

10 September 2021

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
10 Downing St
London
SW1A 2AA

Dear Prime Minister

Climate emergency

Human activity and dependence on fossil fuels have created a climate and biodiversity emergency. Rising temperatures across the planet are increasing the risks of catastrophic heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, floods and sea-level rise. The consequences across the globe are bleak: from the loss of biodiversity and the devastation of ecosystems to famine, illness, death. The UK is not immune to climate change and its consequences; mounting evidence shows that climate change has contributed to flood damage, lost crops, lost livelihoods and lost lives.¹

Most worryingly, tipping points are expected to be reached sooner than initially predicted, with virtually irreversible and calamitous effect.² The Paris Agreement established a goal to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial averages and avoid the likely worst climate impacts, yet the latest assessment by the IPCC shows that if current trends continue, the global average temperature is likely to reach or exceed this within the next 20 years.³ In short, we are headed towards disaster.

The UK's presidency of the United Nations Climate Change Conference and the upcoming COP26 meeting represents a real chance – perhaps our last chance – to agree actions that will give us any hope of meeting the 1.5 °C goal. The UK must provide global leadership in order to prevent the most damaging climate change over the coming decades and centuries, and to steer away from a ruinous path. For this generation of global leaders, this is an unprecedented challenge, and one we must not fail, for the sake of our planet.

Public appetite

British adults consistently rank the environment as one of their top three 'most important issues facing the country today'.⁴ Two thirds believe climate change is as serious as COVID-19, and the majority want climate to be prioritised in economic recovery,⁵ and to see the UK as a world leader on tackling climate change.⁶ The Climate Assembly UK report is emphatic in its call for strong and clear leadership from Government on climate.⁷ There can be no doubt that the British public has a strong desire for climate change action, which is aligned with the calls of scientists and businesses from across sectors and disciplines.

¹ Climate Change Committee, 2021. [Independent assessment of UK climate risk](#)

² Potsdam Institute, 2021. [Tipping Elements - the Achilles Heels of the Earth System](#)

³ IPCC, 2021. [Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis](#).

⁴ YouGov, 2021. [The environment is once again a top three priority for the British public](#)

⁵ Ipsos MORI, 2020. [Two thirds of Britons believe climate change as serious as coronavirus](#)

⁶ Global Witness, 2020. [YouGov poll finds majority of British public want the UK to lead world on tackling climate change](#)

⁷ Climate Assembly UK, 2020. [The path to net zero](#)

We represent professional life scientists in the UK and specialist organisations promoting and supporting the bioscience sector and skills development. Our members work in relevant scientific fields, generating evidence of harms and potential solutions. We agree strongly that there is a climate and biodiversity emergency that must now be addressed. These are inextricably linked, and one cannot be addressed without the other. We believe there is a powerful societal mandate and an expectation that must not go unmet.

UK leadership and domestic policy

The UK has expertise in climate science and a strong record on policy action. As the COP26 host, the UK has the opportunity to build on this, guiding other nations and brokering a global agreement that will set the world towards a greener, healthier future. To do justice to our history of leadership, our actions must set a positive example for the world.

We are concerned by findings from the Climate Change Committee that just 20% of the emissions cuts needed by 2035 are on course for delivery,⁸ with the UK failing on 17 out of 21 progress indicators, and meeting only two of 31 key policy milestones between 2019-2020.⁸ In May 2021, the International Energy Agency stated that in order to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5°C, no new fossil fuel developments should be approved by government beyond those already committed as of 2021.⁹ It is of further concern, therefore, that construction of a deep coal mine is under consideration in Cumbria and permits have been sought for oil and gas exploration on the Isle of Wight and in the North Sea.

To reach net zero, policy is needed to drastically reduce emissions and increase efficiency in all emitting sectors. Consideration of climate risk must be embedded in all financial decisions of public and private bodies, including pandemic recovery plans – something the scientific community could help to assess. We must ensure that measures to reduce UK emissions do not lead to rises elsewhere and we must ensure that we take the right measures to achieve net zero carbon with benefits for nature. Further, support is desperately needed for adaptation to the changing climate, both in the UK and in developing countries.

We can turn to significant accumulated knowledge to help avoid catastrophic climate change and restore the environment. Nature-based solutions seek to enhance nature, tackle climate change and improve human wellbeing. Habitat protection and restoration provide resilience and support adaptation to our changing climate. Restoring peatlands, seagrasses, saltmarshes, forests and other ecosystems will increase biodiversity while drawing down carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The Dasgupta Review on the economics of biodiversity, commissioned by the Treasury, highlights the benefits nature provides.¹⁰

Success at COP26 and beyond

A raft of recent policies and developments from around the world provide a foundation for action to prevent the most dangerous effects of climate change. However, the urgent need to reduce our national and global emissions remains the greatest challenge of our age. Beyond a given total of greenhouse gas emissions, meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement becomes essentially impossible, with consequences that will last for centuries. Every passing day brings us closer to this threshold.

⁸ Climate Change Committee, 2021. [Progress report to parliament](#)

⁹ IEA, 2021. [Net zero by 2050](#)

¹⁰ Dasgupta, 2021. [The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review](#)

Many sectors contribute to the climate crisis, and multifaceted action is therefore needed. We have sufficient knowledge and understanding to begin reducing emissions now. While technology and innovation have a part to play in our path to net zero, it would be unacceptably risky to expect a silver bullet to emerge, or to defer taking action now for any reason and in the hope of a technological solution. Delay could be deadly.

COP26 presents a chance for the global community to agree and implement a clear plan to reduce emissions and limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5°C. There may not be another opportunity, and any delay will be enormously costly. Instead, we must seize this final chance to stabilise the climate and deliver a safer, fairer world. We urge you onwards in this regard and in support of the aim of the UK Presidency to reach binding and meaningful agreement in Glasgow.

Yours sincerely



Dr Mark Downs CSci FRSB
Chief Executive

cc:

Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP, COP26 President

Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer