Delivering both Net Zero and Net Gain

These are serious times for many species, habitats and our planet. Unlike the army of 'armchair experts', the mineral products industry is focussed on delivering action, as it has been for the past 30 years.

VIEWPOINT by MPA Chief Executive Nigel Jackson

Next year, COP 26 (the 26th UN Climate Change Conference) in Glasgow will be another important step towards confronting the harsh realities we all face. It should prove to be the most 'can-do' yet. I certainly hope so. MPA will be actively engaged as best we are able, sticking to the science, staying practical and proportionate, and guided by evidence.

As an industry we recognise our responsibilities, highlighting feasible solutions and responses, playing our part in the collective journey to Net Zero by 2050. Determination and transparency underpins our approach; not rhetoric, not denial, not greenwash. With MPA representing over 90% of the UK's largest material supplying foundation sector, I know we will make a meaningful contribution.

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Astonishingly, some still claim we are "doing nothing" about climate change or, more accurately, man-made global warming and biodiversity loss. But when it comes to environmental action – especially the twin challenges of Net Zero carbon emissions and Net Gain in biodiversity – this sector has a long and proud legacy, and bold ambitions for the future.

MPA's Restoration Awards have been running for nearly 50 years, showcasing hundreds of restored quarries that are havens for wildlife. And our Restoration Guarantee Fund has been running for over 40 years; an industry pledge that enables local authorities to claim for unfinished quarry restoration if an MPA member happens to go bust. Such unrivalled environmental commitment is even recognised in planning guidance.

> ***"In 10 years MPA members have planted over 1.5 million trees and 100km of hedgerows"***

In 1998 we agreed our four point plan for National Parks, with members yielding up old planning permissions to reduce the possibility of quarrying in key areas. In 2005 we formed our partnership with English Nature, now Natural England, to showcase MPA members' biodiversity achievements.

In 2006 we published our first annual Sustainable Development report; we now produce five such reports evidencing environmental performance in marine aggregates, cement, concrete, industrial lime and all mineral products.

In 2007 we produced our first 'carbon advice card' setting out the steps members could take to reduce their carbon footprint. In 2011 we launched our carbon portal, supported by the Carbon Trust, giving further guidance on energy and carbon reduction to members.

In 2013 we were the first UK industry to launch a Biodiversity Strategy which, 7 years later, has just been refreshed. I am not aware that any other sector even has such a strategy.

In 2013 we launched our virtual National Nature Park which now hosts 80 sites with public access, field study and education centres, nature trails and SSSIs, many managed by or in liaison with the Wildlife Trusts and RSPB.

In 2015 we hosted the first Quarries & Nature event, a two yearly celebration of the industry's contribution to nature which showcases the rich diversity of wildlife that thrives in and around quarries and is actively recovering nature whilst others just talk about it.

And in 2017 we launched the MPA Charter which sets out our Seven Strategic Priorities, of which Climate Change & Energy and the Natural Environment are but two. In the first 10 years of the MPA our members planted over 1.5 million trees and 100km of hedgerows, and had already created 8,000 hectares of priority habitats with at least another 11,000 planned.

We have published papers evidencing that we are recycling or reusing 82 million tonnes of construction waste each year, either as construction aggregate or for land remediation. The UK actually has the highest per capita recycling rate in Europe and therefore probably in the world. That recycled material represents 30% of the country's total aggregate supply, taking pressure off the demand for primary resources.

Unlike some industries, who have a far greater impact on the environment, and many who export their impacts (out of sight and out of mind), mineral products companies pay going towards £1 billion per annum in environmental taxes. Unlike some more polluting and harmful activities we are not subsidised. Unlike many industries we are not deforesting at scale to make way for damaging agriculture. Unlike other sectors we have reduced our carbon emissions, for example by 53% in cement and concrete since 1990, outstripping the UK overall. Total UK cement emissions are also five times better than the global average. Real, measured improvements, not conjectural.

This year we have published the landmark UK Concrete and Cement Industry Roadmap to Beyond Net Zero – an industry first. Concrete is the world's most versatile and sought-after man made material. We are evidencing not just the environmental cost of using concrete, but the real, social and environmental benefits of using this local, essential, durable, versatile and sustainable product.

> ***"Transforming our existing production methods is a massive challenge requiring innovation, investment and time"***

In launching our roadmap, we have not arbitrarily nominated unrealistic and opportunist target dates. This is not a time for empty gestures and virtue signalling. 'Quick wins' are fine and may make us feel good, but it takes time to transition to sustainable long-term changes at scale. Transforming our historical and existing production methods is a massive challenge requiring both innovation, investment and crucially time, whether we're talking about cars or concrete.

Whilst there is an urgent need to move to more effective mitigation, we also need to accelerate adaptation as global warming and the other effects of climate change are already a reality. The mineral products industry has been doing that for well over a decade yet others have barely begun.

And, yes, we can do more. On the plus side Government has made progress with the Climate Change Act, the 25 Year Environment Plan and the developing Environment Bill, but it could help accelerate progress by adopting a full-economy appreciation of the link between consumption, demand, need and supply. And incentivising innovation will be more likely to change the game than regulation alone.

> ***"Consumers and society drive demand for our products – we respond to that demand"***

All we ask is for is parity of treatment across all business and industry sectors and for consumers to 'make the link' between their quality of life and the essential materials they need to maintain it. Consumers and society drive demand for our products for good reasons. As an industry we respond to that demand. Our products are essential to our quality of life, they enable us to be safe, secure, healthy, protected and connected, and above all civilised.

So this is not a time to exacerbate divisions. There is no 'them and us'. We're all part of the same giant supply chain. On our treasured planet there is only 'us'. Essential mineral products, like it or not, are here to stay and fortunately the UK industry is well advanced when it comes to embracing the challenges of Net Zero and Net Gain.