**People Spotlight: Gemma Harper**

A person smiling for the camera

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceDr Gemma Harper became Chief Executive of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) in September 2021. JNCC is the UK’s scientific advisor on nature conservation and recovery. Prior to joining JNCC, Gemma was Deputy Director of Marine policy and Deputy Race Champion in Defra. She was awarded an OBE for services to the marine environment in the New Year Honours 2021. In March 2020, Gemma co-led Defra’s Food Vulnerability directorate, as part of the COVID-19 response, and the directorate won the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion ‘Impact on the Citizen’ award. Gemma has nearly 20 years’ experience working in the UK Government. She is a social scientist by training and studied social psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. After eight years in criminal justice research at the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, Gemma joined Defra in 2010 as their first Chief Social Scientist. She was awarded the Defra Leadership Award twice, graduated from the Civil Service Senior Leaders Scheme, and is a University of Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy Fellow. Last year, Gemma was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences for her contribution to social science. She founded and co-chairs the Civil Service Network for Nature, whose mission is to connect civil and public servants to celebrate nature. You can follow Gemma @JNCC\_UKCEO.

**Interview with Gemma**

Earlier this month Gemma kindly undertook an interview with us (Team Fry on the South West Future Leaders Programme), where we gained an insightful view into Gemma’s passion and contribution to nature conservation and recovery. Some core questions that Gemma answered for us were as follows:

**What do you think is the most valuable work that you and the JNCC do?**

‘To provide impartial scientific advice to the four governments of the UK and to the UK Government to support international negotiations. It's our duty to the citizens, to be really clear on what's happening and why in terms of nature, and what we can do to recover nature. And that's the focus of our work now and into the future.’

**What is the most frustrating aspect of your job in relation to nature and the environment?**

‘We are all part of nature and if we take action in silos we are going to have potentially unexpected or undesirable consequences in another part of this system. So trying to see nature as a system in itself, a system that we are part of and that how we affect change in that system requires thinking across different sectors. This requires being quite bold about action and rapid change that we need to stop a set of scenarios which are already pretty bad. So I think that the opportunity is as much as the frustration is to see life as integrated.’

**Do you support eating a vegetarian diet to help the environment?**

‘I’ve been a strict vegetarian for over 30 years mainly down to animal welfare reasons and the impact of livestock agriculture on the environment. However, recently I have visited farms that are working sustainably for nature and food production. I am very interested in the future of what you might call sustainable or regenerative farming, where actually the animals are supporting biodiversity through living onand helping to managethe land.’

**If David Attenborough could whip you off somewhere for 24 hours, where would it be and what would you talk about?!**

‘Wow! Well we would talk about how do you engage and connect people with the natural environment without at the same time damaging it. And I think the Galapagos Islands are a really interesting case study on how you can do that well – and what works and what doesn’t - in terms of ecotourism. Mainly because people will still want to see these beautiful places and experience these awe-inspiring moments, species, habitats and so on.’

**And finally… how can you get involved?**

If you’re a Civil Servant or in an Arm’s Length Body, join the ‘Civil Service Network for Nature’! Gemma founded this network to connect civil servants to celebrate nature and provide with volunteering opportunities through access to green and blue spaces.

[Home - Network For Nature (N4N) - Knowledge Hub (khub.net)](https://khub.net/group/network-for-nature)

