



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Species reintroduction, HC 849

Tuesday 28 February 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Ian Byrne; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; and Mrs Sheryll Murray.

Questions 70 to 138

Witnesses

I: Evan Bowen-Jones, Chief Executive, Kent Wildlife Trust; Tom Bradshaw, Deputy President, National Farmers' Union; Professor Alastair Driver, Director, Rewilding Britain; Judicaelle Hammond, Director of Policy, Country Land and Business Association.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [National Farmers' Union](#)
- [Rewilding Britain](#)



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Evan Bowen Jones, Tom Bradshaw, Professor Alastair Driver and Judicaelle Hammond.

Q70 **Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, where we are continuing our evidence on species reintroduction. I am very pleased that we have three expert witnesses before us. I would like you to introduce yourselves briefly.

Professor Driver: I am the director of Rewilding Britain. I have had 45 years in conservation now, working with farmers and landowners across the country. I was the first conservationist working on the Thames catchment and became head of conservation for the Environment Agency for 15 years. For the last six years, I have been director of Rewilding Britain, partly advising on national policy with Ministers and civil servants, and partly advising major landowners across the country on the ground on how to move in the rewilding direction.

Chair: Tom is no stranger to this Committee.

Tom Bradshaw: I am Tom Bradshaw, NFU deputy president, and here covering the species reintroduction subject.

Judicaelle Hammond: I am Judicaelle Hammond. I am the director of policy and advice at the Country Land and Business Association. We represent members in England and Wales. My team gives advice to members. We then take their feedback and that informs the work that we do with Government Departments.

Evan Bowen-Jones: I am Evan Bowen-Jones, chief executive of Kent Wildlife Trust, representing the wildlife trusts of Britain. We are currently conducting a very high-profile bison project; we have chough reintroduction underway; and we are looking at pine martens as we speak, so I am very much representing the practitioner's perspective.

Q71 **Chair:** I should probably put on record that I am a member of the National Farmers' Union and the CLA, and a practising farmer. Could we start with Evan from the Kent Wildlife Trust? What do you think of the Government's overall strategy on species reintroduction? Is it clear what the Government are aiming for and what direction they are heading towards in this area?

Evan Bowen-Jones: In a word, no, to start things off, being fairly clear about where we should be going. The Government have a number of commitments, national and international, on biodiversity and climate. They have a 25-year environment plan. They now have targets that have just been put in place for restoring biological abundance. All those things, to one extent or another, depend upon reintroducing certain key species—particularly the keystone species, as we call them, or the ecosystem engineers, depending on how you want to phrase it—that can help restore natural processes and better, more complicated habitats.



Basically, they do the work that humans are not very good at doing within a conservation context, so that we end up with more climate-resilient landscapes, which have better adaptation as the climate changes, knowing that we are now at 1.2 degrees and heading towards 1.5 degrees within a decade. They provide the complexity, which means there are niches for lots of other species, and create the conditions for things like translocation or movement of other species as the climate shifts.

We see species reintroductions in their various forms as fundamental mechanisms for achieving all of these other governmental targets, some of which are legally binding, at pace, because we know that, if we do not get these things going properly now, it will be too late in many cases, particularly around the climate targets. We have a very limited timeframe for reaching net zero. Effectively, this is underappreciated as a mechanism that should be mainstreamed through other bits of policy and law to deliver these higher ambitions.

Q72 Chair: That is a good introduction to the subject. Maybe we can widen it to all of you now. Tom, you were at the NFU conference last week in Birmingham, and the Secretary of State said, "I won't be supporting reintroduction of species like lynx or wolves. We just don't need to and we won't do". Was it appropriate for the Secretary of State to make such a statement now, especially given the role of the species reintroduction task force, which has had only one meeting, and she has already closed off two species that they might have been considering?

Tom Bradshaw: I thought it was very helpful, actually. Clearly, she has been listening to the evidence that we have been providing and the written submission. It is pretty clear that we have some very major concerns. Maybe it is good to recognise that she has been listening to some of the evidence.

Q73 Chair: Was that the only bit of the speech that went down well?

Tom Bradshaw: The other bit I was going to highlight was that the opening part of her speech was about farmers' primary role as food producers. In this session, it is very easy to forget that that is seen to be the primary role of farmers as food producers, and we have to recognise what the interrelationship looks like with species reintroduction alongside food production and whether there are going to be negative impacts to that.

One of the key things that we would raise is the need for impact assessments before a species is going to be reintroduced. What are the likely impacts of that? If it is highlighted that there is an impact on food production, how can that be managed? Impact assessments are absolutely fundamental to setting out on the journey of a species reintroduction. At the moment, there is not a clear role for that at a national level. It is done at a very local level, and we need to see the



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national policy framework developed around those impact assessments, so that we can understand what the potential consequences are.

Q74 **Chair:** Certainly, this Committee is hoping to get lessons from around Europe. I know that lynx have been a problem in Norway. They are introducing beaver in Germany as well, so it would be interesting to see other people's experience.

Turning to Professor Driver, you have said that species reintroductions are necessary and required. Are the Government, therefore, doing enough, and would you agree on the point on lynx and wolves?

Professor Driver: First of all, no. At the moment, we are not doing anything like enough. The Government have really ambitious and worthy environmental targets through the 25-year plan and 30x30, et cetera. They are laudable targets, but they need to be backed up by significant action. Species reintroduction is one key piece of the jigsaw that is required in order to achieve the biodiversity recovery that Government are aspiring to. That is the first thing to say.

The second thing is that I was first consulted on beaver introduction in 1987, so I have been dealing with discussions on species reintroductions since a very long time ago. Throughout that entire period, we have had a culture of "no, why?" and we need to move to a "yes, if" approach. It is a cultural change that we need to undertake. "Yes, if" means, "Yes, potentially, as long as you can demonstrate that you are abiding by the IUCN guidelines for species reintroductions". They are very clear guidelines that have been well applied in this country for several years, despite the reticence, so we need to embrace that and turn things around culturally.

When it comes to lynx and wolf, there are a couple of important points. First of all, you are absolutely right. The Secretary of State was prejudging this Committee. It was prejudging the results of the consultation that you went through seeking evidence online and the species reintroduction panel's decision-making. That is the first thing to say. In my view, she should not really have been making those bland statements.

The second thing is that lumping lynx and wolf together in the same sentence, when they are completely different issues, with a completely different ecology, shows a certain level of ecological illiteracy.

The next thing to say—and I will finish with this one—is that I have visited about 140 major landholdings in this country that are considering rewilding, although not all of them are going to. Across those landholdings, I now have a list of 50 species that are either being reintroduced or are being considered for reintroduction. None of them is lynx and none of them is wolf.

Q75 **Chair:** Are these animals, or animals and plants?



Professor Driver: They are, at the top end of the spectrum, pine marten, beaver and bison, but most of them are butterflies, plants, even mycorrhizal fungi, reptiles, amphibians and birds. These are completely harmless and innocuous species. You need to go through a process to make sure that they are and that everything you know about them is correct. That is what the IUCN guidelines recommend.

We need to think about having a tiered system here, where there is a more streamlined approach for most species and, for those more contentious species, of course, you take a different line.

Q76 **Chair:** Some animals are being reintroduced within enclosures, and others are being allowed to range far and wide across other people's land. Is that a cautious approach?

Professor Driver: That is the cautious approach that we have been taking. Beavers and bison are good examples of enclosure species, so we still do not yet have a licence approved for release of beavers to the wild, even though it could be done under legislation now as a result of changes last September. It is time now to move to a much more proactive, positive approach, but making sure that we stick to these IUCN guidelines.

Q77 **Chair:** Judicaelle, I had a meeting recently with the Woodland Trust, which was saying that beavers often do not hang around the place where you put them, where you maybe want a dam to slow down water and prevent flooding. They might go and build a dam somewhere else, where it might cause landowners, such as your members, to have their land flooded, or even people's houses to be flooded. What is your view overall on species reintroduction and, in particular, the issue of beavers?

Judicaelle Hammond: I should start by saying that we have members on both sides of the debate. There are some who are part of reintroduction projects and very positive towards them, and some who are looking at doing more reintroductions and not necessarily of the keystone species. There is plenty of reintroduction, as Alastair was saying, that is small, not necessarily visible and not necessarily very sexy, but can be quite useful for ecological restoration.

Overall, we would support reintroductions where they make sense for ecological restoration, provided that they are supported by the landowners who are impacted, both immediately and in the future, where populations are likely to move, which is certainly the case with beavers.

It is worth pausing there just for a second to say that opposition, in our experience, often stems from lack of information, feelings of being done to, and uncertainty about what would happen if things went wrong. If there is a process that is clear and, right from the start of a reintroduction project, manages to introduce clarity over those things, then opposition is likely to dwindle. I am not saying that it will not occur, but certainly it can be mitigated.



The third issue that we are considering in terms of “support if”, to quote Alastair, is that the projects need to be backed by long-term resources for management of unforeseen consequences and exit strategies, should that be necessary.

Q78 Robbie Moore: I wanted to just focus a little on farming practices. Tom, if I start with you, you mentioned impact assessments, but can modern farming practices coexist alongside species reintroduction such as lynx and beavers?

Tom Bradshaw: You have to go back to starting off with that impact assessment and knowing what the ambition is of a species reintroduction. If you look at some of the local consultation at the moment, it has not been with the landowners that then end up being impacted, whether that be beaver, where there are now wild populations in areas where they were not released, or the white-tailed sea eagle on the Isle of Wight, where the impacts are much further afield than the Isle of Wight.

We need to understand what the strategy is for the species reintroduction at a national level, before we then move down to a local level, because there are different species. I am not going to disagree with a lot of what Alastair said, because it is very easy to focus on some of the keystone species, but there is a lot underneath that that is not going to have any impact at all. Clearly, it is very difficult. We do not want to draw a line and say no to species reintroduction, when there are many that are going to be completely harmless, will be beneficial, and should not be controversial at all.

It is possible for farming to coexist alongside these species reintroductions, provided we have everything that Judicaelle said. If they end up having an impact and the population ends up being out of control, we need to know what to do. If you look at the Bavaria model, euthanasia is part of it, because the reintroduction has clearly got to a level where they recognise that they have to be controlled.

As much as it is pretty negative starting to talk about euthanasia before you have even reintroduced a species, unless you have the whole lifecycle and you understand how that species will be managed in the event that it gets out of control, above desired levels or into an area where it is undesirable, you do not know how you are going to be able to control that species.

There is scope for farming alongside species. There are some that are far more controversial. Something like the lynx is probably about the most controversial, because the impact, particularly on sheep farmers, could be quite severe. At the moment, it is not clear how compensation would be paid or whether compensation would be payable. Can you identify that it was a lynx that has taken out a number of lambs?

There are a lot of different elements to this. I do not want to say that the NFU does not support any species reintroduction, because that would be completely wrong, but we need to understand the full strategy and what



that control mechanism would look like within a species reintroduction programme.

- Q79 **Robbie Moore:** I appreciate the element of reassurance that needs to be provided to members, to landowners and to farmers on what the impacts are of different species being reintroduced, because the impact is different based on that species. Of course, compensation provisions, et cetera, will come out of the consultation in terms of recommendations, but, surely a landowner, a farmer or an occupier needs to have some understanding of what the impact of that species is going to be on their holding. It might be that there is a change of the management of the farming practice that they need to implement before any other reassurance of compensation kicks in.

Just focusing on lynx, for example, I know that the NFU has previously said that that might result in a change to how livestock farming is done, how it is housed, et cetera. What are the practicalities of lynx reintroduction, working in conjunction with farming practices?

Tom Bradshaw: You go back to that impact assessment and what we identify as being the problems. With lynx, clearly, it is that having sheep lambing outside is going to be very challenging if you have lynx in that area. You just need to look at sea eagles on the west coast of Scotland, where there are sheep farmers who are having huge problems with an inability to keep sheep, because of the challenges provided by the sea eagle. There are examples there.

Another one would be beaver in the Fens. The Fens are below sea level. Would you logically want to bring beavers into the Fens, looking at all the challenges that could be created when you have a manmade system completely reliant on drainage? Logically, it is a very productive area of the country. You would look at that and say that that is an area of the country that should be protected from reintroduction of beaver in that area.

It is a species-by-species and a geography-by-geography impact assessment that is required. Until farmers understand what the likely impacts are, it is very easy to prejudge an outcome. We should not be prejudging the outcome; we should be looking at the science and the evidence. We have always said that we are a science and evidence-led organisation. I could sit here and say, "No, we do not want lynx", but, if there is evidence put forward that there is going to be a negligible impact, I would be unreasonable taking that position.

It comes back to making sure that that impact assessment is thoroughly carried out and that everyone understands any potential consequences. If there are consequences, can they be managed? If they cannot be managed, you probably come up with the answer, "You should not reintroduce that species".

Evan Bowen-Jones: There are a couple of things there. First of all, we need to be really careful about just taking UK evidence as what we should



be working from. There is lots of international good practice—not just the IUCN guidelines, but much more broadly—around this stuff. There is lots of international evidence about what the impacts are for given species or the best way to manage them.

At the moment, there is a risk, which we have seen playing out in the projects we have looked at, that the statutory authorities and perhaps the species task force that has been established just look at the context in the UK, which, we have to remember, is about the most biologically degraded country in the world; we are at 179 or something at the moment. We have moved up from 186, probably due to some statistical device, in the last couple of years. We are really low down on the spectrum, and so we need to be referencing where these animals are already interacting with people and farmers.

In many cases, there are very successful management strategies that can overcome these things, as referenced by Tom. One example would be from work that I did for the Overseas Development Institute at one stage. Compensation does not work. You do not put compensation schemes in. You make payments for presence. If you want a species present and if you decide that, politically and to achieve the targets like 30% of land and sea in better condition by 2030, which needs to be done rapidly and with ambition, you need some of these keystone species in play. Then you start to look at the management practices that have worked elsewhere and you use the evidence on whether there really are impacts on these things, so I am not disagreeing with Tom on that at all.

Things like white-tailed eagles in Scotland are predominantly scavengers. If you want them in play as scavengers, then you work out a system for management and for paying for their presence, rather than compensating for apparent losses. There are too many ways in which that does not work. That is well described in the literature. We need to work from the right standpoints, and they are not to be found here necessarily. They are to be found in the broader context. The species task force needs to be referencing that.

Q80 Robbie Moore: The Committee has already taken evidence based on what is happening abroad—in Norway for example, where the lynx was introduced. We have heard that up to 1,000 hill farmers have given up farming based on the impact of the lynx being introduced, so it is important that the positive impacts as well as the negative impacts are worked through.

Professor Driver: That was exactly my point. I wanted to flag that, when you are looking at impact assessment, you must look at the whole range of impacts. As you know, we now have more deer in this country than ever in history, according to all the evidence. Roe deer are a primary prey item of lynx on the continent and second on the list is fox, and we probably have more foxes than for many a long year. We need to look at where the benefits are, as well as the disbenefits, and weigh them up. When you think about tree planting targets in relation to deer and



deer damage, there might be situations where the benefits outweigh the disbenefits for lynx, for example, in the north-east of England. We need to look at the rounded picture.

Pine marten is another one. Pine martens selectively predate grey squirrels. There is more and better evidence coming out all the time. Grey squirrels have a major impact on tree regeneration and survival. Bearing in mind the overall 30x30 targets and the 25-year plan—

Q81 Robbie Moore: I am conscious of time, but I just want to go back to the premise of this question, which is to do with farming practices. You quite rightly said there that lynx directly prey on roe deer, but how do you provide the reassurance to hill farmers that there is not going to be a negative consequence on livestock?

Professor Driver: It has to be built into an environmental land management scheme. Evan has already touched on that, and maybe we will come on to that later, but it is very important that these schemes are properly rewarding farmers for helping us to achieve our environmental targets. If we take the example of lynx, that would mean that lynx, being a very secretive woodland species in this country, would be hanging around the fringes of cover, so you then have to think strategically about what animals you put in that part of the landscape and plan accordingly.

We have to make sure that farmers are properly paid for that through the land management scheme and through, for example, the landscape recovery component. Having been involved in that, it looks like that scheme, if it delivers what says it will, will achieve that.

Q82 Robbie Moore: I see Tom shaking his head there. I do not know if you want to come in, Tom.

Tom Bradshaw: I assume that we are going to go on to environmental land management in more detail. You talked about the impact of roe deer on trees, but we also have to think about the impact of beavers on trees and tree planting. Again, this is selective evidence, if we are not careful.

Professor Driver: The same applies. It is the same situation. Look at the pros and cons in any given location.

Judicaelle Hammond: I am quite interested in the idea of payment for presence, not loss. I wonder what the Treasury would think about it, because it tends to be quite strict in its interpretation of value for money. That is the first issue.

The second one is that those costs can be quite variable. It is not just how many lambs you might have lost. It might be how many flood defences or banks you have to shore up or how many dykes you have to strengthen, et cetera. From experience abroad, it will vary according to species and according to the location. I do not know. I am struggling to see how you go for payment for presence, where the costs can be quite variable.



The final thing is that what farming takes place, whether it is food production or farming for the environment, still needs to be profitable. How do you make sure that the payments are sufficient for that?

Q83 Mrs Murray: Can I turn to deciding on species reintroductions and just ask you all, without you repeating what the other person has said, if the current framework for determining whether a particular species should be reintroduced in a certain area is the optimum approach?

Evan Bowen-Jones: It goes back to the institutions and the mechanisms that we have in place at the moment not really being very clear. If we take the species task force, which has just been established, we have had to look on Twitter to work out who the members are. We are not aware of terms of reference being available yet.

Mrs Murray: I am going to come on to that.

Evan Bowen-Jones: It is all wrapped up. To date, we have not had mechanisms right. We have a great opportunity to set that right now. Therefore, looking forwards, it is a great opportunity to get it right.

At the moment, however, there is not a mechanism that I have seen for prioritising, and what we have seen so far has not taken into account what I started off with. As the other members of the panel have said, there is a huge difference between a keystone species, which has much more value and needs to be looked at much more seriously and rapidly, and the translocation of an adder, which is a totally different thing. There is an inherent prioritisation there if you want to link these species to delivering policy and delivering impact. That does not exist.

Judicaelle Hammond: There are a couple of mechanisms that are in their infancy. The first one is the local nature recovery strategies. It may well be that that is a good mechanism to identify opportunities, but the anxiety that we have is who is going to determine it. Local authorities are in charge. Do they have the capacity and the capability? Are they going to consult sufficiently widely? The jury is out.

The second mechanism is the code and guidance on translocation and reintroduction, which we thought was quite good. It covers quite a lot of ground. It offers a very structured way of looking at costs and benefits. There are two documents that go with it. One is on scoping right at the beginning of a project, just to make people think about the risks, the costs and the benefits, and one is the application. I am not quite sure how well used it is, but, again, it has the right principles and it is asking the right questions.

Tom Bradshaw: For us, it is a lot about identifying the risks associated with individual species. I would look at wild boar and the potential risks associated with African swine fever. We have seen it spreading in Germany and it seems that there is a big link there to wild boar. It is getting closer and closer, and that is one of our major concerns. We have seen what happens when an apex species is protected and the impact



that that can have—I am thinking of TB—so we really do have to think about the risks and whether we know all of the risks. That is why knowing from the outset what the control programme would look like, if there then becomes a risk that is identified, is really important.

We have been backtracking for the last 15 years and trying to get control of a disease that is out of control, because that control mechanism is not in place with a protected species. We need to learn from history and make sure that we do not end up going back through that process again, so identifying those risks at the outset is really important.

Professor Driver: I have just a couple of things to add to what has already been said. First of all, there is a requirement for statutory agencies to be more closely aligned to one another. Having worked in one of those agencies for over 30 years, I am aware that it is not as joined up as it should be. The environmental NGO community could also do with a more consistent voice on some of these matters.

The second thing is that my particular experience most recently has been on the beaver reintroduction proposals. I commented on those on behalf of my organisation. It was striking that the requirements being suggested for future licensing were really overly burdensome.

I will give you an example. They were requiring five years' guaranteed funding. Having worked in public service for all that time, we never had five years' guaranteed funding in a Government body. We were lucky that we got four years for flood risk management. We got one year for all other conservation type activities. There has to be some pragmatism and realism associated with the rules around this.

Q84 Mrs Murray: Judicaelle, the species reintroduction task force, as was already mentioned, was launched in May 2021 for England and held its first meeting earlier this month. Have you been involved in the task force so far? What would you like to see from it?

Judicaelle Hammond: Like Evan, I discovered it rather by chance. We have not been involved. I am not quite sure what it is supposed to be. From the evidence that the chair provided to this Committee, it comes across as an advisory group, but the word "task force" suggests that it is intended to be more.

In terms of what we would like to see, we would quite like it to have a role of scientific advice and potentially of due diligence on applications. That would probably be helpful. Could it be a mechanism whereby conflict is managed? For that to happen, however, the composition of that task force would need to be different. It would need to have, for example, farmers and landowners on it, as well as, potentially, other types of land managers, because wild species do not stop in the countryside, as we know from wild boars in Barcelona and various other places.

It is not quite clear what the task force is there to do. It can probably have a really good impact and a really good role, but, at the moment,



this is very nebulous and I am not sure that it is fit for the purpose that Government intend.

Q85 Mrs Murray: Evan, what are your thoughts on how transparent Defra has been on the task force, including how it influences Natural England's decision-making process?

Evan Bowen-Jones: To date, I would say that it has not been transparent enough. I would hope that it is going to be a lot more transparent; otherwise, it will fail in what it is presumably aiming to do. Again, we are presuming what it is set up to do. We do not really know who it is going to advise. Is it going to advise Natural England or Defra? There are multiple bits of Defra involved in all this stuff. Is it going to advise Ministers? That makes a huge difference. It is critical that whatever advice it provides is also transparent and that we can all see that provision.

Going back to one of Alastair's points about the beaver process, we did not see the advice that went from Natural England to Ministers on beavers. We have no idea how that was translated. The process around that has been exceptionally slow. The evidence is really good. I would now like to see them focus, in that instance, on moving it into the next phase of how to manage beavers in the landscape, because that is where we are.

Rather than NGOs, as we are at the moment, setting up, in our case, the East Kent advisory group for beavers, which is taking into account landowners and having some really good discussions, where we start to turn the perceptions of beaver conflict into beaver activity and how to manage it, so deescalating some of the language and coming to really positive places in terms of what we could do, that transparency and that mandate is really critical.

Chair: We have had some communication from the task force. It has given us a list of its members and is providing biographies that will be posted on GOV.UK. "Following the first meeting, the terms of reference are being edited for agreement, and I expect the terms of reference to be agreed in time for the Committee's hearing on 21 March". That was an email dated 28 February from Dr Andy Clements, so they are aware that we exist and we have been in touch with them.

Q86 Mrs Murray: Tom, you have said that the NFU would like to be involved in the task force. In what form do you see this involvement? Do you have confidence in the task force as it stands today? I do accept that you have probably not been able to go on to GOV.UK and have a look at the most up-to-date information that has been put on.

Tom Bradshaw: What I am intrigued about here is, if it is being hosted on GOV.UK but writing or editing its own terms of reference, who has set the objectives for the species reintroduction task force. The way that this is happening seems quite peculiar to me. In terms of the makeup of the board, was it appointed by the Chair? Is it a public appointment process?



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If it was a public appointment process, they would normally be endorsed by the Secretary of State.

There are some really big questions here. It could provide a really useful safe space to have these discussions around species reintroduction, which we would all agree is absolutely required. Fundamentally, we do not want to write it off before it has started, but it has got off to a very poor start so far. Transparency and clarity of purpose are essential, but it sounds from that email as though it is writing its own terms of reference. Who is setting them?

Q87 Chair: The Secretary of State has already ruled out two of the species that they might be considering.

Tom Bradshaw: At least that reduces the burden for them, so they know where to focus their energies, which could be quite helpful. There are some real concerns there.

Professor Driver: I would support everything that has been said. I saw somewhere and could not find again a list of some of the members. Maybe it was through one of these discussions. It seems to be very heavily weighted towards academics. Do not be fooled by my title; I am not an academic. It is really short on policy and practice, by the looks of it, and that gap needs to be filled.

Evan Bowen-Jones: To add to what Alastair just said, it also goes to the topics that they will consider. I know that these things are intertwined, but a lot of the barriers to doing this right in a way that landowners can live with are to do with things like tax regimes and legislation that conflicts. We will probably get into things like ELMS, et cetera.

The topics that they consider, if reintroduction is going to be a useful mechanism to achieving the wider policy aims of Government, need to be quite pragmatic and based upon enabling these things in the right way. Therefore, that suggests what the composition of the committee should be. Unless they have lawyers who have experience of the Dangerous Wild Animals Act, the RPA and the Wildlife and Countryside Act, and unless they have tax experts who know about VAT for landowners based upon active farmer tests and stuff like that, it is not going to get anywhere in terms of making any difference.

Q88 Rosie Duffield: I need to declare an interest as a massive fan of the Wilder Blean project and the Kent Wildlife Trust. Hades and his friends—the bison—live in Wildwood, in my constituency, so I am a bit biased.

This section of the questioning is about stakeholder consultation and is mostly for you, Evan, but we can take other points of view as well. From your perspective as a proposer of reintroduction projects, what has been your experience of consulting with stakeholders? What do you need from the Government to support this process?



Evan Bowen-Jones: I will start with the last bit of that. There are really good guidelines internationally that have been worked with across the world. The IUCN guidelines are absolutely fit for purpose. They do not go into a huge amount on consultation as compared to some of the other aspects. One of the areas where the proposed guidelines, which have been adapted, essentially, from the Scottish guidelines, which came from the IUCN guidelines, could be strengthened is around that.

However, anyone who is a responsible body doing this stuff and wants to succeed with a reintroduction should be inherently biased towards over-consulting. We definitely have done that around chough. We have done that ad infinitum around bison, because we want to succeed. To do this properly, you have to get opposing views into the room and find common ground. You have to take everyone's opinions into account. It is really important that those opinions are then given equal weight, because there are a lot of stakeholders around this stuff and a lot of people who are extremely supportive of this from a principle perspective.

The Wildlife Trust membership is nigh on a million people. Unsurprisingly, many of them are pro this stuff. The public generally has been surveyed a lot and is very positive. Even in Scotland, where rewilding is seen as a dirty word in some circles, the public is very pro this stuff. There is a strong public rationale for it, but the consultation process has to be strong, and that is what we have been doing.

We have found a lot of positivity within the local landowning circles for what we are doing, particularly around things like pine marten, where people can see an upside, but the same applies to all of these things, barring the translocation side, which is an easier tier, as members of the panel have said before, and does not require the same weight of consultation for many of the species that we are talking about in terms of butterflies, lizards and things.

Q89 **Rosie Duffield:** The Committee's understanding is that the proposer of the project is responsible for all of the feedback from the stakeholders and feeding that back to Natural England. Should the stakeholder consultation process be carried out by an independent party that does not have a direct involvement in the project? I would be interested to hear what others have to say on that as well.

Evan Bowen-Jones: We have used an independent party to help us design the process, and that has worked really well. In fact, you could cite recent examples in the UK of where there has not been that kind of professional input in how to engage people, and it has not been as successful. Again, I would just come down to the fact that there is good guidance on how to do engagement, and that needs to be followed. Sorry, what was the second part of your question?

Q90 **Rosie Duffield:** It was whether an independent party should be involved, but you just said that you have been doing that.



Evan Bowen-Jones: The other bit, which I did not want to miss out, is that it is quite important sometimes, working with landowners, that statutory bodies are not involved at the off. They want to have a safe space, as Tom just said, to be able to talk the issues through properly. There is a lot of benefit to NGOs or third parties taking a lead in some of this stuff.

Judicaelle Hammond: What the Wildlife Trust is doing is really showing how it can be done. Similarly, in the River Otter project in Devon, with the reintroduction of beavers, what made a difference was that there was a lot of consultation and they learned as they went along. The consultation right at the beginning of the process was not necessarily as good as it could have been, but it certainly improved as they went along.

As Evan was saying, there is no guidance. We suggested in our evidence that perhaps it could be a legal requirement to have a broad consultation, because it may well be that not all proposers will be thinking about it in the right way, and we certainly would support having an independent party with the right skills doing it. Let us be honest. The problem with that is that it could increase the cost to applicants, so it needs to be proportionate, but, on the other hand, it might also avoid problems later down the line, so it is a good investment from that perspective.

It is really difficult at the moment. When it is not done properly, and there are a couple of examples of that, you really feel done to as a farmer and a landowner, which means that the trust is gone. Consulting right at the beginning, before the ink is dry on the funding, for example, is really important, because that gives you your input into your impact assessment and your risk assessment, and it also gives people a stake in the project.

I am a big fan of local reintroduction management boards, which are not like the task force and not necessarily doing the same thing, but coming together in a safe space and discussing problems, mitigations and how things can be sorted out.

Q91 **Rosie Duffield:** Tom, I know that the NFU has raised concerns about the existing guidelines.

Tom Bradshaw: Taking you back to the big picture, we would like to see the national policy set before we see the local policy. Where do you draw the line of the consultation when a species is going to end up in other parts of the country from where it was originally reintroduced? It will affect people outside that consultation, so it is really important for us that the national policy is looked at first and then you give the power to do things at a local level. You have to have an overarching policy in place to begin with.

It is also important that we think about the people who are going to be impacted, potentially, by the species reintroduction. Evan, as you mentioned, yes, the wildlife trusts have about a million members, but how many of them would potentially be impacted if something goes



wrong? How do you weight the responses to those consultations from our members, who could have direct impacts, versus others who would get joy out of seeing those species but would not necessarily have to deal with the consequences? The weighting of those responses is a really important part of how you determine what the outcome is.

There is another step that we need to consider during that consultation phase, which, at the moment, I do not think is compulsory, and that is the full lifecycle of the project. What happens if we get to the end of the project and a species ends up in the wrong place? How are we going to deal with that? You have to do the full project analysis and consultation before you set out, because doing that during the project, when it is already too late, in some respects, becomes pretty meaningless, really.

Q92 Rosie Duffield: The Government's best practice guidance states, "If you cannot reach an agreement with stakeholders, consider contacting Natural England for advice", but who ultimately decides on whether a project goes ahead?

Evan Bowen-Jones: At the moment, it is quite complicated. It depends on where a species sits on the Wildlife and Countryside Act list and which appendix it is on, whether it is extant, whether it is formerly extinct or whether it is, in some cases, not on the list, like bison, because it is pre the date that they decided whether anything was native or extinct. It goes back again to that tiered approach.

For pine martens, at the moment, you do not need a licence. You can put out on private land. For chough, as a formerly extinct species, we have had to go through a licensing process there. It is variable and, again, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to this.

That is the kind of thing that could be sorted out quite easily with the right group of people around the table looking at this. I am not disagreeing with Tom here. If the species task force is the place that that conversation is going to happen nationally, and that high-level framework can be worked out as to what needs to be done in each of those tiers, with sensible, greater scrutiny on the ones that could have the most impact and fit into a certain category within law, et cetera, versus the ones that really are not contentious at all, then that is a really useful first stop, but we do not know that that is what is going to happen.

Q93 Chair: Following on from that, were the Government premature to afford certain protections for beavers ahead of widespread reintroduction and ahead of the task force reporting? For example, you need a special licence to shoot a beaver or even to interfere with its lodge, which may threaten to flood your land or your neighbouring houses. Was that a little premature?

Professor Driver: I do not think so, because, to be honest, beavers are here to stay. They are ordinarily resident in the UK. There are several populations in England in the wild. We need to now learn how to manage



them where we need to, and to assess how their benefits measure up against the disbenefits. It is almost too late. It should have happened several years ago before they became resident in the wild.

Tom Bradshaw: What you said there, Alastair, is that Sir Robert is right that the whole plan should have been put in place before we ended up where we were, which is that they are now in the wild.

Professor Driver: You are agreeing with what I am saying—that we should have done it some time ago.

Tom Bradshaw: We should have done it some time ago, before we ever got to that point where they were a protected species and we did not have the plan in place. We need to learn from that. For the next species, if we have the national view from the task force and we know how strategically it is going to be implemented, we will be a long way ahead. We are vehemently agreeing, but I would say that the problem is that we are probably five years too late in having the plan in place for the beaver. It is not just a matter of months or days. It coincided with a member of the Defra board leaving, did it not?

Q94 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you to all our witnesses for being before us today. Tom, can I start with you? You have touched on this with some of your earlier answers, but can you give us an overview of your members' experiences? Could you also cross the border for the membership of NFU Scotland as well in terms of their experiences with the species reintroductions so far, positive or negative?

Tom Bradshaw: I cannot speak for NFU Scotland, but I can speak of the experiences that we have heard about, particularly from the west coast. The Isle of Skye may be one of them that has been really severely impacted. Lambing in that area is very challenging, and there are many people who have stopped keeping sheep. We heard of the Norwegian example earlier on from Robbie as well, so there are real-life examples there of what the impacts can look like.

Judicaelle really summed it up earlier on. This is about farmers feeling like it is being done to them rather than with them, and the voice not being heard during these consultation phases and before the implementation. A lot of it can be dealt with if we end up with far better communication, consultation and implementation.

Q95 **Dr Hudson:** I am going to come on to what could be done to mitigate that and improve the consultation, but could you just get on record what the experiences are of your members with the eagles and the beavers?

Tom Bradshaw: If you look at the white-tailed eagle, the Isle of Wight experience there is that those eagles have and are being found across southern England, and there are impacts on lambs. It is not a sheep-heavy area, and I am not going to be overdramatic and say that it is meaning that sheep farming is impossible in the southern part of the



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country, but there are definitely members who are having impacts during lambing from eagles.

There are impacts there, but, at the moment, populations are still at very low levels. You are seeing the beginnings of a potential problem, but it would be overly precautionous to say that it is going to end sheep farming on the South Downs, although there are impacts for them. There, the consultation did not go out to those farmers who are now being impacted, and that is the critical part.

If you speak to members in the south-west, the beaver on the Otter are far wider than the Otter. They extend to certainly two or three other rivers now in that area and are not limited to where they were initially introduced.

Professor Driver: They are separate populations.

Tom Bradshaw: But they are now illegal.

Professor Driver: They started as separate populations.

Tom Bradshaw: They started as separate, so they were illegal.

Professor Driver: They were either escapees or deliberate releases.

Q96 **Dr Hudson:** What are the experiences of your members from the beavers? That might tip into Judicaelle's members as well.

Tom Bradshaw: I do not have direct member feedback to pass back to that.

Q97 **Dr Hudson:** Judicaelle, do you have anything in terms of tree damage or flooding?

Judicaelle Hammond: We do not represent members in Scotland, but we hear what is going on and we are in contact with our Scottish sister land association. There have been issues with beavers and trees, particularly because they can go for species that are quite valuable. Cricket bat willow is one of them.

We have a member in Cornwall who has spent quite a lot of money protecting valuable trees. They were able to rely on volunteers, but I do not think that everybody can, to stick PVA glue and sand on the bases of the trees, which, when you have quite a lot of acres of trees, can be quite time-heavy.

We also hear about issues with ancient trees being debarked or gnawed down. There are issues with commercial forestry. Even without those, the anxiety is based on the view that, if the beavers go further than the areas where you want them, because they are fantastic eco-engineers and they slow the flow of water, it is possible that they are removing shading from riversides, et cetera. Particularly when you might be getting public money for creating riverside afforestation, and the beavers come along and take



those trees down, it is particularly galling for the landowners and it is not particularly good value for the public purse either, so there are issues.

Similar to Tom, it is worth making clear that they are not dramatic at the moment, but, if you are looking at Germany, it took 15 to 20 years before the populations got to a point where it was really hitting crisis level, and we are not there yet.

Q98 Dr Hudson: I will come to you soon, Evan. I just wanted to come back on this theme first in terms of what can be done to help with this. Tom, in one of your answers, you talked about the consultation process and doing that early enough in the process. For both of your members, is it happening early enough in the consultation process and, if not, what can be done to improve the consultation process so that people are on board with it from the get-go?

Judicaelle Hammond: Making it a legal requirement right at the beginning of a project is a good idea. As Tom was saying earlier, making sure that, when the consultation happens, it looks at the whole lifecycle of the process, and putting forward funding for when things go wrong, would be very helpful.

Tom Bradshaw: A national framework, a national consultation and impact assessments are essential before you to start out on the species reintroduction plan.

Evan Bowen-Jones: There are a number of things in here. I do not disagree at all that the process around beavers was not optimal, and we need to learn from that. However, in any perceived conflict, you have to be a bit careful about direct evidence from landowners necessarily being accurate all of the time. I am not saying that the landowners in question in this particular case are not being entirely honest.

Chair: I hope the cameras panned on to Judicaelle at that point.

Evan Bowen-Jones: But there is potential for things to be seen through a rather singular lens, if you just look at one set of feedback. The benefits need to be weighed quite broadly in this stuff. We know that, with beavers and re-naturalisation of rivers, that is potentially an excellent way, in terms of climate adaptation, for communities to make sure that they have water supply in increased drought stress. We know that, in the right areas, it can mitigate flood damage that can save properties. How do you weigh up the householder whose property has been saved by a beaver versus the fact that someone might have, from a landowning perspective, lost a few of the trees that they liked?

Again, that goes to making sure the management system weighs these things up properly and is then properly communicated. It does go back into the payment mechanisms and making sure that things like ELMS, because we have the opportunity now to get this right, take all of this into account in the round. If you have the management system in place, if it is based on proper consultation, if it is communicated properly and if



it is linked to payment mechanisms, you get these societal benefits, you minimise the disbenefits to individual landowners, and then you are where you need to be.

Professor Driver: I did want to stress that the questioning has tended to focus on the perceived detrimental impacts. For every detrimental impact, there are dozens of significant benefits. I have whole spreadsheets here of lists of peer-reviewed evidence of the benefits of beavers on water quality and reducing flood risk by 20% to 30% peaks in head streams, et cetera, so that has to be taken into account.

There are the nature tourism benefits in terms of white-tailed eagles. Back in 2011, it was £5 million per annum to the tourist industry on the Isle of Mull. That was over 10 years ago. That has to be taken into account as well. It is not just about the farming community. It is about the whole community, and particularly in rural areas. Again, I am not prejudging any decision. What I am saying is that you have to weigh everything up and then make your strategic decision.

The other thing to say is that, although Rewilding Britain is not a membership organisation, we do have a membership network that is growing rapidly. I have some stats: 42% of our rewilding landowners are members of the NFU; 50% are members of the CLA; and approximately 50% are considering reintroducing beavers, for example. They are the most popular one, and I have a list of 50 species that they are considering. Please do not think that all farmers are against some of these more contentious species.

Q99 **Robbie Moore:** That is very helpful, and I take your point that impacts can be positive or negative. From the discussion so far and some of the evidence that has come in, we know that some reintroductions are more controversial and cause more conflict than others. Is there a need to provide, through the consultation mechanism, a proportionate consultation process for what can be termed as high-conflict reintroductions?

Professor Driver: I did touch on it earlier and I absolutely support that. There needs to be a tiered system. The list of species that would be in that high-risk category is pretty small. There is a handful of them, but the list of the non-controversial is enormous. It is pretty open-ended. We need to establish at least a couple of tiers of decision-making, one of which is very rigorous and one relatively streamlined. Otherwise, we will see more and more people just taking life into their own hands.

Q100 **Robbie Moore:** Do the other panellists agree that having some tiered mechanism in terms of the levels of conflict would help?

Tom Bradshaw: I think so, because there are definitely some species that are high-conflict and others that really are not controversial at all, so they should not have to go through the same processes.



Judicaelle Hammond: Just for the record, in defence of my members, when you lose your newly planted riparian forestry, it hurts. When you lose your ancient trees, it hurts. When your fish spawning ponds are being disturbed, you are not happy.

Evan Bowen-Jones: As a final comment on that, if I may, Chair, I totally understand that. When you work on these projects with stakeholders, you see that. However, fish spawning ponds are a great example. Beavers are beneficial for fish spawning. All the evidence is there. You just have to talk it through with people and get them to see things in a slightly different way, which is that working with these animals is going to put us in a different space on a number of levels.

One of the issues, which has not been referenced yet, is that we have a limited categorisation of animals that we can use in law. We have wild animals and we have domestic animals. It does not work already for conservation grazing, which is like the light version of what we are talking about from an ecosystem perspective. Something like "wild managed" would be a really useful category to integrate into all of this stuff.

We do not disagree that, for example, you have to have a range of management options in some cases, and I am going to use the example of boar on the continent. The reason that wild boar are tolerated across the landscape is that, if they go into the wrong places, they are made into sausages. Effectively, wild boar are a wild managed species. "Wild managed" works for beaver, as far as I am concerned, going forwards, because we are going to have to manage them in the landscape. I do not think that there is any disagreement on that either.

It works for new proxy species, which we have not talked about, like bison, which need to be brought in as ecosystem engineers but do not fit into any of our pre-existing lists. Everyone on this panel and beyond needs to promote a more active management of a number of species in the right way. Devices like that and getting the language right is really critical.

Q101 **Chair:** We have also heard already that wild boar is a primary vector for African swine fever in Europe and that that is causing devastation. It has already caused devastation in China.

Tom Bradshaw: Just on that last point about "actively managed", we would, again, have a huge amount of agreement there, because, when you get some apex species in particular where the population explodes and there is no predator, the impact that they have on some of the other natural species can be very detrimental. There is plenty of evidence that we are collecting.

Q102 **Chair:** Badgers and hedgehogs are examples.

Tom Bradshaw: Yes, that is one perfect example. Another is ground nesting birds and solitary bumblebees. There are many examples where, if you have the population out of control, there are significant biodiversity



impacts. "Wild managed" is really important and that has to be recognised.

Q103 **Robbie Moore:** The next bit of questioning focuses on something that everyone seems to have mentioned, which is environmental land management schemes and the impacts that they can have on the potential introduction of species. Tom, I am just picking up on what you suggested earlier. Is ELMS a mechanism for enabling reintroductions?

Tom Bradshaw: I am really concerned that, at the moment, we are looking at ELMS to deliver everything for society. It is clean water, net zero, clean air and sustainable food production. It is going to be species reintroduction. That is fine, but where are we going to find £10 billion from? If we are realistic about expecting ELMS to achieve all those outcomes, we need to find significantly more funding. There is net zero; I do not know whether I mentioned that one.

There are so many objectives at the moment that Defra needs to sit down and ask, "What are the priorities for ELMS to actually deliver and how are we going to do that well?" The thinner we cut the budget, the less impact we are going to have on whatever those targets are and we will probably fail to meet them all.

There is a question of what the priorities are and where we prioritise private finance rather than public finance. At the moment, for us, species reintroduction would be one that fits into the private finance category. If it goes into the landscape recovery tier, that is a public-private partnership there. It is very challenging at the moment, with the scope that we are looking for ELMS to deliver and the very limited budget that it has in reality.

Q104 **Robbie Moore:** Following on from that, do you feel that, despite what Defra has announced with the ambitions of ELMS to do with species reintroductions and possible considerations further down the line, ELMS as a structure is not the right mechanism, whether it is positive financial incentivisation to landowners or through compensation means, to address this issue?

Tom Bradshaw: If it cannot be found within the project proposer, the budget that is initially with that species reintroduction, we would probably accept that compensation would come out of that pot. As I said at the start, identifying when compensation is payable will be very difficult. You have to be able to identify which species is causing the problem. It is not always possible to do that.

Chair: We are coming on to compensation very soon.

Tom Bradshaw: We may draw a line there, but I go back to this. Look at the scope within the environmental improvement plan that was published two or three weeks ago. Everybody is looking to ELMS to solve all of society's problems and it is too big a challenge.



Q105 **Robbie Moore:** Judicaelle, you might want to pick up on this. ELMS is a contractual relationship between the applicant and the state, so to speak, but obviously species reintroduction is likely to impact other farmers who are not contractually having that relationship, where there will be potentially negative implications. In that respect, again picking on the point, is ELMS actually the right mechanism for dealing with this?

Judicaelle Hammond: No, I do not think so. ELM, particularly countryside stewardship, has a role in habitat enhancement. It may well be that some reintroduction, particularly on the flora side, might work under ELM, but we see that as quite limited. In terms of fauna, we need the kinds of scrutiny mechanisms, tiered appropriately, that would not fit neatly into an ELM agreement. Compensation is also something that we see as separate. Perhaps we can talk about that a little bit later. ELM is not the right mechanism, by and large.

Professor Driver: I think that ELM is the right mechanism and I know that a lot of the environmental community agree. I absolutely agree with Tom about the funding. Potentially, if it is seen through, with the right funding, ELM could be the most significant policy change we have seen in my lifetime, in terms of restoring the natural environment and helping to mitigate climate change. There is no doubt about that, but there is no doubt also that, if we are going to repair the ecosystem and return, particularly, ecosystem engineering species to the natural environment, the landscape recovery component is the part of ELM that can do that, because you are operating at a very large scale across multiple landowners.

I accept of course that, with very mobile species, there are still impacts beyond that, but that is certainly the best place to start. If Government are prepared to inject funding into that, as they are at the moment with the pilot schemes, which many of our rewilders are now actively part of, it will start to draw in private money. I know that to be true, because I am getting emails on a regular basis from private finance, saying they have heard about these projects that are being driven through public funding initiatives.

Q106 **Robbie Moore:** On that point, do you feel that you have to have the state-funded solutions to drive the private inward investment to start with, or can you not do it simply by having private inward investment?

Professor Driver: In the vast majority of cases, you need that public assurance, if you like, that is supporting the scheme. When funders see that, they prick up their ears and become interested. That draws them in. What I see happening is that, if we see this through properly, over time landowners will be less dependent on these kinds of schemes, because there will be more private money coming in. The proportions will change, but initially it is going to be more public than private. Gradually, the balance will switch, as we move into biodiversity offsetting, nutrient offsetting, biodiversity net gain et cetera.



Evan Bowen-Jones: I am picking up on a few bits there. ELMS has to be in the mix. One of the problems is that we still do not really know how it interrelates to the various aspects of landscape recovery schemes, countryside stewardship, countryside stewardship plus coming in 2024. The one team in Defra that we have had any interactions with that has any kind of grip on how this needs to be pulled together is the future farming team. That might be one place to house and intelligently pull these things together.

I do not think that it will fund everything. The private sector is going to have a massive role in this, but it is slightly different. The drivers there will be more around climate and possibly through the emerging voluntary biodiversity credits schemes, but they are a way off.

On the carbon side, very briefly, going back to the climate arguments here, we have modelled how much carbon can be locked up if you restored carbon-rich native habitats on marginal land, so not using any grade 1 or grade 2 land, across the UK. Very conservatively, you are looking at 17 years' worth of UK aviation, international and domestic, by 2050 if you restore those habitats, so 670 million-odd tonnes of carbon.

Those native habitats are best managed by keystone species. That diversity that they inject into them then makes them more climate-resilient. That makes the carbon units that are sold to your private sector buyers more stable and resilient too, so there is a direct link into how we deliver net zero et cetera. It does not necessarily have to come from ELMS. It will come from the private sector if we get that right. All of this has to be joined-up policy and it has to happen quickly.

Tom Bradshaw: I would like to challenge Evan there. Have you modelled what the impact is on food production and what impact offshoring that production to other parts of the world would have, when we have no control over where that food might be produced? If you are saying that it is avoiding grade 1 and grade 2 land, there is still a significant proportion of agricultural land that you are taking out of production.

Evan Bowen-Jones: It is modelled without taking agricultural land out of production and it is very conservative. You have to match that against, as I say, 30x30 commitments and the fact that we have the Glover review, which basically says that our national parks do absolutely nothing for either climate or biodiversity. Going back to one of my earlier statements, we are so nature-poor in this country. Our baseline is so absolutely low. There is ample space for doing this stuff.

Chair: That sounds like a whole debate. In fact, we are doing a debate on food security, so we will talk about that.

Q107 **Barry Gardiner:** Tom, I was going to ask you whether you thought the Government had a clear plan of how to manage post-introduction species. You answered that in your response to Rosie earlier, which was



that they did not. What would you like to see and who ought to do it?

Tom Bradshaw: Some of that comes back to what the terms of this species reintroduction task force are. Is it going to be respected and fully independent? I say “fully independent”. I do not mind that it is answerable to Government, but is it going to be independent in its view?

Q108 **Barry Gardiner:** Tell me what you would like. Let us take away the label of the species reintroduction task force. What would you like of any group that was actually putting together such a plan? Should it be on a species-by-species basis? How should it be going about it?

Tom Bradshaw: We have probably been reasonably clear on this, Barry, but it is about initially having that national view of how we reintroduce a species, what the ambitions are and what the limitations are. Where are the risks? What are the impact assessments? You do that on a species-by-species basis. Then the hierarchy that has been talked about probably works, because many of them will not be a risk. If they are not a risk, we do not need to treat them in the same way as those species that are going to provide a risk.

My only concern about saying that is that there will be a species that is reintroduced where we have not identified a risk from day one. I am thinking bovine TB again. Our members are living with bovine TB, day in, day out. They see the impacts. If there is a species that is reintroduced that happens to be a vector of a disease that we do not know about when we reintroduce that species, we have to have a clear strategy as to how that will be dealt with.

Q109 **Barry Gardiner:** I will come on to exit strategies in a moment. I wanted to pursue this and kick it about a little bit more. Judicaelle, you talked about that trade-off between riparian trees, flood alleviation and so on, which Alastair had mentioned the benefits of. Do we not need something like a natural capital committee to look at this in the round and say, “Actually, yes, there are real costs here. These are what they are. They are economic costs, but there are costs that classical economics would look at and say are externalities”? We need a natural capital committee that is able to say, “On balance, we come down on this side or that side of the equation”.

What I am trying to get out of you here is a recommendation that this Committee can make. We have a report to write and you are here to help us write it, so I am trying to draw out of you some of the recommendations that we need.

Professor Driver: I am absolutely with you on that. You need to be looking at both sides of the equation. As I have said, quite a lot of the questioning today has been looking at the negatives, but you could have a whole session just on the positives. It is very important that whichever committee this is has some kind of clout, makes sure it addresses the whole strategy and is clear about that. Then we know what the non-



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starters are and what we can start planning properly for, because a lot of these things take many years to plan.

Judicaelle Hammond: I have to declare an interest as an ex-civil servant. My challenge was going to be, "Is that not the job of Government?" They should have scientific advisers, in-house economists and ecologists in Natural England and other places. Then they should go round and consult with stakeholders.

Do we need an extra body? Maybe that is what the task force ought to be doing. Maybe there are in-house resources that can be pulled together instead. Frankly, I am not sure what the right answer is, but, if the task force is to be useful and effective, that is probably one of the things that it ought to be doing.

Q110 **Barry Gardiner:** That is really helpful. Perhaps we can mould a recommendation to say that one of the roles the task force could usefully perform would be to weigh up the natural capital benefits and look at this in the round, in terms of costs and benefits.

Evan Bowen-Jones: Another thing to weave into that is that we have to be looking at the risks proportionately as well. There has been a lot of stuff thrown around about the risks from a disease perspective. As compared to the importation of millions of pheasants, for example, in a situation where we have avian flu possibly coming our way, if you are talking about the relatively controlled introduction of animals that can be properly health checked before they go out into the environment, proportionately that is not a huge risk. I come back to Alastair's point that there needs to be the right breadth of evidence brought to bear in the right way.

Chair: We are going on to disease risk later.

Evan Bowen-Jones: Going back to Judicaelle's point, or possibly yours as well, Barry, about Natural England versus what we might need, to check ahead of this—

Barry Gardiner: I did not say Natural England. I said a natural capital committee.

Judicaelle Hammond: I did. Natural England was my idea.

Evan Bowen-Jones: Apologies, I am going to come back to that. I talked to my project staff who are working on choughs, pine marten, bison as we speak. I asked them, "Have any of you had a positive interaction with Natural England over any of these schemes, in terms of proactively coming to us, asking whether we can learn from those schemes and working with us to make the schemes better?" The answer was no. I do not think that that is what we need. Whoever does this work, wherever it sits and whatever their mandate and the terms of reference end up being, that has to be changed. Otherwise, again, we are



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not going to be able to create the kind of local consensus to enable this stuff, if we think it is necessary.

Q111 **Barry Gardiner:** If the populations get out of hand, for whatever reason and in whatever way, what are the appropriate methods of control? Would you be in favour of culling?

Judicaelle Hammond: It needs to be available as a tool.

Tom Bradshaw: How that culling takes place would be the question, but, yes, there has to be culling available.

Evan Bowen-Jones: It should be included in the management measures.

Professor Driver: The answer is yes. I was involved in helping to develop the beaver strategy. Right at the bottom of the flow chart, that is where you end up, but you should go through many steps before you get to that last resort.

Q112 **Barry Gardiner:** Given that we are talking about populations out of control, Alastair, if I were to pose that same question to the beavers about human beings, what do you think their answer might be?

Professor Driver: They would probably have us further up the chain.

Chair: Luckily they do not have guns, Barry.

Barry Gardiner: There are other methods.

Tom Bradshaw: There is a serious point though, is there not, Barry?

Barry Gardiner: There is.

Tom Bradshaw: We are talking about all of this in isolation. The fact that we have 70 million people living here on this island is what has the huge impact on biodiversity. It is a serious point that you made in a joking way.

Q113 **Barry Gardiner:** Exactly, that is my wider point. We are having to do this because we are out of sync with nature, not actually because nature is out of sync with us.

Evan Bowen-Jones: The other reason we are having to manage is that we do not have apex predators in play. I agree that, at the moment, it would not be the time to consider apex predators such as wolves. Going back to one of Alastair's earlier points, Lynx are a completely different thing. We must make sure that they are not lumped into the same bracket. Even if it is a 20-year timeframe, and the group that we are talking about of experts from various areas around this decide that that is the timeframe, they should still be in the mix.

Going back to the point about deer, we know that the reason that we have a deer problem is that we do not have those predators. We



theoretically could accommodate some of them in some places in the UK. Obviously the channel prevents them from arriving of their own accord. We have seen a wolf recently outside a Belgian city and moving across Europe. We could not do it at the moment, for sure, but with a 20-year or 30-year timeframe to get some of them back, in the right places, once the right management systems are in place and the right processes have been gone through, why not?

Q114 Barry Gardiner: Indeed, the rest of Europe lives with apex predators. In a sense, we are rather unique in not doing that. I want to focus on the decision-making about species management. You know that in Bavaria, in Germany, they devolve decisions right down to the level of the local mayor. Of course, the local mayor in Germany has a great deal of power, unlike loyal mayors here tend to have. In England, that would mean Natural England has the only ability to license removals of beaver dams, for example. Who do you, as the panel, think it would be best to give this power to? Should it stay with Natural England? Should we try to devolve it to a local level in some way, where they might have a much more hands-on view of what is going on?

Judicaelle Hammond: In the context of where we are, given its regulatory and other responsibilities, Natural England is probably the natural home for this. The decision-making should be within the framework of local nature recovery strategies and in consultation with the affected parties locally, through local reintroduction management boards, which Evan was talking about. That is the way it should be done. It is Natural England but within a local context, within local partners, as per the River Otter actually. That is the way that they did it.

One thing that we have not yet talked about—I do not know whether it is on your horizon—is the administrative and staff resource that this requires, not just in the decision-making but in the management and monitoring et cetera. Those things are not cheap. That does not mean that it cannot happen, but we need to take that into account when we discuss these things to make sure, whether it is Natural England or local organisations, that they have enough people.

You were talking about Bavaria. They have two full-time beaver managers and 250 local beaver consultants, who are mostly volunteers. For the River Otter pilot, they had 1.5 full-time equivalents. That is quite a lot of resource.

Tom Bradshaw: In theory, it should be Natural England, but I was very interested to hear what Evan said about Natural England, to be honest with you. It is an agency that does not seem to be fully functioning. We have to make sure that it is able to take an objective view. Clearly, that will be set out in the initial strategy. When you introduce the species, a lot of this will be almost predetermined. You cannot get to that point, but you will know what the triggers are that are going to say when the population needs controlling. The outcome should already be set.



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Having that objective view is something where, at the moment, we would say Natural England may struggle to deliver on that plan, even though it was already set out in legislation or in the species reintroduction programme, as to how it should be carried out.

Q115 **Barry Gardiner:** Tom, I am still fishing here for actual recommendations. Judicaelle has given me one, which is, “Yes, Natural England, but in conjunction with local nature recovery strategies and reintroduction schemes”.

Tom Bradshaw: I am saying, yes, a functioning Natural England.

Barry Gardiner: Good.

Professor Driver: I support that, but Natural England will need to go back to the way I remember NCC days, where you had a really strong, knowledgeable, expert local team. As you know, some years ago it shrunk back to the centre, largely.

Barry Gardiner: That is what Natural England did, yes.

Professor Driver: It has lost that local expertise, knowledge and connection.

Evan Bowen-Jones: I agree with pretty much all of that. There is a cultural challenge as well. This will be seen as new. In all the projects that we have been involved with recently—it is not just NE but various other statutory as well—they find it very difficult to do new things. The computer often says no. Then, suddenly, you are doing it on your own and that is not a good space to be in sometimes either. It is very difficult to go for ambitious projects if you do not have the right sort of support.

Q116 **Barry Gardiner:** A strong recommendation from this Committee, setting these things out, would be helpful in giving clarity about what the way ahead should be, yes? Thank you. On the role of exit strategies where things do not go to plan, what evidence should be fed into them? Who should be doing it?

Tom Bradshaw: A lot of that, as I have just said, should be carried out at the initial umbrella level, when you are agreeing that there should be a species reintroduction programme. As Alastair said, at the bottom of the beaver species reintroduction is euthanasia. That will be part of the reintroduction programme initially. You identify what the risks are.

Once you have identified those risks, the management of that becomes very clear, not necessarily linked to a certain number of a certain species but what the potential problem is. What is the impact and when may that need to be controlled? If you get the initial consultation right, beyond that it should flow and it should be quite easy to determine when the intervention is required.

Barry Gardiner: Thank you very much. That was really helpful.



Q117 **Chair:** I would like to go back to the issue of compensation. We have touched on it already and we have talked about payment for presence, which was a new term to me, but I can understand what that means. In England, no species reintroduction compensation scheme exists. Is this the correct approach?

Evan Bowen-Jones: I will refer back to the review I carried out. It is a bit dated now, but still relevant. I had a look at it earlier. As I say, the problem with compensation schemes is that they are really complicated to manage. They tie Government into long-term financing on the basis of complexity at all sorts of levels. The global experience suggests that they are also very easy to cheat. It is much easier, simpler and often better reviewed by the landowners or stakeholders in question if they are actually paid to, in some way, tolerate predators.

Q118 **Chair:** "All my sheep had triplets this year".

Evan Bowen-Jones: It is that kind of thing, particularly when you have species such as scavengers in the mix as well. It is very difficult to tell whether a white-tailed eagle has actually killed a lamb or is scavenging the corpse. It is sometimes difficult to determine not only what species, as Tom said, but also when there has been an incident. The manpower required is huge. The cost implications are significant.

If we can integrate things such as payment for presence into ELMS, whatever that turns out to be, that will be a starting point. Equally, we could pay for bundled services. Going back to that point about private sector payments as well, if we can be paying for carbon and beavers via the same payment mechanism, that too will be better than compensation. Compensation is a rather blunt tool.

Q119 **Chair:** Tom, the National Sheep Association has said that it wants a compensation scheme available to help where species, particularly white-tailed sea eagles I guess, impact on them. Do you think that it could be practical to have a scheme?

Tom Bradshaw: I do not disagree with Evan about how difficult it could be. Where I disagree with Evan is that he seemed to jump to suggest that Government should pick up the compensation. Initially, we would be suggesting that it should be the project proposer or the project that is picking up the compensation, not the Government. That does not overcome the challenges of ascertaining where the interventions need to be.

Q120 **Chair:** It would be an ELMS-funded project, I guess.

Tom Bradshaw: That is assuming that ELMS funds it, which is not what I suggested would be happening, but it may well be that it is ELMS-funded. If it is, you end up with Government compensation. If it is a private-funded project, it should be that private project that is looking at covering the cost of compensation as well. Compensation will be a critical area. It may not be for 90% or 95% of species that are being



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reintroduced, but there will be that 5% where there are impacts and compensation becomes problematic.

We are automatically thinking here about compensation for loss of livestock, but there is also flooding compensation. Much as there could be benefits downstream if it slows the flow and things like that, there could also be land that is flooded—it may not be the land that is initially put into the scheme—which prevents the use of that land for food production or other uses, so compensation needs to be multifaceted at this point. It cannot just be about loss of livestock.

Q121 Chair: That is precisely the point that the Woodland Trust made to me. You may introduce beavers in field A, but actually they decide that they would rather live somewhere else, where the water flow is needed to protect agricultural land or houses.

Judicaelle Hammond: When we discussed that with members, the idea that came back was public liability insurance. The big question is whether the market would provide. It is in the scenario that Tom just outlined where the project proposer has to take out insurance. If the market does not provide it, can it be state-backed, rather than state-run? Having the Government taking on the liability would be the last rung in that ladder. I wonder whether the private sector might be in a position to provide a product for that first. That is the way that we were thinking about it.

In terms of costs more widely, there are prevention costs, again based on what is happening in Bavaria, around fencing, strengthening et cetera. That might not necessarily fall under remit of compensation, but probably ought to be taken into account too.

Q122 Chair: We have found, with experience from foot and mouth and bird flu, that the insurance works quite well when there are not a lot of claims. If claims started to build up, the insurance would not be available. Have you discussed this with the Association of British Insurers as an organisation?

Judicaelle Hammond: We have not, because that was a fairly early discussion. To the point Tom was making that, for 95% you will not have a problem. It is in the last 5% that you might. In terms of building a fund, that is, in theory, something that insurance companies should be having a look at.

Evan Bowen-Jones: It is about linking these things together. There is a lot of agreement on this panel. If we have good management schemes that minimise the conflict in the first place, the conflict in itself, in most cases, should be viewed as coexistence. There is a change in language that is required, which will come through the process of engaging with stakeholders and coming to those agreements about how to manage the species in question anyway. Then you should be left with a minimum of conflict, whether you pay for it through presence or compensation payments.



A lot of this comes down to how the Government view species reintroduction. If the Government view is as in the public interest, it is entirely reasonable for ELMS to be paying for some of this or for the Government to be backing these schemes. It is about the principle of reintroductions, particularly around keystone species, as Alastair was saying earlier, being of strategic benefit, if you like. We need to start seeing some of these things as strategically important related to our climate and biodiversity ambitions.

If that is the case, there is a role for Government on the financing side as well. We need to see that coming through in terms of the task force or whatever it is, Natural England, the management schemes and the payment for those. There are ways of managing these things if we get it right.

Q123 Chair: We have heard the example of Bavaria, where there is a compensation scheme, a very well-funded system. We have heard about the number of people available. Would something like that be applicable to this country?

Evan Bowen-Jones: The interesting thing there, from colleagues who are working on this stuff at the moment in the UK, is that they are seeing that the most transferable bit from the Bavarian scheme is the rapid response. That, again, goes to decentralisation of dealing with the management.

They reckon that, if you can get out within 48 hours to a site where a landowner thinks they have a conflict with a beaver, you can then employ your various options in dealing with that, which we maybe do not want to go into. There are devices that fool the beaver into thinking that the water is running so they do not dam. You can notch the dam so that the level of the water goes down. There are a whole load of things that they can do if they get on site. It goes to having that local capacity to get out and respond with the landowners.

Q124 Chair: In this country, at the moment as the law stands, we would have to apply for a special licence. We would then have Chris Packham and Wild Justice on our backs. We could be in court for three or six months. We have seen examples before. Presumably that system would not be fit for purpose if we are talking about rapid response.

Professor Driver: Along those lines, I would strongly advise against going down the compensation route. There are enough other mechanisms that have been mentioned. I will give you one extra reason why. As more people start to apply for licences to release, for example, it will be virtually impossible to prove where individual beavers come from. We have already had an example from the south-west, where there are three separate populations there. You thought that there was one. You would have naturally thought that the River Otter would have been to blame for some damage from one of the others.



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Proving where the animals came from, as we restore these species back into the wild, is going to be virtually impossible. It might be possible in the early years, when you have tagged individuals, but descendants of that, no. You have to bear in mind these complexities that are almost unfathomable. It is much better to go down the management and insurance route.

Judicaelle Hammond: We talk about beavers a lot, but it might be useful for the Committee to look at wild boars in Spain. I was talking about them not staying in the countryside. There was a really interesting article, in *The Guardian* of all places, in 2019 about the city of Barcelona and the problem that it is having with wild boars carrying disease and causing nuisance. They go where the food is. Where is the food? It is in bins. Where are the bins? They are in centres of population.

They had to pay quite a lot of money for boar control, which is something that we are not necessarily thinking about. If we are talking about wild boar reintroductions, as well as the risk of disease, this is a risk that needs to be taken into account. There is another source of information.

Chair: The last time I was in Belarus, I saw how they have a similar problem with wolves from the area where the Chernobyl accident affected the land and the wolves are coming into villages, because there is not enough food for them there.

Evan Bowen-Jones: This conversation is a great example of where we are getting the terminology wrong. Going to Barry's point, that is not the problem with the animal. It is the problem with the way that we are storing our waste in those areas and/or what we are doing to their habitat.

In the case of the UK, there is every opportunity to get management of, say, wild boar right. In an area such as Sussex, there have been wild boar at low densities for quite a long time. The reason they are at low density is that they end up in the butchers as—I was not being entirely facetious—sausages. You can get wild boar sausages from Sussex woodlands.

Then it goes to whether their ecological importance is sufficient to warrant putting that management in place. We would argue it absolutely is, because they play a vital ecological role that then boosts biodiversity, increases climate resilience et cetera. Again, if we think they are important to have, we have to get the management schemes right, which includes shooting them if they are in the wrong place. That is a totally legitimate way of managing a population of wild animals across a landscape. That does not mean that you should not have them in that landscape.

Chair: I suppose we should also stress that the vast majority of the animals and plants that we are going to introduce could well be beneficial. They could be pollinators, but obviously, as a Committee, we



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are focusing on the problems, because that is where we are going to get grief from farmers affected.

Q125 **Mrs Murray:** Can I turn to best practice and start with you, Tom? The 2021 England code and guidance for species reintroductions sets out Defra's guidance for best practice. Were your organisations consulted during the development of this guidance?

Tom Bradshaw: We were consulted. Luckily, I am on the right page, Sheryll, so I can see that one. This is one where you are testing the limit of my knowledge. We were consulted on the reintroduction conservation code.

We would like to see more clarity from Government about how the code is applied and the fact that it is considered when a species introduction licence is reviewed. At the moment, there is not that transparency of process. "Transparency" is a word that has come out a lot during this session. Our members are nervous. They will be far more nervous if this process appears closed rather than open.

Q126 **Mrs Murray:** I am going to interrupt you there, because I am going to go on to the two supplementary questions I have had here and then ask all three of you whether you will answer in the same way. You have already touched on it, Tom. Did Defra listen to the feedback when drafting the code? Were your comments reflected in the final version?

Tom Bradshaw: No. We felt that the code should have been strengthened. If our evidence had been listened to, it would have been strengthened further. We do not feel that it is strong enough and there are opportunities.

Q127 **Mrs Murray:** Do you have confidence in the code in its aim to promote best practice in reintroductions?

Tom Bradshaw: It is a starting point, but it is not going to have complete confidence because it does not feel like all of the evidence that was submitted was listened to. It is a case of "can do better". We do not need to rip it up and start again, but it could be improved upon.

Judicaelle Hammond: We were consulted and we inputted into the consultation. We think that the code is largely right, but, just like Tom, we do not think that our feedback was taken into account. There were two issues that will not be a surprise to the Committee, given what I have said so far. One is consultation, whether it is early enough, the way it is done, having a template et cetera. The other is how you deal with liability for future problems. That is not in there either.

Tom Bradshaw: The stakeholder consultation is exactly the area that we feel it is weakest around.

Professor Driver: I was personally involved in the early stages but not thereafter. Generally speaking, because it follows IUCN guidelines



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broadly, we are reasonably comfortable with it, but I accept the challenges that my colleagues have mentioned. We need more detail.

Evan Bowen-Jones: We were not consulted at Kent Wildlife Trust. I cannot say whether the central office was, I am afraid. As I said earlier, we are reasonably happy that the introduction guideline piece is fine. We also agree that the consultation piece could be strengthened, but it is around this broader framework of how it fits into what I think most of us are agreeing needs to be a tiered approach to how it is applied.

At the bottom end of it, when it is translocations of things that are already here, of low ecological significance, as it were, then it should be light-touch. We do not want loads more bureaucracy being applied to moving animals that are not problematic to enable those populations to survive in a fragmented landscape that is increasingly being affected by climate change.

Q128 **Robbie Moore:** I wanted to focus on illegal releases, because, inevitably, this has happened and could be a consequence going forward. Alastair, do illegal releases pose a risk to the success of legal ones?

Professor Driver: Yes, they absolutely do. It is really important that we get this species reintroduction strategy right, because that is the only way that we are going to minimise the risk of illegal releases. As I say, I have been involved in discussions on beavers for a very long time. I am pretty certain that there are illegal releases of beavers out there, but I personally, even though I know everybody in this field, still do not know for sure. I am pretty certain in my own mind that there have been illegal releases.

Q129 **Robbie Moore:** Why do you think that it might be the case that that has happened?

Professor Driver: It is the case because people have got fed up with waiting. They have been fed up with waiting for a very long time. I know that there are people like that. You see it on social media, with impatient calls for action. I am assuming that those people have just decided to take the law into their own hands. That is not the way we want to be. If we are going to have a proper species reintroduction strategy, illegal releases are likely to be contradicting quite a lot of the priorities, geographically and species-wise, that we have decided are important.

Q130 **Robbie Moore:** Even though you are talking about the knowledge of potential illegal releases, do you think that they are being taken seriously from an enforcement point of view?

Professor Driver: No, but you have to put this into proportion. Unfortunately, there is a whole list of other, more important things that are not being properly enforced. For example, in the Thames area of the Environment Agency, there is not a single warranted enforcement officer dealing with breaches of land drainage consent. That is unbelievable to me, because that was a big deal when I used to work there.



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Knowing that there are now all these kinds of things happening, sewage pollution that goes unenforced and unprosecuted, quite frankly, these species matters are way down the bottom of a massive list of things that need resolving. I am not suggesting that the Government should start putting resources into this. I am saying that the way you should do it is strategically, by being more proactive. Remember the “yes, if” approach to proper strategic reintroductions. The environment and farming sector as a whole will gradually, through peer pressure, start to suppress and minimise these illegal releases.

Q131 **Robbie Moore:** Do you feel that, as we get to a stage of more species reintroductions potentially happening through legal means, there is a risk that more illegal means will take place if people feel, “It is good enough in one particular area; why can it not be good in another area”? Do you still take the same position, though, that enforcement organisations should not keep that as a prioritisation in terms of looking at the illegal means?

Professor Driver: That is a fair question to ask. I do not personally see that happening. People will latch on to things that they believe passionately about that are not being supported by Government, so I doubt very much that that will be a significant outcome. I firmly believe that this is not a priority for Government over and above all of these other pollution-related matters that are not getting properly enforced.

Q132 **Robbie Moore:** Tom, I know that you and the NFU have said in the past that farmers are bearing the cost of illegal activity of others in the context of illegal releases. In your view, should the Government have a compensation scheme that specifically focuses on illegal releases?

Tom Bradshaw: I do not think that it is compensation. If these are illegal releases, you have to look at how those illegal releases are going to be controlled. At the moment, they are not being controlled and there is no desire to control them, which then precipitates the problem, because there is no deterrent from carrying on doing it.

There is a case here, accepting how pressurised all Government Departments are, from what you have just said, Alastair. If you are going to draw a line in the sand and say, “This is illegal”, at some point you have to demonstrate that it is illegal and take a course of action. At the moment, it is our members who bear the cost of it.

Q133 **Robbie Moore:** I know that the NFU has previously said that the Government should bear the responsibility and the cost as part of their enforcement regimes and that compensation should be in place for the damage that illegal populations have caused. Could you clarify that position?

Tom Bradshaw: Absolutely, but we really want enforcement before the damage is there. In the event that there is damage, compensation should be payable, but, at the moment, the lack of enforcement is another area that creates real concern. It demonstrates, from day one, that there is no



desire to implement the control mechanism. There was no control mechanism for beaver, so that was another challenge there. There were illegal populations, but there was no control mechanism available, so that was very difficult.

It creates muddy waters around species reintroduction, because members are having to deal with those illegal populations with no interest from Government agencies about how that should happen. Where they are causing damage, clearly we would want to see compensation, but that is the worst-case scenario. We want to prevent the damage happening in the first place.

If you go through the full species reintroduction programme, set out the criteria and have all the management in place, it should not happen. At the moment, it is a symptom of a problem and we want to avoid the problem in the first place.

Evan Bowen-Jones: I would agree with a lot of that. It is a symptom of the problem. Government, broadly, have moved too slowly around beavers. The case for them being a positive agent for change, if managed in the right way, is fairly overwhelming, but we do not have the management system in place. It goes back to the timing of all of this being wrong. That has led to frustration. I would agree with Alastair that it is less likely to be a problem if we can get the system right now.

In addition to that, if you are going to categorise it as a wildlife crime and talk about wildlife crime enforcement, there are a load of other wildlife crimes that need to be looked at as well, including raptor persecution. There are things that will make various parties around this space feel better if they are looked at more broadly with a fair lens. You cannot be persecuting people who release beavers illegally over not dealing with people who kill golden eagles illegally, for example.

Judicaelle Hammond: I was thinking about what Tom was saying. Between compensation and rapid response, we would rather have rapid response, because that prevents the damage and therefore reduces the need for compensation, but that in itself requires the resource.

Professor Driver: We must remember the practicalities around enforcement. If people like me do not know who is doing this, after 30 years of talking to everyone in that field, what chance does anyone have of pinning down who is doing it and successfully prosecuting? I honestly think that it is a non-starter.

Chair: I will go to our resident vet, Dr Neil Hudson.

Q134 **Dr Hudson:** I declare an interest in my next line of questioning. I am aware of the narrative that there are benefits of species introduction, but there are also potential negative impacts. Forgive me, my line of questioning is going to go down, potentially, some of the risks on this side of things in terms of disease and unintended consequences.



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We have seen what has happened over the last 100 or 150 years or so to the red squirrel population, with the greys coming in with the squirrelpox et cetera. If we have novel pathogens, existing pathogens or unknown pathogens coming in, what are your thoughts, as a panel, on the potential risks of disease introduction when we introduce or reintroduce species into this country? I am aware that we will have differing views on the panel.

Evan Bowen-Jones: There are multiple dimensions to this, like all of this. Again, it comes down to proportionality with regards to risks. It is a bit like the enforcement thing as well. Where are you going to put your money, as Government? Where are the highest risks around new diseases coming in to affect livestock? Is it going to be from, hopefully, legitimate species reintroductions where the animals have been health checked before they go out, versus some of the other things that are going on already with large numbers of animals being brought into the country without so many health checks, versus intensive agriculture, which we know has issues around it health-wise, versus existing reservoirs of disease in the existing animal population? I do not see this as being the straw that breaks the camel's back in comparison to all those other risks.

Also, you have to bear in mind that, if you have restored complex ecosystems, they are actually more resilient to new diseases that are going to come our way courtesy of climate change anyway. Importation of trees would be a great example as well, so ash dieback. You have a greater resilience to things like new tree diseases coming in if you have more diverse woodlands with better structures in them. How do you get the better structure? You have large herbivores in it, such as your boar and your bison.

This is all interrelated. I would say that it is proofing us against risk of certain diseases to get that complexity back into our ecosystems courtesy of some of these keystone species. I do not believe that this is going to be a major additional threat, even if done at ambitious scale, as compared to lots of other things that are already in the system.

Q135 **Dr Hudson:** I will come back to the possible safeguards that could be brought in. Tom, in terms of perception, the UK's biosecurity and animal health aspects, but potentially tipping into human health, what do you feel the potential risks are disease-wise for us? We talked about African swine fever. You have mentioned endemic diseases such as TB as well. What are your thoughts?

Tom Bradshaw: I think that I have been pretty clear that it is a concern. It is a risk and something that we have to be aware of, particularly with wild boar and ASF. The ones that we know about are actually quite easy not necessarily to manage but to understand. The worry is that there is an unknown. If that is transmitted, if there is a vector of disease that we are not conscious of when that species is reintroduced, that could become problematic. It is about making sure that we work through that plan as



thoroughly as possible and understand what mitigation can be put in place.

ASF would be our biggest concern at this moment in time. It is not that they would bring in ASF, but actually the spread of ASF is just as big a threat. From farm to farm, you have no control of where those wild boar would go. If there was a breakdown on farm A, which could be in Norfolk, the next thing it is down into Wiltshire because there has been transmission. That would be the concern, the spread of that disease, which would be far more difficult to control than it would be by management at a farm level. I would obviously object to the “intensive” comment that was made and it is not something that we would recognise. Management at a farm level can be very controlled and it is far more difficult to do that, to implement all the biosecurity measures, if you have wild boar, for instance, transmitting that disease.

Q136 Dr Hudson: In terms of introduction of species and safeguards, some of these species are difficult to handle as well. Evan, you talk about safeguards and actually doing health checks on these animals before they are released, but that is not without issue, is it?

Evan Bowen-Jones: It is pretty difficult. Take the bison that we are working with at the moment. The reason that I suggested that we need a wild managed category is that they do not fit into the domestic bracket. They need to be kept as wild animals within the woodland, because that is the safest way to have them. They keep their distance from people and dogs et cetera. There is not the right category to have them in.

Despite that, on bringing them in they have done full health checks. We have got a corral set up so we can bring them in as required to do TB testing. We have done bluetongue and all the stuff we need to do, but it is not the best way to work with those animals. To get the full ecological benefit, we need to be working with them as wild animals. There is this need for this additional category and that needs to be worked through properly. I know that that is slightly different to the disease question.

Q137 Dr Hudson: It raises the issues that it is complex to test these animals coming in, but also, if they then become resident, monitoring the health status of a herd is very complex. I take Tom’s point. If we have animals around, that could spread from a housed group to a wild group. That is the concern. We are trying to tease out the unintended consequences. I take your point about ecological matching and balance, and that side of things. Protecting the UK’s biosecurity as an island is not something that we should ignore.

Evan Bowen-Jones: I totally agree. When you are working with a well-set up system, where the animals you bring in can be properly health checked and which is as good as you are going to get anywhere in Europe or elsewhere, that does not prevent the spread of novel diseases into the population from novel sources. If you look at avian flu, we are not



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anticipating, as far as I am aware, culling all the native birds in the UK because there is this disease spreading in.

There will always be an element of risk in living around wild animals. From a disease perspective, there are links to, as we know, Covid, from the way that humans interact with animals. It is an impossibility to live on this planet without having the potential for some form of zoonoses in the mix.

Q138 Dr Hudson: I take your point about avian influenza, but we have migrating birds coming in. It is almost endemic now in some of the migrating populations. The worry is then that getting into the domestic kept birds. That is perhaps a different example from bringing in boar, bison or other types of animals. That is a slightly different argument because of the migratory pattern of some of these animals.

Do the benefits of the reintroduction of some of these species that we are talking about outweigh the risks? I would imagine that we might have a bit of a split panel on that.

Professor Driver: For many years, we have been following the IUCN guidelines. Since we have been doing that, we have managed it very well. We need to keep those standards up. As far as I am concerned, we need to keep those standards high and make sure we learn from new technology all the time. If something went wrong it could go really badly wrong, as with swine fever, but that is a different scenario. That is starting within kept animals and spreading into so-called wild animals. That is a bit of a one-off. We can just stick to these guidelines and we will be doing our best.

Judicaelle Hammond: I wonder whether, in some cases, it adds to the probability of disease spread. Having said that, it has to be species and location-specific. Density of population is what makes a really big difference in terms of control and likelihood of it moving around. There is not a one-size-fits-all answer.

Tom Bradshaw: That is what your initial consultation phase and overview will take into account for any individual species. You will have to identify that risk at that point. It can be dealt with in advance of the species being reintroduced, where you highlight those risks.

Chair: We are going to have to conclude there. We were going to ask a little bit about assisted colonisation and the introduction of species that have not been native here. Because of global warming, some species, such as the woodcock, for example, are moving north and east. Other species might well be able to colonise. If you have any thoughts on that, would you like to write to us?

It was a bit of an experiment having all four of you together, because we thought we might have two panels. We thought that we might get a bit of a debate and disagreement as well as agreement across the panel. I hope you agree with me that having you all together has worked quite well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thank you very much indeed for giving us the benefit of your expertise and knowledge. We look forward to seeing some of these animals in the environments in which they are going to be living. Thank you very much indeed.