Dear Tony,

Thank you for your recent letter about the EU referendum and the consequences for wildlife. I too am disappointed that the environment has barely featured in much of the coverage of the debate about our membership of the EU, and welcome your attempts to take this up with local MPs. It’s an aspect of the debate that I have been working hard to raise the profile of, including working with WWF and RSPB to this end. For example, this video statement sets out the case for remaining in the EU on the grounds that it’s the best way to protect wildlife, and it has been shared with all RSPB members, as well as on social media.

From the Habitats and Birds Directives, by way of REACH and controls on pesticides and other chemicals, to leading the way on climate change and air pollution, the EU has been a force for good when it comes to protecting our environment and our wildlife. At times this has been because of the UK’s influence and losing that seat at the table would not be good for our environment or our ability to make a difference on these importance matters.

The EU is far from perfect – and I’ve always argued for significant reforms, including to reduce the considerable corporate lobbying to which MEPs and Commissioners in particular are subject – but it is the best way to address the environmental challenges we face. These challenges do not queue up politely at borders with their passports, and I believe that leaving the EU would significantly reduce our abilities to advance the kind of cross border approach we need. It’s a theme I have developed in several media articles in an attempt to make sure this message reaches more people, most recently here, to mark World Environment Day.

If the UK votes to remain in the UK, I’d like to see a dramatic increase in the priority afforded to biodiversity protection, for example. Some 42% of European mammals are endangered, together with 15% of birds and 45% of butterflies and reptiles and a recent European assessment of the conservation status of around 6000 European species revealed that up to 25% of European animal species are now threatened with extinction. The mid-term review of the EU’s ambitious 2011 biodiversity strategy shows progress in many areas in relation to the 6 targets and 20 actions to halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services, but also highlights the need for much greater effort. This will only be achieved if we reform the EU to become much more responsive to citizens and if as citizens we start electing both MEPs and national governments that prioritise the environment within the EU. The EU is what we make it - and I strongly believe we need to stay in it to change it, including to ensure the environment is even better protected.

If we were to leave the EU, I have no confidence that we would replace existing legislation with anything better or more effective – in fact I suspect that much of the protections we have would be at risk of being scrapped. After all, environmental protection is another name for what many advocates of leaving Europe routinely call red tape, which they call to be removed. Key is whether or not the UK remains part of the internal market. If it does, much environmental legislation continues to apply although not, as I imagine you know, the Bathing Water, Birds or Habitats Directives. In this position, the UK would also be excluded from future decisions about environmental and wildlife protection. If the UK doesn’t stay part of the internal market, it is free to determine its own environmental laws that could be stronger or weaker than those agreed across the EU. As mentioned earlier, I do not think a unilateral approach is the most productive in the face of the need to tackle soil pollution or prevent habitat loss, for example. I’d also argue that there are plenty of signs that the environment would not feature highly on the agenda of a post Brexit government; many prominent Leave campaigning are climate change deniers for a start.
I hope that gives you a clear sense of my position and what I have been doing to advance a strong environmental case for our membership of the EU, but do let me know if you need any further information or have additional questions. Later this week I am speaking at a Friends of the Earth EU referendum public meeting in Brighton, alongside the Chief Executive of Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, and I look forward to speaking with any members of the Sussex Wildlife Trust who are there too.

Best wishes, Caroline

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HAVE YOU REGISTERED TO VOTE IN THE EU REFERENDUM? DON'T LOSE YOUR RIGHT TO HAVE A SAY – FIND OUT MORE ABOUT REGISTERING HERE. DEADLINE IS 7TH JUNE

If you would like to receive weekly email news bulletins from Caroline Lucas please reply to this message putting 'email bulletin' in the subject line.

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