

Written evidence submitted by Rewilding Britain (SR0003)

Call for Evidence on Species Reintroduction – Rewilding Britain submission

Introduction to Rewilding Britain and why we are submitting this response

Rewilding Britain is a small, but highly influential wildlife charity aiming to catalyse rewilding across at least 5% of Britain by 2030. In line with agreed IUCN criteria, we define rewilding as the large-scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself. Rewilding seeks to reinstate natural processes and, where appropriate, missing species – allowing them to shape the landscape and the habitats within.

We have established a very successful Rewilding Network of rewilding landowners and land-owning organisation across Britain, currently covering 113,000 ha of Britain and we have over 70 rewilding case studies showcased on our website. These numbers are steadily increasing and the data gathered from them tells us that species reintroductions are one of 25 specific interventions being implemented on these sites to help restore natural processes and a healthy functioning ecosystem. Although they are only 1 of 25 interventions, species reintroductions are nevertheless a very high priority for many sites, with 80% of sites either have carried out or planning species introductions of 58 species.

My name is Prof Alastair Driver and I am the Director of Rewilding Britain and the former National Head of Conservation for the Environment Agency. I am compiling this submission as someone with 44 years of experience in professional conservation and extensive experience of species reintroductions stretching back to the early 1980s.

Species reintroductions are therefore extremely important to the aims and objectives of Rewilding Britain – hence the carefully considered submission which follows.

1. What role should species reintroductions play in the delivery of the government’s biodiversity and nature recovery goals? Should specific objectives/targets be set for species reintroduction?

Species reintroductions have a huge but, as yet, massively under-utilised role in achieving biodiversity and nature recovery. We know from recent successful species reintroductions such as the Red Kite, White-tailed Eagle, White Stork, Pine Marten, Water Vole and Large Blue Butterfly that if carried out in line with IUCN recommendations, they can have a huge impact not only for the target species but also for many other species and in some cases the entire ecosystem function.

In addition, many charismatic species reintroductions are excellent vehicles for galvanising funding and manpower resources for wider conservation initiatives associated with those species and the habitats on which they depend. I know this because I personally led on Water Vole conservation for the UK for 20 years when Head of Conservation for the Environment Agency. Targeted reintroductions following on from American Mink control were a key element of the conservation programme which almost certainly saved the Water Vole from extinction and that played a major role in securing literally thousands of volunteers around the country in river and wetland conservation activity (largely through The Wildlife Trusts), which benefitted not only Water Voles but the whole aquatic and riparian ecosystem.

And last, but by no means least, species reintroductions can generate very significant socio-economic benefits for local communities – for example the Island of Mull in Scotland receives up to app £5M per annum of tourist spending due to the presence of White-tailed Eagles. This supports an additional £1.4 million of local income and 110 jobs each year.

I am a conservationist with 44 years of experience under my belt and I believe it to be quite extraordinary that we have stood by while species after species dwindle to extinction and yet have at the same time sat on our hands and anxiously worried for decade after decade about the possibility of reintroducing a species in case it might not work very well or “it might upset the farmers”. In literally every case that competent conservation bodies are ever likely to seriously consider for reintroduction in this country, the risks of failure or significant undesirable impacts are miniscule compared with the likelihood of both success and net societal benefit. It is really is time that our thinking matured in this area.

And yes absolutely - we should have targets for species reintroductions. These should be focused on a wide range of species across all the key taxa – not just the charismatic and popular. Having said that, particular priority should be given to keystone species such as Eurasian Beaver, Golden Eagle and Eurasian Lynx whose presence in the countryside will be hugely beneficial to a wide range of other species. For example, as is now well known, Beavers create fantastic habitats for a huge range of other wetland species including

amphibians, fish and dragonflies and Lynx are major predators of Roe Deer and Fox both of which have had inflated populations in this country as a result of historical removal of apex predators and the more recent decline in shooting and wildlife persecution.

Most of the relevant eNGOs will have carefully considered target lists which can form the basis for targeting. Timescales for reintroductions and milestones for population distribution should be clearly identified for target-setting purposes, taking into account the IUCN criteria.

2. How can the government maximise the potential benefits from species reintroduction, and ensure the correct species are reintroduced in the correct places?

What is urgently required now, is a much stronger steer and remit for Natural England and the relevant parts of Defra to actively promote and encourage species reintroductions. This requires a major culture change from the “no-why?” approach to the “yes-if” approach – the “if” being the demonstration of general adherence to the IUCN criteria for reintroductions.

In addition, these bodies will need to recognise that many of our species have shrunk back to the only bits of the landscape where they can cling on – eg Golden Eagles in the Highlands of Scotland - but these are not the only habitats they belong in. On the continent for example, you can find Golden Eagles feeding in wetlands and nesting in trees. The historic loss of habitat and level of persecution in this country has been so great that we have a completely false impression of where these species belong. We know enough about where many of these species genuinely thrive, from work done across Europe. We now need to learn from their experiences and knowledge and free ourselves from the shackles of “shifting baseline syndrome”.

3. What role should the Landscape Recovery and Local Nature Recovery Schemes, under ELMS, have in supporting species reintroduction?

The Landscape Recovery component of ELM focusses on landscape scale land-use change and rewilding is of course included amongst the options for that component. Rewilding is the large-scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself. Such initiatives in this component of the ELM scheme therefore lend themselves perfectly to supporting species reintroductions for several key reasons:

(i) Because undesirable human impacts eg intensive agriculture, moor burning, use of chemicals, etc, cease in the project area - usually from day 1 of any given rewilding project.

(ii) Because the very scale of such initiatives (500-5000 ha) means that often there will be multiple landowners and stakeholders involved, all sharing the same ambition for nature restoration. For reintroductions of more mobile species - eg birds and mammals - it is essential that neighbouring landowners are on board with a reintroduction project and not just the owner of the land where the introduction specifically takes place.

(iii) By their very nature, landowners and land managers who engage in large scale rewilding are excited and enthusiastic about species reintroductions. Making a real difference through transformational change is what drives them on, and species reintroductions are often at the very core of that ambition. By way of example, we at Rewilding Britain keep detailed records of major rewilding projects in England and at this point in time, we have a list of 56 plant and animal species which landowners and land managers are keen to reintroduce.

4. How effective is current government policy and 2021 guidance in leading and managing species reintroductions? Should any changes be made to its policies and guidance?

Currently the overbearing and restrictive licencing policy and guidance is a major deterrent for individuals and organisations considering applying for species reintroduction licences. Rewilding Britain responded in detail to the Defra 2021 consultation on the licencing of Beaver releases and summarised our thinking as follows: *“We welcome this hugely significant and long awaited announcement to licence the release of beavers into the wild in England. We agree in part with the proposed approach, but we are very concerned about the disproportionate emphasis on perceived risks and costs and the overly burdensome nature of the licencing criteria being proposed.”* These views were echoed by a multitude of other environmental organisations and should be acted upon without delay.

5. What improvements can be made in how local communities, landowners and other land users are engaged and consulted on reintroduction proposals? What practical steps can be taken to reduce conflict with these groups?

There are no significant improvements required for all those species reintroduction proposals which follow the IUCN guidelines. There are plenty of good examples out there – beavers on the River Otter in Devon,

Pine Martens in the Forest of Dean, White-tailed Eagles on the Isle of Wight etc. We don't need to reinvent the wheel on this. We know what to do and how to do it and it works well. It is also absolutely essential that government accepts that you cannot please all of the people all of the time. There will always be detractors - many of whom are heavily mis-informed or who have vested interests. Majority support and not unanimous support will always be the best that can be expected. The more that we implement successful projects professionally following the best practice guidelines, the more chance we have of reducing the level of opposition.

6. How could the development of long-term management plans and regulatory regimes for reintroduced species control be improved?

This will very much depend on the species involved and the only key comment we wish to make is that sweeping generalised guidance and regulation is not appropriate here. An approach that is appropriate for the Lynx is clearly not appropriate for the Bird's Nest Orchid – and vice-versa.

7. What can the government do to help prevent unregulated species reintroductions?

The clear and obvious answer to this question is to streamline and speed up the licensing process for species reintroductions without delay. I know from my long career in conservation that we have gone more or less full circle in the last 50 years from: (i) very relaxed arrangements where individual naturalists quietly carried out reintroductions with little or no consultation, to (ii) a period post-1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act where key representatives of conservation organisations (such as myself as Head of Conservation for the EA) urged patience, caution and adherence to government policy, to (iii) the situation we've had for 10 years or so now, where "under-the-radar" individuals are fed up with waiting and rogue reintroductions are steadily increasing.

Government will never be able to directly prevent unregulated reintroductions – even if it spent vast amounts of public resources, (which would be much better spent on pro-active conservation measures anyway) - because unregulated reintroductions are relatively easy for a rogue individual to carry out completely undetected. The only way is to steadily exert peer pressure on these individuals by adopting a clearly positive "yes-if" approach to reintroductions as described above.

8. What lessons could the UK government and Natural England learn from reintroduction in other jurisdictions, in UK and Europe?

There are many lessons to be learnt from across Europe and indeed beyond. Key considerations when doing so are:

(i) It is important to distinguish between deliberate reintroductions and natural colonisation – eg Eurasian Lynx have been reintroduced in the Alps whereas the Grey Wolf has recolonised several countries naturally.

(ii) We should look to the continent to realise that many species occur in a much wider range of habitats than modern-day population distributions in Britain would suggest. Many decades of habitat loss and pollution etc mean that many of our more sensitive species are clinging on in very specific refined habitats which meet their requirements best, in the absence of other suitable large scale habitats that we've wiped out. This gives us the false impression that that specific habitat is the only habitat in which the species can survive.

(iii) We need to bear in mind the role that certain species once had in terms of ecosystem function. If a species formerly resident in Britain is now extinct but once fulfilled an important function in the ecosystem – eg the Aurochs – then we should consider which species most closely fulfils that function in modern-day Europe. In the case of the Aurochs, the answer is almost certainly its relative the European Bison. Even though there is no categoric evidence that Bison existed in Britain, we should nevertheless consider it for introduction into the wild in England in light of its potential benefits for the ecosystem and thus wider biodiversity. There are successful examples of this approach elsewhere in the world eg the Aldabran Giant Tortoise reintroduction to the Ile aux Aigrettes in Mauritius (as an ecological replacement for the extinct Mauritian Tortoise), which has led to fantastic regeneration of native vegetation on the island.

(iv) We should also look to the continent to gain a better understanding of the impacts of climate warming and the northward shift of species over time, which is already well underway. Mobile species such as moths, birds and dragonflies are already colonising Britain from the continent, and being more aware of what may arrive naturally and benefit from population reinforcement, will be an important consideration for our overall species reintroduction strategy.

An excellent starting point for learning from Europe can be found here: <https://rewildingEurope.com/wildlife-comeback-report-2022/>

