

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in support of their inquiry into Species Reintroductions, December 2022

Evidence submitted by Dr Andy Clements, Chair, England Species Reintroduction Task Force

Introduction

I am Dr Andy Clements, a professional in nature conservation for the last 40 years, and appointed by the Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra) in September 2022 to be the inaugural Chair of the government's Species Reintroduction Task Force. Originally a research scientist studying behavioural ecology of mammals and birds, I moved into the statutory nature conservation body, then called the Nature Conservancy Council which covered the whole of the UK, in 1982. I was initially employed as a scientist gathering evidence to support the identification of protected areas for birds and vegetation in the English and Scottish uplands. Over the next 25 years I took on a diverse range of roles within the organisation, eventually becoming Director of Protected Areas for English Nature in 2000, and a member of the Executive Board. When Natural England was created in 2006, I served as the Director for Science, Evidence and Policy. In the late 1980's I had a four year secondment to the, then, Department of the Environment as Chief Wildlife Inspector, regulating keepers of birds of prey and assisting Her Majesty's Customs & Excise (HMCE) in the control of trade in endangered species.

In 2007 I moved from the statutory sector and became Chief Executive of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) a widely respected scientific charity gathering evidence of status and change in bird populations as indicators to inform society and decision-makers about the state of the environment. I retired from that full-time role in December 2020. In 2013 I was appointed by the Secretary of State to the Board of Natural England and my current term finishes at the end of March 2023. My roles on the Board include chairing the Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC). This is an advisory panel of around 15 independent academic scientists, scrutinising, challenging and supporting Natural England's evidence-led work. NESAC is occasionally required to give formal advice to the Natural England Board and to Defra. Two examples are the provision of advice to undertake a research trial to test the effectiveness of brood management of Hen Harriers, enabling the Government to publish the Joint Hen Harrier Recovery Action Plan in 2016, and an examination of the evidence to support a shift from badger culling to badger vaccination in the Government's measures to control bovine TB. I also chair the National Nature Reserve Partnership, bringing together the statutory, NGO and private sectors in the collaborative modern management of nature reserves, contributing to the Government's nature recovery targets.

I have previously served on the Board of the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) and on the Council of the Cambridge Conservation Initiative (CCI), where I was the inaugural Chair. CCI is a collaboration between nine NGOs and the University academics working on conservation, to bridge the disciplines of research, policy and practice in response to the climate and biodiversity crises. I am currently a member of the National Trust's Natural Environment Advisory Group, a voluntary role assisting the Trust with enhancing biodiversity on their estate.

Species Reintroduction Task Force

Defra, with the assistance of Natural England, responded to a Government announcement from the, then, Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and are in the process of setting up the England Species Reintroduction Task Force (ESRT). The Task Force will be an independent technical advisory group, bringing together statutory bodies and experts to promote a collective evidence-led view, advice and guidance on existing and potential conservation translocations and reintroductions of species in England. The Task Force will develop and publish a framework to inform the assessment of benefits and risks of species for reintroduction. This will ensure a consistent approach that is aligned with the principles of the Reintroductions and Other Translocations Code and Guidance for England published by Natural England in May 2021 (hereafter referred to as the Code), and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Guidelines on conservation translocations. The Task Force will enable this framework to be used to identify the relative suitability of species for future reintroductions, including consideration of their environmental and socio-economic impact, and legal requirements.

Taking an evidence-led approach the Task Force will:

- Provide technical assessments of the suitability of species for future reintroduction;
- Collate, review and share experiences from conservation translocation projects to build the knowledge base for informing future projects;
- Provide advice to support the translocation and reintroduction of native or formerly native species at both regional and national scales;
- Establish and work with a broad stakeholder forum to ensure the widest possible support for this work, and to develop partnerships leading to successful projects;
- Engage constructively with counterparts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) at the UK level.

Membership and meetings

In addition to the Chair, the Task Force will comprise around 12-15 individuals representing a range of expertise and including academics, conservation professionals (both statutory and from the NGO sector) and land managers. The initial membership is in place and has recently been approved by Defra. The decision-making process should aim to reach consensus wherever possible, with the Chair taking the final decision and noting any lack of consensus where this is not possible.

Natural England will provide the secretariat for the Task Force. The Chair will report to the relevant Director in Defra, and may provide advice from the Task Force to the Board of Natural England. Meetings will initially be held quarterly, aiming for face-to-face engagement, with the potential addition of occasional technical briefings that can be held online. The first meeting has been booked and will take place in mid-February 2023. The Stakeholder Forum will be established at the first meeting of the Task Force with a suggested frequency of meetings twice a year.

Role of the England Species Reintroductions Task Force

The work of the Task Force will have a key role in balancing benefit and risk. Conservation translocations, of which there are four types, set out in Natural England's evidence to the Committee, can be an important and effective conservation tool, and can excite public support for the environment. Conservation translocations should be part of a wider nature recovery programme, including habitat improvement, tackling biodiversity loss and becoming key adaptation measures to assist ecosystems to be more resilient to climate change. In addition to addressing the Government's species abundance and avoiding extinctions targets, there

should be synergy between this species-based conservation intervention and wider nature recovery targets such as the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) and Biodiversity Net Gain.

Conservation translocations can elicit controversy where stakeholder groups have concerns around the impact of changes to the environment, species communities and socio-economic activities. These risks need to be managed, working with internationally known research, standards and expertise, with particular reference to IUCN and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). Diligent stakeholder consultation must address concerns and manage risks. Making conservation translocations the most effective tool will be a balance of incentive and regulation.

Q1 What role should species reintroductions play in the delivery of the government biodiversity and nature recovery goals? Should specific objectives/targets be set for species reintroduction?

The Government has set out provisions for a legally binding target to halt declines in species abundance by 2030. In addition there is an intention to set a longer-term target for biodiversity, proposals for which currently include a target to reduce the extinction risk of native species. Conservation translocations are a key intervention that will directly assist the delivery of these targets. As mentioned above, successful species reintroductions will also depend on integration with other conservation interventions, such as habitat enhancement, the control and removal of non-native species, and improvements in air and water quality. Successful species translocations will also contribute to meeting the Government's international obligations towards the Convention on Biological Diversity's post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework which includes a 2050 goal and target to halt human-induced extinction, reduce extinction risk, and to restore genetic diversity to maintain adaptive potential, including through in situ and ex situ conservation.

Conservation translocations will be most effective where they are well planned and integrated into wider nature recovery interventions. Monitoring and evaluation will be essential to learn lessons and continue to improve best practice. It is likely that the Task Force will prioritise evidence about native species that are threatened nationally and globally, and those that have the potential to benefit most effectively wider nature recovery. The setting of species reintroduction targets is not straightforward. Targets can drive isolated actions that may not be best integrated with other measures such as habitat enhancement. In addition we do not necessarily have all the information to understand which, or how many, species need to be reintroduced, and what the priorities may be. The work of the Task Force will be a key contribution to this evidence and knowledge base.

Q2 How can the government maximise the benefits from species reintroduction, and ensure the correct species are reintroduced in the correct places?

The England Species Reintroductions Task Force will play a strong role in helping the government to maximise the benefits from species reintroduction, and ensure that projects are delivered successfully, reducing risk and benefiting communities, stakeholders and wider nature recovery targets. The Task Force will develop and publish a framework to inform the assessment of benefits and risks of species for reintroduction. The framework will be aligned with the recognised highest standards of the IUCN Guidelines and the principles of the Reintroductions and Other Translocations Code and Guidance for England published by Natural England in 2021. The Task Force will preferentially promote conservation translocations that are integrated with other conservation interventions as part of planned wider nature recovery, such as the government's new Environmental Land Management Schemes, mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, protected area strategies and the delivery of a Nature Recovery Network. Advice from the Task Force will encompass

suitability of donor locations and reintroduction sites. The Task Force may consider whether the current balance of regulation and incentive is appropriate and offer advice into this space. The introduction of most native species is unregulated and can lead to range extensions, for example to reintroduce species in England that are already resident in another UK administration. The Task Force will seek to ensure that an equivalent standard operates across the whole of the UK working with country statutory nature conservation bodies and the JNCC. Others may put forward the view that there should be an underpinning legal framework so that the Code and IUCN Guidelines can be enforced. The Task Force may be required to offer advice on this point, to help determine whether benefits are maximised and risks minimised.

Q3 What role should the Landscape Recovery and Local Nature Recovery Schemes, under ELMS, have in supporting reintroduction?

Other than the general intention, already stated, that land management schemes and incentives can and should enable species translocations to be successful, the Task Force is unlikely to make more specific recommendations regarding the details of the proposed schemes. We will however recognise that land management schemes have a strong track record in enabling successful translocations with examples from both the plant and animal kingdoms. We will endeavour to understand and learn from existing experience.

It is of course fundamental that habitats of appropriate quality and scale exist or are encouraged through government policies, with management secured over the long-term. It may be appropriate for the Task Force to examine, for example, whether a specific Threatened Species Supplement would improve the chances of successful reintroduction projects. The Landscape Recovery Pilot Scheme, launched early in 2022, provides an example of where directed action can assist with early projects coming forward to reintroduce water vole, black grouse and marsh fritillary butterfly.

Q4 How effective is current government policy and 2021 guidance in leading and management species reintroductions? Should any changes be made to its policies and guidance?

The Task Force will have a strong role in advising government as to the effectiveness of current government policy and guidance in encouraging and regulating species reintroductions. The expertise on the panel, from a wide variety of perspectives and disciplines, should ensure that the Task Force can provide an independent view of the current policy framework and the extent to which it could be changed or improved to assist with successful conservation translocations. As independent Chair whilst the group is being formed, it would be inappropriate for me to express a view now as to the effectiveness of government policy.

It is important to recognise that any guidance or framework can only exist at a high level in order to cover the variation across all our native biodiversity from lower plants through to mammals. Whilst the Task Force will no doubt be required to advise on effectiveness of policies and measures, and will learn from existing practice, it is too early to yet assess the effectiveness of published guidance. The work of the Task Force will aim to address this gap. Compliance with guidance and best practice is unlikely to form a main thread of the work of the Task Force.

Q5 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 conflicts with these groups?

It is imperative that the Task Force is accepted and supported by the land owning and land management communities, and by the conservation land management organisations and individuals. The membership includes their representatives. In addition, the Task Force will convene and establish a wider stakeholder forum that will encompass all the interests and

communities affected by conservation translocations. The details of how this stakeholder forum will work will be the subject of early meetings of the Task Force and we will expect to evolve its effectiveness over time. IUCN has published analytical tools to facilitate engagement including the use of expert elicitation. The Task Force will learn from techniques available and always seek early engagement.

The process of engagement and consultation can be long and complex, but it must start with high quality communication. As Chair I would encourage an early and open multi-channel communication strategy and dialogue with key interests to make clear the intention for the Task Force to have conflict resolution at its heart. In practice this may involve some Task force presence actually in communities that have concerns or are initially sceptical of a local translocation. The Task Force should be open to advice from the wider stakeholder interests into how best we conduct our business. My own passion in working for an improved environment has always been to draw different perspectives together in seeking a common goal.

Q6 How could the development of long-term management plans and regulatory regimes for reintroduced species control be improved?

Other than a general interest in ensuring species translocations are successful over time, the area of the regulatory control of reintroduced species is unlikely to be the main work of the Task Force. There will be other advisory bodies and licensing regimes in place that can assist in the development of more effective management planning and regulation.

Q7 What can the government do to prevent unregulated species reintroductions?

The England Species Reintroduction Task Force should be seen as a key measure to reduce the likelihood of unregulated species reintroductions. Having a recognised, widely accepted specialist technical advisory group, with a range of membership perspectives and a strong communications strategy ought to assist communities to understand and respond to the benefits and risks of conservation translocations. Beyond the non-mandatory adherence to published guidance and best practice, others may propose stronger regulation, and the Task Force would be ready to examine evidence, and provide advice, for and against such proposals.

Q8 What lessons could the UK government and Natural England learn from reintroductions in other jurisdictions, in UK and Europe?

International knowledge on best practice is widely available and should be recognised as key sources of experience to inform project proposals in England. The Task Force can be called upon to bring together and make available existing evidence, particularly given the particular expert members of the group. The statutory nature conservation bodies in the UK are evidence-led and can also provide advice. Indeed NatureScot is already advanced in its established best practice for conservation translocations, and the England Code, and the draft Terms of Reference for the Task Force, have been developed in alignment with this learning.

It may be that the Task Force can learn about particular experience by engaging with, or even visiting, conservation translocation projects in other parts of Europe.

Summary

Species reintroductions can be a powerful tool in ensuring wider nature recovery both through enabling enhancements in native biodiversity and engendering public support for

environmental improvement. The England Species Reintroduction Task Force will provide an expert technical advisory offer to assist with planning conservation translocations that are integrated with wider nature recovery measures and strategies. It will publish a framework that builds on existing learning and guidance and seek to maintain standards and adhere to best practice. Engagement with organisations, communities and individuals affected by proposals for reintroductions will be led through a stakeholder forum. The Task Force will examine and publish the evidence related to proposed policy initiatives and advise government accordingly.