

How would a Brexit affect the environment?

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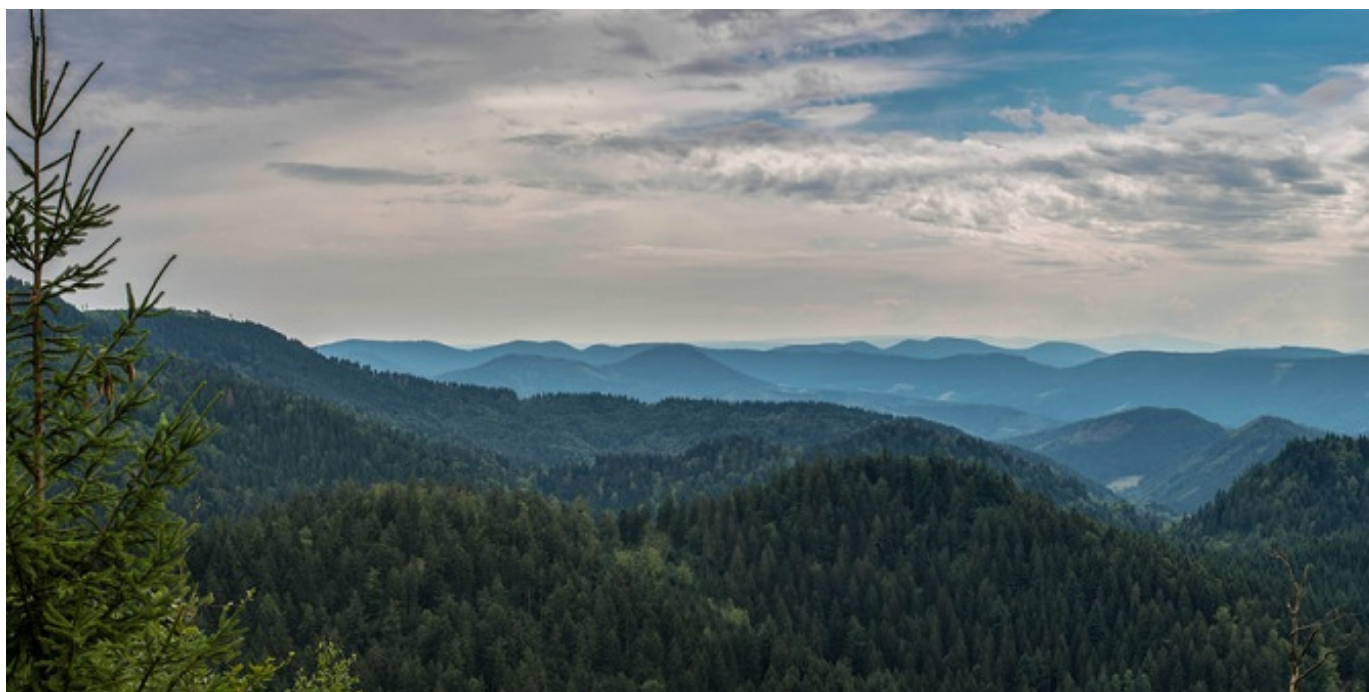
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The environment has not played a prominent role in the UK's EU referendum campaign. And yet the EU has been highly active in global efforts to tackle climate change and, as [Sebastian Oberthür](#) writes, environmental issues are a key area that could be affected by a Brexit. He argues that the EU's attempts to improve the environment are far from perfect, but the ability of European states to work together in securing international agreements has had a notably positive impact not just on Europe, but on the wider world.



Both the Environment Minister Rory Stewart and former energy secretary Ed Miliband have recently reminded us that the EU referendum has an international dimension that voters should not ignore. While Stewart [claimed](#) that the UK's ability to combat international wildlife crime and related illegal trade would suffer from a 'Brexit', Miliband [pointed to](#) EU leadership on international climate agreements. Action on international environmental challenges is at stake. But what are the issues and, more importantly, what is [the evidence](#)?

The European Union has long been a respected international leader and 'powerhouse' in international environmental and climate policy. It has shaped various multilateral environmental agreements, ranging from the Montreal Protocol for the protection of the ozone layer to several protocols to the Convention on Biological Diversity to the recent Paris Agreement on climate change – to name just a few. In all these cases, EU engagement has been vital for securing an outcome at the more ambitious end of the 'zone of possible agreements'.



Schwarzwald, Germany. Credits: [Schwarzwert Naturfotografie](#) / Flickr.

This relatively successful record has relied on close cooperation between the European institutions, notably the European Commission, and the member states, including the UK. EU institutions and EU member states have coordinated to speak with one voice and send one common message to the world, thereby amplifying the EU's collective impact. While each member state has had her say in internal discussions, they have joined together in

pursuit of a common purpose to convince other powers.

The EU's international role and influence has strongly relied on EU internal policies. Internal policy coordination has united EU member states as it has established environmental standards everybody in the EU has to follow. Internal policies have also served to enhance the EU's international credibility as it demonstrates the feasibility of the EU's proposals and its determination to 'walk the talk'.

In addition, various EU environmental policies (including for the management of chemicals and waste) have been emulated in other parts of the world thereby supporting EU-inspired international standards. All in all, internal and external EU policies work in tandem and can hardly be separated. Hence, to the extent that [internal environmental policies](#) would suffer as a result of a possible Brexit, so would EU international environmental leadership.

Coordination in international environmental policy has been strongly mutually beneficial for the EU as a whole and its member states, including the UK. It has allowed EU member states to [combine their weight and pool their resources](#). Without EU pooling, the UK would account for less than 5% of the world's GDP and even less in terms of most environmental indicators (such as greenhouse gas emissions). Without the UK, the EU would lose some 15-20% of its weight in those terms.

Beyond numbers, the coordination of environmental diplomacy capabilities and combining negotiating skills has brought clear benefits, with each EU member state bringing its comparative advantages to the table. Consider, for example, relations of Spain and Portugal with Latin America, of France with francophone Africa, and of central and eastern Europe with the EU's eastern neighbourhood – in addition to the traditionally strong diplomatic ties of the UK with several parts of the world. As much as combining resources and coordinating diplomatic efforts seems a win-win for all sides, 'Brexit' would result in a lose-lose.

Consider the example of the path-breaking Paris Agreement on climate change adopted in December 2015. The EU and its member states were crucial in securing an agreement that exceeded expectations, not least by bringing to life an [influential 'high ambition coalition'](#). The EU and its member states formed the nucleus of the coalition together with a cross-section of developing countries from Africa, Latin America and Asia: the result of long-lasting common and coordinated efforts by the EU and many member states supported by the credibility lent by established internal policies. And while the UK was important in shaping and contributing to the EU efforts, neither itself nor any other individual member state could likely have achieved this on its own.

Obviously, not all is rosy. There have regularly been conflicts about who would represent the EU and its member states in international environmental policy and how member state involvement would be ensured. Criticism may also be leveled at the EU for a [lack of ambition](#), including its target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 'at least' 40% by 2030. However, the rationale of [throwing away](#) a glass that is at least half full because it could be even fuller is not obvious. How likely is it that environmental politics will suddenly start to produce perfect solutions or even just higher ambition in the case of Brexit?

For international environmental policy, the evidence clearly suggests that acting jointly as the EU has been beneficial for all, including the UK – as also found by an investigation of the House of Common's [Environmental Audit Committee](#). A Brexit would produce losers on all sides – an imperfect world would get even worse. And while much of Europe would have to try to sort out the fallout of a UK decision to leave, climate change and other urgent environmental problems (such as the loss of biodiversity) will not take a break.

The result may well be a triple-loss: for the EU, the UK, and the environment. Put differently, the EU likely remains the best chance for the UK and its European partners to jointly pursue effective international action on climate and the environment for the benefit of future generations.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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