

Written evidence submitted by the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (SR0009)

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Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, www.arc-trust.org

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Summary

The Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (ARC) believes that reintroduction (conservation translocation) is an important tool in the recovery of species. ARC has undertaken many reintroductions for reptiles and amphibians in Britain, often working in partnership with a range of stakeholders including Natural England, and this has often resulted in positive outcomes for species. ARC suggests that further government action on species reintroduction is warranted, in order to encourage well-planned projects and to discourage or even prohibit those that might have harmful impacts for the target species, other species, stakeholders or society.

In our view, action by government should take several forms:

- (1) Working with the sector to set objectives for reintroductions alongside national objectives for species recovery, so that the role of reintroductions is both clearer and fits coherently with other conservation action;
- (2) Improve reintroduction policy and guidance in some respects, though we note that the recent [2021] Defra guidance is broadly very positive;
- (3) More proactively encourage good practice in reintroductions, and dissuade poor practice, including through greater engagement with the sector;
- (4) Improve regulation to reduce the chance of poor practice reintroductions, and provide better enforcement options where necessary;
- (5) Encourage and support research that would fill key evidence gaps;
- (6) Support reintroduction practitioners through financial assistance and through the provision of shared specialist resources such as disease risk assessment;
- (7) Improve other areas of conservation and land use policy and initiatives, so that they better align with reintroductions, in particular the new ELM schemes, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, protected sites designation and management, and land use planning.

ARC is pleased to note the establishment of the England Species Reintroduction Task Force and suggests that this body, alongside the specialist staff in Natural England and Defra, should be well placed to explore key improvements with the sector.

1. Background to the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust and our reason for submitting evidence

The Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (ARC) is a UK-based wildlife charity dedicated to conserving these two important groups of animals. ARC does this through staff and volunteers, by working with partners and by influencing others through advocacy, education and increasing awareness. In addition to its work in the UK, ARC also looks to make a difference for amphibians and reptiles across Europe and internationally. ARC manages 80 nature reserves, covering over 2,000 hectares across Britain. It works in partnership with a wide range of governmental, private and voluntary sector organisations. It runs monitoring programmes, undertakes species recovery work locally and nationally, communicates widely, runs training courses, and engages with scientific research.

ARC is submitting evidence to the EFRA Inquiry on Species Reintroduction because this topic is of particular interest to the organisation in several respects. ARC believes that reintroduction is a useful (and in some cases essential) measure in the recovery of the UK's amphibians and reptiles. ARC has undertaken reintroductions for several species with demonstrably positive outcomes (for an overview, see: <https://www.arc-trust.org/reintroductions-and-captive-breeding>; for examples of projects, see Moulton et al 2011, Foster et al 2018). In ARC's view, it is important that legislation, policy, guidance and funding are designed such that they assist with species reintroductions undertaken to good practice, and dissuade or prohibit those reintroductions which might be harmful. The potential of species reintroductions has gained significant attention in recent years, with more stakeholders expressing an interest, greater investment by government and agencies, explicit policy mentions, and substantial media coverage. While the increased attention is generally welcome, there is a risk that poorly planned projects may be undertaken; that has the potential for harmful outcomes for species or land users, and for undermining work done to good practice. ARC believes the EFRA Inquiry is a valuable opportunity for the key issues to be discussed, hopefully leading to improvements in the framework for regulating and guiding reintroductions.

Our evidence is set out in section 2 below, using the eight questions in the Call For Evidence as headers. Literature referenced in the text is set out in section 3.

ARC would be happy to speak further with the EFRA Committee Inquiry if that were deemed useful.

2. Evidence submission

2.1 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 should be promoted as a potential tool for recovering species whose conservation status is unfavourable. Reintroduction is just one method for recovering populations, and it will not always be the most appropriate. In particular, in some circumstances "new" populations can be brought about by encouraging dispersal from nearby occupied areas via targeted habitat creation and restoration. ARC believes that specific objectives or targets should be set for species reintroductions, and that these should in turn be nested under an overall set of objectives/targets for species recovery. The overall targets for species recovery should ideally be set using an approach that gives values for conservation status that are scalable from international to national to regional scales, for example Conservation Status Assessment (which results in a definition of Favourable Conservation Status, as promoted by Natural England – see Mousley & Van Vliet, 2021) or the IUCN Green Status method (see Grace et al, 2021). The targets should also specifically relate to the relevant targets set under the Environment Act 2021. We suggest that Defra and Natural England could increase efforts to encourage the setting of national and sub-national targets for species status, in order to give a firm basis for deciding when and where species reintroductions are appropriate. We note that Natural England has helpfully produced Favourable Conservation Status definitions, sometimes in conjunction with other organisations, and we suggest that a useful next step is to produce plans or strategies to guide the actions needed – including reintroductions where appropriate - to move species toward a favourable level. ARC is in discussion with Natural England on this topic and is working on several relevant initiatives.

Setting spatially scaled goals for species would help to ensure that reintroductions are planned appropriately, in conjunction with wider species recovery efforts. At present, there is an issue where reintroductions for some species are being planned or even delivered without the appropriate links with other recovery efforts; this can reduce the effectiveness of conservation action and increases the likelihood of harmful outcomes.

We suggest that two particular authoritative sources of guidance give useful direction here: the global IUCN translocation guidance (IUCN/SSC, 2013) and the England conservation translocation guidance (Defra, 2021). In particular, Annex 3.3 of IUCN/SSC (2013) and Section 4 of Defra (2021) are useful in reinforcing the message that reintroductions are one of a range of methods for achieving a conservation goal, and encouraging practitioners to select reintroduction only when it is the most appropriate means.

On a related note, we suggest that government reaffirms that reintroductions should be undertaken only when there is a clear role for the intervention to assist with the recovery of the target species, or for some other explicit conservation outcome. ARC is concerned to note that reintroductions are sometimes proposed where, on closer inspection, it appears that the main driver is for some other purpose such as garnering increased public profile. In addition, we believe that whilst species reintroductions can sometimes result in wider benefits to society (the most obvious example being Eurasian beaver releases assisting with hydrology), it is important that those other purposes do not distort a plan such that the conservation outcomes are undermined. On a related note, we suggest that reintroductions need not demonstrate a wider benefit in order to be deemed appropriate and a priority; those other benefits are indeed welcome where they apply, but it should be sufficient for reintroductions to simply demonstrate that they will result in an explicit species recovery outcome.

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

We suggest that there are several strands of government (and government agency) action that would assist here:

Setting objectives: Work with the sector to establish targets for reintroductions, that align with targets for species recovery (see comments in 2.1, above).

Policy: Set clear policy on the role, planning and implementation of reintroductions, building on the excellent guidance issued in 2021 (Defra, 2021). Government and agencies could do more to ensure that various nature conservation practice and policy are better aligned with reintroductions. For example, reintroduced populations are not always reflected in the notification status of Sites of Species Scientific Interest (and possibly other protected sites). Emerging policies and initiatives such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies have the potential to help or hinder reintroductions, but there has been very little examination, as far as we can tell, about how appropriate links will be made. There are a range of other policy and operational changes that should be undertaken to better encourage reintroductions and support reintroduced populations. Policy should also look to major emerging issues such as the potential role of assisted colonisation, including translocation of species not native to the UK (e.g. see Foster, 2022; Brodie et al 2021). We suggest that the England Species Reintroductions Task Force has an important role to play in considering new or amended policy.

Advice and guidance: Ensure there is good practice guidance (which may be generic, thematic or taxon-specific), and actively promote its adoption. Guidance should cover, for example, criteria for deciding the priorities for species reintroductions (the species themselves, geographic areas, justification for reintroduction). Reinforce the message that reintroductions should be part of a wider species recovery strategy. Guidance should focus initially on assessing whether reintroduction is appropriate, scoping the benefits and risks, and planning a good practice reintroduction. Guidance should cover monitoring and evaluation of reintroductions, so that the sector can learn from experience.

Regulation: Although it may not be deemed politically attractive, we believe that increased regulation is needed to help ensure reintroductions are done to good practice, and to prevent those which would lead to negative outcomes including releasing species in the “wrong” places. The current regulatory regime leaves a number of gaps that allow ill-informed reintroductions to be undertaken without necessary control or consultation, and with no enforcement option. The costs of a lack of regulation should be considered: these include economic costs and risks for landowners and developers, where protected species released inappropriately on or near their land could result in additional constraints. In addition, currently there is virtually no way to prevent the release of captive-bred individuals of a protected species, which represents a major gap in regulation. This has happened on several occasions for reptiles and amphibians (e.g. see Owens et al, 2022). Regulation should also require monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Having expressed a desire for further regulation where appropriate, we would like to stress that regulation should only be applied to the level required to achieve desired outcomes, with processes and costs that are proportionate. See also comments below at 2.7 regarding measures to reduce unregulated reintroductions.

Research: Government should encourage, and in some cases fund or otherwise assist, research to fill key evidence gaps in species reintroduction practice.

Resourcing of and support for delivery: Government or its agencies should support reintroductions not only through policy but also via measures to help with delivery. Primarily this should be through direct grant aid to organisations undertaking reintroductions, and by providing shared resources that assist with good practice whilst reducing per-project costs, such as the Disease Risk Assessment and Health Surveillance project run by NE and ZSL.

Sectoral engagement: We suggest that the England Species Reintroductions Task Force could be central to ensuring that there is good engagement between government and those involved in undertaking reintroductions. We understand that details are yet to be announced about how the Task Force will function. It will be important for the Task Force to include some form of engagement with a range of stakeholders, noting that the body itself is likely to need to be small for efficiency purposes. In addition, it will be useful for Natural England and Defra to encourage direct discussions with stakeholders.

Policy and practice for other types of species translocation: Species reintroduction is one type of translocation, but translocations are undertaken for other purposes, notably game releases, livestock movements, release of rehabilitated animals, and mitigation for development. Whilst this Inquiry is focused solely on species reintroduction, we note that those other translocations can impact on the potential for and success of species reintroductions (e.g. through effects on habitat structure or altering predator-prey dynamics). Further guidance and regulation is needed for these types of translocations to ensure they are better aligned with conservation translocations.

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

These schemes have great potential to assist with species reintroductions. We make the following observations:

The ELM schemes could help generally in creating or restoring habitats suitable for later reintroduction; attention will be needed here to ensure that the appropriate habitats are created in the right places, and paying attention to patch size and connectivity.

Importantly, we believe the ELM schemes should have a role in supporting existing populations, including those established through reintroductions. ELM scheme design, particularly the options, will need more input to ensure that they deliver suitable quality, quantity and location of habitat to assist with species reintroductions and with supporting existing populations. This is more the case for some taxa than others; certainly for amphibians and reptiles, our experience with predecessor schemes is that the options often do not align well with the needs of the species, and this should be straightforward to rectify.

The ELM schemes should also reduce the need for reintroductions by creating sufficient habitat such that natural dispersal is encouraged, thereby generating expanded and new populations for species that are able to take advantage.

Note: we suggest that both the LR and LNR schemes should have specific species outcome targets built in from the early stages. This in turn would assist with deciding whether and how reintroduction would be appropriate under the schemes. ELM scheme design should be explicitly linked to over-arching national conservation status targets for species, to ensure coherence.

ELM schemes may be able to help with issues such as coastal squeeze, by creating habitat inland that would be suitable for species reintroductions.

Further guidance is needed about how ELM schemes relate to other policies and initiatives, in particular Biodiversity Net Gain, land use planning decisions including those relating to mitigation, and NRN/LNRSs.

2.4 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?

Overall our view is that current policy and guidance are helpful but not as effective as they should be. To some extent the answer to this question depends what is meant by “policy”. Taken broadly, there is a very broad range of policies that touch on reintroductions, and they often do not align well. For example, we think that more could be done to align the following: protected species licensing, land use planning and mitigation, protected sites (especially the 30x30 approach, and issues to do with notified features and management objectives for SSSI and N2K sites), Species Conservation Strategies, Biodiversity Net Gain, NRN/LNRS, ELMS, biodiversity policy - in particular species recovery.

Some suggested changes to policies and guidance are mentioned in our answers above.

In relation to the 2021 Defra guidance, we think this is largely very helpful. There are some areas where useful additions or changes could be made to this guidance, and/or to policy positions:

- Ensuring there is a clear pathway for reintroductions leading from initial rationale, through consultation, planning, monitoring, reporting and evaluation
- Reinforcing the need for reintroductions to be part of a coherent national recovery plan, and requiring consultation with relevant stakeholders
- Reinforcing the message that successful reintroduction requires considerable planning, and involves substantially more than simply generating animals for release (this is to counter a recent trend for some projects to focus on breeding animals without adequately making a case for reintroduction or assessing what steps are needed to ensure long-term success)
- Rationale for reintroducing species that were once present as native species but were lost in historical times (say over 100 years ago)
- The value of translocating species for the purpose of genetic rescue
- Status of unauthorised (re)introductions of native species
- International assisted colonisation for species that are non-native in the UK
- Future role of conservation translocations.

We note that government agencies have devoted more resources (notably new staff and grant opportunities) to reintroductions in the last year or so in particular. This is welcome. We suggest that policy and guidance changes should follow to ensure that these additional resources are optimised. We also think that better join up between

agencies, and between agencies and stakeholders such as local authorities, would assist. Furthermore, we would like to see more coherence of approach between the four countries of the UK. Working to different systems and standards places an additional strain on those working on reintroductions across the UK.

2.5 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 is good general guidance on this in Defra (2021) and a range of practitioner publications (IUCN/SSC 2013 in particular), peer-reviewed papers and books (e.g. Gaywood et al 2022).

ARC's view is that the type and scale of engagement and consultation should be proportionate to the potential level of impacts of a reintroduction. For example, one would expect there to be a more intensive community consultation for a reintroduction of ecosystem engineers like Eurasian beaver than for an amphibian that has minimal ecological, societal or other practical impacts. Reintroductions of species with strict legal protection should be subject to a particular type of engagement and consultation, given the potential for implications for landowners. This is especially the case for species that disperse rapidly and generate large population sizes. In some cases, it will be necessary to manage adverse impacts caused by the species being reintroduced, or the consequences of their reintroduction (for example changes to habitats). There is a paradox here that we believe requires further exploration: strict protection is desirable in many respects but it can dissuade some landowners from supporting reintroductions on their land or neighbouring land. Some degree of flexibility in the application of the law, for example via derogations or statutory guidance, might be worth pursuing.

We note that there is a case for careful and meaningful engagement with landowners, in particular, as their support will typically be critical for the long-term success of reintroductions. We further note that it is important for those planning reintroductions of any species to bear in mind a duty to undertake such consultation genuinely, because landowners having a poor experience through one project might then be less inclined to support projects for other species, regardless of how well planned they may be.

There is a particular issue for reintroductions of species that pose a potential health or safety risk to humans, livestock or pets. In our own specialism, the adder *Vipera berus* is the clearest example, being a venomous snake capable of causing harm. As the actual risks to humans posed by adders are low, the issue is more about engagement, information and managing public perceptions about risk. A related issue here is the extent to which a reintroduction practitioner, or indeed a licensing authority allowing a release, may carry a legal liability for any harm subsequently caused by released animals or their progeny. Clearer guidance on this issue would be welcome.

We suggest that the active participation of Natural England may be helpful in engagement with local communities in some cases. It could be useful for NE staff to undergo training to be able to assist with such activities. Conversely, in some cases, the participation of government agency staff might be seen as unhelpful by some stakeholders, at least in the early stages, so this issue needs careful consideration.

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

We are unclear exactly what is meant by management plans and regulatory regimes here. We suspect the intention is to refer to plans where reintroduced animals or their progeny are subject to intervention, possibly including containment and lethal control. We suggest that for some species, such plans and regimes will be needed, though in our specialism this seems unlikely as amphibian and reptile reintroductions rarely lead to highly problematic outcomes of the type requiring such drastic intervention.

If the question refers to more broad management plans in terms of the conservation activity needed to maintain reintroduced populations, we suggest that this should be an essential part of the planning for any reintroduction. In our experience, reintroductions may fail in the medium to long term because the appropriate measures for maintaining favourable conditions are not reliably in place. Typically this relates to the ongoing management of habitats, and in particular ensuring the objectives for the species being reintroduced are properly integrated with other objectives, especially on protected sites; mechanisms to address harmful post-release episodic or chronic issues such as fires, recreational disturbance or new construction; mechanisms to ensure ongoing monitoring.

We suggest that a key issue here is suitable risk assessment and early stage planning. If done well, these steps should minimise the need for complex long-term arrangements, or flag up where these are in fact needed and therefore additional resources would need to be factored into the reintroduction project delivery.

Whatever plans or regimes are considered, we suggest that they should relate back to the site-specific and national conservation objectives for the species. Doing so will help ensure that any interventions are undertaken at the level required to ensure that the reintroduction achieves its objectives.

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

To some extent the answer depends on what is meant by “unregulated”. One might assume that regulation refers to a licence being required for release of an animal being reintroduced. However, there are various other ways in which regulation touches on, or can touch on, reintroductions. For example, releases onto SSSIs would normally require approval from Natural England, even if the species itself does not require a licence for release.

We are aware that species are sometimes released without needing any formal regulatory approval. Even then, it would be courtesy at the least to secure the landowner’s consent, but this is often not done in what may be termed clandestine or maverick reintroductions. These are unfortunately an issue for amphibians and reptiles.

A further interpretation of the question here is whether it might relate to the release of non-native species; in the mind of some, these are classed as reintroductions even though by most standard definitions they would not be classed as such. This unfortunately still occurs, and though while illegal is difficult to enforce.

We suggest there are several steps to reducing unregulated species introductions:

- Increased awareness among potential reintroduction practitioners.
- Increased regulation to remove various “loop-holes” that effectively allow poorly planned releases to proceed; this could include listing species on Schedule 9; greater restrictions on keeping species in captivity; new legislation to prohibit or regulate release to the wild; greater restrictions on imports of animals from outside the UK, lest they become part of reintroduction stock (an issue with particular implications for disease and genetic effects).
- One possible suggestion is that reintroduction projects or practitioners could be subject to accreditation.

As mentioned above, we believe that translocations of species for reasons other than conservation reintroductions are currently subject to minimal regulation, yet they have potential to impact negatively on conservation. We suggest that enhanced regulation and guidance on those types of translocations should be put in place, alongside any measures to further regulate species reintroductions.

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

There is now a very good set of reintroduction examples and discussion of the key issues in reintroductions (see for example Gaywood et al, 2022). The IUCN SSC Conservation Translocation Specialist Group is a good source of information, gathering experience globally. Lessons might be learned from countries with particularly long and well-documented experience in conservation translocations such as New Zealand, USA and Canada. We also note that some reintroduction projects in the UK Overseas Territories have been very successful, and include some innovative projects. As mentioned above, we suggest that efforts are made to align policy and guidance across the four countries of the UK. We note that Scotland has had useful experience with its translocation code, and whilst not all of the policy has been welcomed by practitioners, in general the infrastructure appears to have led to better planning of reintroduction projects. We suggest that a common UK approach would be beneficial for practitioners and would also benefit government as it would assist with reporting at UK level, for example for CBD and Bern Convention.

3. References

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