding from the EU for the natural environment in the UK, for example, for nature conservation, environmental stewardship, and academic research.

CIEEM is concerned that the general public is not being made aware of the good that EU legislation has done for the UK's natural environment, and the knock-on benefits that a healthy natural environment has on the economy and human health and well-being.

CIEEM is convinced that leaving the EU would have significant detrimental effects on the UK's natural environment, on the economy, and on society. CIEEM encourages all who are concerned with the natural environment to vote to remain a member of the EU.