

Sci/Tech

Wildlife poll warning to Labour



The water vole, the UK's fastest-declining mammal (Photo: The Wildlife Trusts)

By Environment Correspondent Alex Kirby

An opinion poll commissioned by one of the UK's best-known conservation groups suggests that the government neglects wildlife issues at its peril.

In the poll, carried out for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, 65% of all those questioned said they would be more likely to vote Labour if the government changed the law to give greater legal protection to wildlife.

The RSPB, which says that at least 25 species of birds, animals and invertebrates have become extinct in the UK in the last half century, says it commissioned the poll "in the face of the government's failure to allocate parliamentary time to wildlife law reform".



Once-common species like the thrush are now in trouble

The RSPB's chief executive, Graham Wynne, said: "In the face of massive wildlife declines, these results show that the public care desperately about protecting what we've got.

"The government is failing to appreciate the extent of public concern on this issue.

"This survey shows that voters will be looking closely at the government's environmental performance in the run-up to the next election."

The poll, conducted by telephone last month, involved interviews with 1,595 people aged 18 or over in England and Wales.

They were asked whether they would be more or less likely to vote Labour - or would remain unmoved - if the government took the following actions (the percentage saying they would be more likely to vote Labour appears in brackets):

- changed the law to give greater legal protection to wildlife (65%)

- banned fox hunting (54%)
- imposed a five-year ban on the commercial planting of genetically modified crops (48%)
- restricted the number of new houses built in the countryside to 25% of all new houses built (46%)
- passed a law to allow public access to all areas of the countryside not used for growing crops (43%).



More than half those asked wanted fox hunting banned

One finding was that 57% of those who voted for a party other than Labour at the 1997 general election would be more likely to vote Labour in future if the government did change the law to give wildlife more protection.

And among swing voters - those who did vote Labour in 1997, but for some other party in the 1992 election - the figure was appreciably higher, with 81% saying government action to strengthen wildlife law would make them likelier to support Labour.

With the debate about hunting sparking claims that it is a vital part of rural life which enjoys wide support, this poll may encourage ministers to believe there is serious backing for any move to ban it.