

A False Choice: Why Weakening National Park Protections Undermines Net Zero and Nature Recovery

The backlash against the 'growth-first agenda

The UK Government's latest signals that it intends to weaken planning protections for national parks - including Dartmoor, the Lake District and other cherished landscapes - in what it calls a "growth-first" agenda have triggered an extraordinary backlash. More than 170 environmental and community organisations have warned the Prime Minister that the move represents a "kneejerk bid for growth" that will devastate habitats, accelerate biodiversity loss, and shatter public trust in environmental governance

Their alarm is rightly justified.

At a time when the UK urgently needs coherent, place-based climate and nature strategies, the government's rhetoric risks turning national parks - the crown jewels of our natural capital - into contested terrain for deregulation. The result is a direct contradiction of the Government's own commitments on net zero, nature recovery, and levelling-up through green growth.

The false narrative of "growth versus green"

The suggestion that loosening protections in national parks will spur economic growth is both economically shallow and environmentally regressive. National parks are not barriers to growth - they are the bedrock of long-term rural prosperity, sustaining tourism, local enterprise, and ecosystem services that underpin agriculture and water security.

- The Lake District alone contributes more than £2.5 billion annually to the UK economy, overwhelmingly through nature-based and low-carbon sectors - tourism, hospitality, conservation and local food.
- Dartmoor and Exmoor provide critical carbon sinks and freshwater regulation for millions in the South West, functions that are irreplaceable if degraded.
- Across England, protected landscapes sequester an estimated 16 million tonnes of carbon a year and support over 300,000 jobs directly and indirectly linked to the natural environment

To dismantle the protections that sustain these systems is not pro-growth; it is economic self-harm disguised as reform.

A contradiction at the heart of net zero

The Government's own Net Zero Strategy, Environment Act targets, and recent pledges at COP28 all commit to restoring 30% of land to nature by 2030. National parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) were meant to be the delivery engine for that goal. Yet watering down their protections sends the opposite signal - that short-term development trumps long-term resilience.



This contradiction plays out on multiple fronts:

- **Carbon sequestration vs. land use pressure:** Peatlands, wetlands, and forests in these protected areas are among the UK's largest carbon stores. Relaxed planning or new infrastructure risks releasing millions of tonnes of CO₂.
- **Energy security vs. natural capital:** Building roads, quarries or speculative developments in fragile catchments undermines the same natural systems that buffer floods, regulate water and stabilise local climates.
- **Public legitimacy vs. investor confidence:** The UK has marketed itself as a leader in nature-positive investment. Reversing protections in flagship landscapes erodes that credibility, unsettling green finance markets.

In short, this is a policy contradiction so profound that it risks unravelling the UK's climate credibility. You cannot decarbonise an economy while degrading the ecosystems that absorb and store carbon.

What's really driving the agenda?

Behind the rhetoric of "cutting red tape" lies a broader shift: a belief that environmental safeguards are obstacles rather than enablers. This framing misunderstands both the economic and political reality of the 2020s.

- **Economically**, global markets are pivoting toward green resilience — from sustainable tourism to carbon farming and biodiversity credits. Weakening protections risks deterring investors seeking environmental assurance.
- **Politically**, it alienates rural communities who increasingly depend on protected landscapes for income and identity. These are not anti-growth constituencies; they are stewards of place whose livelihoods rely on stable ecosystems.

Ironically, the Government's "pro-growth" narrative runs the risk of ignoring the growth potential of nature-positive innovation - peatland restoration jobs, regenerative farming supply chains, rewilding tourism, and carbon market participation. By undermining protections, it chokes off precisely the local net zero industries that could anchor rural economies for decades.

The cost of short-termism

If the Government proceeds with these rollbacks, the consequences will ripple far beyond national park boundaries:

- **Ecological degradation:** Fragmented habitats, increased runoff, loss of peatland integrity, and declining species diversity.
- **Carbon leakage:** Destruction of carbon-rich soils and vegetation that will add to national emissions inventories.
- **Social fracture:** Communities excluded from decisions about the landscapes that define their cultural and economic heritage.
- **Legal backlash:** Likely challenges under the Environment Act, Climate Change Act and even international biodiversity commitments.



The long-term cost to the taxpayer - through flood damage, water treatment, and biodiversity loss - will dwarf any short-term uplift in development output.

A smarter path forward

The UK doesn't face a binary choice between protecting nature and driving growth. The smarter approach is to embed green growth within environmental limits, aligning national park management with investment in sustainable infrastructure - renewable energy, nature-based jobs, and visitor economy diversification.

That means: scaling nature markets - carbon, biodiversity and natural capital credits - that fund restoration rather than destruction; supporting local net zero delivery through low-impact renewables, retrofits and EV infrastructure that respect landscape character; backing community-led planning that balances development with conservation.

These measures can deliver both growth and guardianship, but only if protections remain the foundation, not the casualty, of policy.

The bigger picture

This controversy is not just about Dartmoor or the Lake District. It speaks to a deeper question of national identity: what kind of country the UK wants to be in its net zero transition. A nation that sells off its natural heritage for marginal GDP gains, or one that builds prosperity through stewardship? Weakening national park protections is not just environmentally reckless - it is strategically incoherent. It tells investors, communities and future generations that we have learned nothing from decades of degraded ecosystems and missed climate targets.

True economic leadership lies not in deregulating nature, but in regenerating it. National parks are not obstacles to growth — they are the living infrastructure of a sustainable economy. To sacrifice them in the name of expediency would be a betrayal of both our net zero ambition and the landscapes that define Britain itself. How will other nations view us at COP30, when we are failing to protect our own national natural treasures. It may be time to rethink the awful slogan of "build, baby, build."



An international award winning, non-profit, sustainability consultancy, which was established in 2008 to instigate long-term, sustainable change for our planet...locally. Through the launch of its Creating Sustainable Cities initiative in 2018, Ibex Earth has worked with partners from the public, private, third and academic sectors to secure in excess of £56 million to deliver 'sustainable city' projects. It is this work that has led to the realisation that if net zero and climate targets are to be met, then we must build the capabilities, skills and resources across local authorities to access and help mobilise private capital.

