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Post Brexit - the UK at the crossroads

The UK has left the European Union. Will the government make the right decisions to protect the environment?

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[The decisions our government takes this year will have a major impact on all our lives.](#) In just 12 months, it should be pretty clear whether the UK has ventured down the right route or veered off course. This isn't to say that January 2021 will be a either [Mad Max dystopia](#) or the land of (organic) milk and (locally produced) honey – but the year ahead could offer some clear signs of what's to come.

Let's choose a path...

We're 20 years down the road. The UK has [slashed its net climate change emissions to zero](#), earning the Prime Minister a standing ovation at the UN. This couldn't have been achieved without continued partnership with European research networks and access to EU data, so it's [lucky we've kept close to our old neighbours](#).

Millions of us travel to work on the trains and buses that make up our world-class public transport system. Ironically, while few of us bother with a car anymore, the UK is also the world's largest exporter of electric vehicles – helped by our huge European market.

The highest environmental standards

The UK, which already had some of the world's highest environmental standards, has taken them even higher. [In 2020, the government passed a law guaranteeing it would never be possible to weaken our protections](#) and decided that the UK would always adopt the highest possible standards, so as to never be outdone by other nations.

On a weekend, it's always a pleasure to get outside in the [fresh air](#). It really is fresh – the UK smashed through World Health Organisation goals for air quality years ago. And whether you choose to head to the beach for a swim or go for a walk in the country or a local park, it's hard to believe that they weren't always buzzing with wildlife and free from rubbish and pollution. Things are still getting better too – the UK is making great progress towards achieving targets set in 2022 to restore natural spaces, improve biodiversity and [cut the use of plastics](#).

Even a night in feels different. There's no more guilty feelings every time the fridge opened to reveal shelves of factory-farmed meat, palm oil-filled sauces and over-packaged ready meals. Supermarkets now [stock affordable and sustainable food](#) – mostly sourced from the very UK farmers who've done so much to restore our countryside since the 2020s. It's great to shop knowing that whatever we buy, and wherever it was made, [it'll meet the high standards we hold our farmers and producers to](#).

Happier and healthier

It isn't just everyday things either. This future UK is a happier, healthier place to live. It's a thriving democracy, which has [placed the environment at the centre of domestic and foreign policy](#). And it engages communities at home and leaders from around the world in a long-term project to tackle the climate and nature emergency.

But back to 2020



Blank signpost showing two directions © Pixabay

This future sounds great, doesn't it? This year we'll see the first signs of whether the chosen path will lead to this rosy future. The UK and EU have set a 31 December deadline to agree our future relationship. This won't just cover how we'll trade in the future, but also how the UK and EU will cooperate. Will the UK retain access to EU bodies that do everything from checking things like chemicals and food are safe to funding research and sharing data? It'll be impossible to cover everything by the deadline, but the big issues will need to be resolved.

The government has a choice. It can set the groundwork for a close future partnership and trading relationship by agreeing mechanisms for ongoing cooperation and to follow or exceed common standards. Or it can look to maximise its independence and lower standards. We'll know which approach is winning out by the summer, giving big clues about the UK's future trajectory.

New laws after Brexit

We'll need to pass new laws to determine how the UK will protect the environment outside of the EU. Parliament is already discussing Environment and Agriculture Bills, which together could set out an ambitious system to protect and restore UK nature and ensure the government sticks to it – although both Bills will need some improvement to do so. But without a concrete guarantee that current standards won't be weakened, it's impossible to be certain the UK will move in the right direction when it comes to our future environment. And current plans for targets that can't be enforced, a weak environmental watchdog and weakening of important environmental principles would take us another step towards a future where those countryside walks are just a dream.

Future trade after Brexit

A lot's being said about future trade between the EU and the UK. But 2020 will also be the year the UK decides how – and with whom – it wants to trade in the future.

Does our government want to rush through a trade deal with Trump's America, despite the US leaving the Paris agreement and making clear that while chlorine chicken and hormone beef will be on the table during negotiations, measures to tackle climate change mustn't be mentioned? Will it

choose to allow lower standards for food imports? Will it sign up to trade deals that let companies damage our environment?

If 2020 sees these become a reality, the supermarkets of the future will be a minefield. Avoiding products reliant on animal cruelty, dependent on deforestation or containing unsafe chemicals or hormones will at best, mean a lot of label reading. At worst, you won't even know what you're buying.

And if this year doesn't see a Trade Bill that sets out clear and transparent policies that foreground environmental protection and guarantee future trade agreements will be properly scrutinised, we'll have little hope of a truly progressive future trade policy. Much less being the global environmental leader that the UK hopes to become.

This is the crossroads we're at. And it's never been more urgent that we make the right decisions.