

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE 2026 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

Opinion polls make it clear that the environment is low on the agenda of most electors and is therefore unlikely to be a high priority for MSP candidates. Inevitably health, the economy, cost of living, housing and immigration score more highly. What needs to be done to change the opinion of voters and would be politicians about the natural environment? Six things could make a difference.

1. Let's stop being negative about the environment

Yes, the indicators about nature and the wider environment are not positive, but let's promote what needs to be done to change the profile and trends. Let's persuade everyone why the environment matters - soil to provide food, woods to supply materials and create a place for plants and animals, peatlands and acidic soils to store carbon, water to provide sustenance and liquid directly for people and for lubricating nature. And, most significantly, nature for enriching our lives. Let's make it clear that natural resources can provide the ingredients for the new technologies provided they are used wisely. And remember there are already many jobs in looking after the environment in national parks and nature reserves with many more waiting to be created to support looking after the land and water better.

2. Let's be better prepared for the effects of climate change

Climate change is already impacting on Scotland through higher temperatures, greater storminess on land and at the coast, more intense precipitation events with accompanying flooding, and longer and more severe droughts. We need urgently to provide action plans and delivery structures to increase our preparedness to mitigate extreme events and deal with the outcomes. Working with nature using Nature based Solutions is a must, alongside rapid response decision making and contingency plans for people and places.

3. It's time to reframe the economic imperative

We are told incessantly that without sustainable economic growth Scotland will continue to be the poor relation of other small countries in Europe. With it, we are told that we will be able to afford better standards of living and have the money to resolve lack of funding for health, education, housing and more. But is this a proven fact or just the old fashioned rhetoric of the business world? Remember, it is driven by market forces which have a limited social and environmental conscience well below the commercial bottom line. Surely, we should be reframing the economic imperative from the 'silver bullet' formulation of economic growth by harnessing business acumen and innovation to support a goal of social and environmental improvement to benefit people and nature.

4. Improving knowledge and literacy about the environment is critical

It is clear from market analysis that we do not have a sufficiently skilled workforce to respond to the opportunities of renewable technologies or navigating the just transition to net zero. There is a great opportunity to reorder skills' training at secondary and tertiary levels to raise our game so that we can compete effectively with those countries that are ahead of us. As a result, we should be able to reduce the import cost of goods and services for renewables and food, for example.

At the same time, we should be refocussing our educational objectives. Let's make sure we are educating future citizens about their world and how our attitudes and behaviours will need to change to ensure that environmental catastrophes can be avoided or ameliorated. Environmental literacy should be a core discipline at all levels of formal education.

5. Government funds must be used more effectively for the environment

With the existing public expenditure crisis, comes the challenge of gaining more than at present from the same application of funds. This means seeking multiple benefits from funding streams rather than a single focus. No longer can addressing biodiversity decline be seen as an optional extra, especially in view of the legally binding targets placed on the Scottish Government in the

Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2026. It means that positive measures for improving biodiversity and the whole natural environment need to be formally mainstreamed in all government plans and programmes, and effectively delivered. In agriculture, for example, funds should focus on three key components - food production, soil stewardship and nature restoration, rather than paying farmers just for owning land, or for growing commercially viable crops to produce alcohol biscuits for example. The same argument goes for support to forestry; there should be no grant aid to commercial operations, and government should refocus on multiple benefits of planting and managing native trees and existing woodlands. Similarly for health services let's promote what I call 'the outdoor pill' to encourage people to take a walk in the outdoors for their health and wellbeing. Primary care and social services should be at the forefront in promoting this approach as it is proven that experience of the outdoors is beneficial to human health and wellbeing and can therefore reduce the costs to the health services of medics and medication.

6. Good environmental planning and management needs to be promoted in building and infrastructure

With the need for more houses and related infrastructure comes the need for more land. This means loss of good agricultural land as is happening around most of our major settlements, reducing both the capacity for food production and increasing the costs to the economy of food imports. Also sealing of the ground surface, exacerbated by more frequent intense precipitation events, results in increased overland flows and heightens the risk of flooding. The dash for housing land, driven by the house building industry and the government through National Planning Framework 4, needs to have checks and balances about the losses as well as the gains. Unaccounted costs for food production and for flood prevention, as well as the increase in road traffic for journeys to work, shop and for pleasure, all have environmental consequences which are not being effectively assessed, but need to be, to gain for multiple benefits without further increasing environmental damage.

Roger Crofts
RSE Convenor Environment Community of Interest

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