

Environmental groups are using our money in support of pro-EU campaign

Britain's biggest environmental charities have been accused of using public donations to campaign for staying in the **European Union**. The charities watchdog will on Monday issue new guidance on political neutrality after Friends of the Earth, The Wildlife Trusts and Greenpeace all made public comments backing EU membership.

The charities have all insisted that Britain being a member of the EU is vital to protecting Britain's wildlife – with one suggesting that those backing Brexit want to make the country “the dirty man of Europe”.

“There are strict rules about charities engaging in political campaigning and organisations meant to be dedicated to good causes should not be seeking to circumvent them.”

Their public support of the Remain campaign has prompted formal complaints from eurosceptics and has led to the Charity Commission issuing new guidance on political neutrality during the referendum.

The new guidance from the charity watchdog says that charities should only get involved in referendum campaigning in “exceptional” circumstances and stresses that the importance of maintaining independence and neutrality.

Eurosceptic MPs and charity transparency campaigners complained that donations from the public to protect the environment were being used to campaign against Brexit and said donors would be “infuriated” by the findings.

Andrew Bridgen, the Tory MP for North West Leicestershire, has written to the Commission to see whether the charities are “breaking the law”.

“There are strict rules about charities engaging in political campaigning and organisations meant to be dedicated to good causes should not be seeking to circumvent them,” he said.

Gina Miller, who campaigns for charity transparency and set up the True and Fair Foundation, said donors would be “infuriated” to discover their funds were being spent trying

to keep Britain in the EU. "I feel uncomfortable they are exerting undue pressure. There is a very fine line between a trustee doing this as an individual and someone using the standing of the organisation for political purposes."

She added: "Members would be infuriated. If you are a Eurosceptic you do not want your money spent on the other side."

The concerns mark the opening of a new front in the EU referendum campaign that has seen the Remain campaign dubbed "Project Fear" over "scaremongering" claims about the consequences of Brexit.

The role played by environmental charities with hundreds of thousands of members has now been called into question amid evidence that the charities have backed Remain.

Friends of the Earth says on its EU referendum page that membership has created "cleaner beaches and drinking water", "less air pollution" and "protected wildlife" in Britain.

A string of blogs and academic papers extol the virtues of EU membership while its CEO Craig Bennett, who is on the steering committee of the 'Environmentalists for Europe' campaign, has warned Brexit would make the UK "the dirty man of Europe yet again".

The Wildlife Trusts, which represents 47 different trusts across Britain who manage more than 95,000 hectares of land, announced it would be backing an In vote last month.

"Our research and evidence indicates that the safest outcome for wildlife and the environment would be for the UK to stay in the EU," it concluded. Greenpeace has insisted that Britain being a member of the EU is vital to protecting Britain's wildlife. A Greenpeace representative told a meeting in Parliament earlier this year there was "not a question" of the charity sitting on the sidelines in the EU referendum, adding: "I hope others will join our call."

In the 1500-word guidance Charity Commission said that charity staff found tweeting support for either side in the referendum or putting up posters in offices would be "clear breaches of our guidance".

It also raises fears that pro-EU trustees could use the charities as a "vehicle" to push their own views about the EU referendum in such a way that would breach impartiality rules.

It warns charities getting EU funding that they could “seriously undermine” their reputation by campaigning and demands they spell out clearly any financial links to Brussels. Charities that refuse to take note of advice could lead in extreme circumstances to trustees being sacked if found guilty in an investigation by the watchdog.

Bernard Jenkin, the **Tory** chairman of a Commons committee which oversees the regulation of charities, raised the possibility of charity bosses being called to justify their behaviour in Parliament. “If we receive complaints about charities’ conduct during this referendum and there is a consensus on the committee then it is highly likely that we would want to inquire into this matter,” he said.

A Charity Commission spokesman said: “Our guidance on campaigning, and specific guidance on elections and referendums, explains that charities who want to engage in a referendum must consider carefully how such activity supports their charitable purpose, and how they will ensure that they maintain their independence and neutrality. Only in very exceptional cases will it be appropriate for a charity to directly campaign for a yes or a no vote.”

Spokesmen for Friends of the Earth, The Wildlife Trusts and Greenpeace all said they believed their activity complied with Charity Commission guidelines and that the issues at stake at the EU referendum were important to the causes backed by their charities.

Mr Bennett, Friends of the Earth CEO, said: “Friends of the Earth exists to protect and improve our environment. The threat posed to our environment by leaving the EU – be it to our birds and natural habitats or to having a reduced ability to legally challenge government inaction on killer air pollution – is why we’re campaigning to stay in. “We are more than within our rights to campaign on the EU referendum. Indeed it could strongly be argued that we were failing our charitable objectives if we stood by and did nothing”.

Nigel Doar, The Wildlife Trusts’ director of strategy, said the EU referendum was a “very significant issue” and “core to our charitable purposes”.

He added: “Our approach is in line with Charity Commission and other relevant guidance. We believe that we would not be doing the right thing for the UK’s wildlife, wild places and natural

environment if we took any other course of action.”

A Greenpeace UK spokesman said that all campaign work falls under Greenpeace Ltd, a non-for-profit organisation, rather than Greenpeace Environmental Trust, which is a registered charity.

John Sauven, executive director of Greenpeace UK, said: “From ministers to industry lobbies and think tanks, there’s hardly a pressure group or politician left in the country that hasn’t declared their hand on the remain or leave issue.

(This article first appeared in the Daily Telegraph)

Interestingly, the article didn’t go into the degree to which these organisation receive funding from the EU. However, as we pointed out, certainly Friends of The Earth has benefitted from Brussels’ largesse in recent years.

Photo by gvgoebel 