

## **Written evidence submitted by Mr Ross McNally (SR0005)**

### **Species Reintroduction**

Species reintroductions must be a crucial pillar of the UK government's biodiversity goals over the coming decades. As one of the most nature depleted countries on Earth, and with many of our large keystone species absent with no chance of natural recolonisation, reintroductions are necessary to restoring crucial ecosystem functions, such as vegetation disturbance by large herbivores, nutrient cycling via urination, defecation, decomposition and scavenging, as well as behaviourally mediated trophic cascades via apex predators.

Reintroductions should be prioritised according to the ecological impact of candidate species, so that keystone species with the greatest potential benefits to biodiversity are proposed for reintroduction first. Candidate species should also be selected based upon evidence of their past natural occurrence in Britain subsequent to the last Ice Age, and that human impacts contributed to their extirpation from Britain. Reintroductions should take place in locations with sufficient habitat to support a viable population, and with connectivity to the wider landscape via wildlife corridors. Habitat requirements for such candidate species should be obtained from scientific literature and expert advice. Given that most native species likely to be considered for reintroduction are still extant in mainland Europe and are usually well-studied, such evidence is readily available.

The government should seek to facilitate species reintroductions by several means. For instance, using ELMS subsidies to incentivise landowners to apply for reintroduction trials on their land, in accordance with the principle of payments for environmental benefits. Landscape recovery schemes could facilitate cooperation between multiple neighbouring landowners to provide habitat and wildlife corridors to facilitate population expansion and dispersal of reintroduced species across the landscape.

The government should also seek to remove unnecessary bureaucracy from the process of applying for reintroduction licences if successful trial reintroductions have already been supervised by statutory agencies. For example, following the success of the Scottish Beaver Trial and the Devon Beaver Trial, Defra should have moved faster to grant beavers legal protection and simplified the conditions for beaver reintroduction nationwide, including by removing requirements for containment. The government should also review other legislation that may unnecessarily hamper species reintroductions, such as the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976: the listing in this act of native species like the wild boar has meant that the status of incipient feral populations in places like the Forest of Dean remains ambiguous, and that licenced reintroductions in other parts of the country are impossible, even while this population is growing rapidly and is now annually culled.

Another way that the government should seek to facilitate species reintroductions is by increasing landscape connectivity across major highways. It is understood that the presence of large ungulates and other large bodied animals in the landscape can present a risk to road traffic, and vice versa. Among the most effective ways of mitigating the risk of such wildlife vehicle collisions is the provision of wildlife overpasses, also known as wildlife bridges or 'ecoducts'. These are costly constructions, and as such are generally reserved for motorways, but when used in combination with roadside fencing to channel wildlife towards them, can be very effective at facilitating wildlife

dispersal. This is demonstrated in countries like the Netherlands, which currently has (depending how they are classified) between 47 and 70 ‘ecoducts,’ which are enabling the dispersal of bison and deer through the landscape, and facilitating natural recolonisation by wolves, in a country with the densest motorway network in Europe. By contrast, the UK has fewer than five wildlife overpasses of this kind. Along with long-term measures to reduce vehicular traffic and shrink the road network, a plan should be developed by relevant agencies, such as Natural England, Highways England and their devolved equivalents, for the construction of wildlife overpasses across the UK’s motorways in a cost-effective way.

Stakeholder engagement and approval are crucial to the success of species reintroductions, and the government should continually strive to improve consultation and incentivisation by responding to feedback. Schemes like ELMS mentioned above can be useful in incentivising landscape recovery and species reintroduction, but additional measures may also be required. For example, in the decades to come, the UK may be in a position to reintroduce wolves to some parts of the country, and could reintroduce lynx much sooner. Given that large predators will inevitably cause some livestock depredation, it would be necessary in advance of such reintroductions to design a compensation scheme for farmers, which have already been used for decades in many European countries where these and other predators are recolonising former ranges.

Further, the government and organisations involved in species reintroductions should provide public information ahead of reintroductions, to counter misconceptions and reduce the risk that the behaviour of local people threatens their safety or that of reintroduced wildlife.

December 2022