

Written evidence from Mr. John Jones (GRO0114)

Executive Summary

This submission makes a case for banning driven grouse shooting on the grounds of:

- a. the persistent criminal persecution of raptors on grouse shooting estates which is comparable to other international biodiversity problems such as elephant poaching,
- b. the over-intensive management of grouse moors damages their ecology in the interests of the hobby of a few and to the disadvantage of the majority of people,
- c. the shooting of wild birds for fun is unethical on animal welfare and cruelty grounds.

1. Introduction

I make this submission in my personal capacity of having had a strong interest in wildlife, particularly ornithology, for over thirty years and having witnessed the damaging impact that various exploitative activities, including shooting, have had on wildlife populations in Britain. I consider that there are powerful ethical implications to the way we damage wildlife which are not given sufficient weight in governmental and corporate decisions where monetary values tend to dominate environmental or ethical considerations.

2. There is a powerful case for banning driven grouse shooting

Despite legal protection for birds of prey in Britain since 1954 they have been perpetual victims of criminal persecution by grouse moor managers for decades without either the effective application of the law to prevent the persecution or the reform of gamekeeping practices that might allow birds of prey to co-exist with shooting interests. Non-governmental organisations like the RSPB have worked with the shooting industry to try to bring an end to the persecution but without any change and it is clear from its behaviour that the shooting industry will continue its criminal activities in the future. Therefore the only way to protect birds of prey, particularly Hen Harriers, on grouse moors would be to stop the activity which is the cause of their decline towards extinction. That would entail legislation to ban driven grouse shooting.

3. The persecution of raptors and declining international biodiversity

The problem of the depletion of planetary biodiversity has been with us for many decades during which time national governments and supra-national bodies like the United Nations have struggled with minimal success to reduce the damaging impacts of human activities on the planet's wildlife. The problem of elephant poaching in Africa that is driving the elephant towards extinction through the illegal killing of large numbers of them for their ivory is only one example of this worldwide problem but in its essential features it bears a close similarity to that of the criminal persecution of birds of prey by the shooting industry in Britain. Like elephants Britain's birds of prey are legally protected but the financial incentive to eradicate them is strong enough to make their criminal persecution a routine part of the work of gamekeepers on shooting estates. This has brought the Hen Harrier to the edge of extinction in England and to a much lower than optimal population in Scotland. Other raptor species such as Buzzards, Red Kites and Golden Eagles are also frequently killed by gamekeepers.

4. The failure of the legal protections for birds of prey

Birds of prey have had legal protection in Britain since the Protection of Birds Act was passed in 1954 but the effectiveness of the application of this legislation has been weak. The paucity of birds of prey in the upland areas where grouse shooting predominates is primary evidence of the failure of the legislation. While there is habitat available for around 330 pairs of breeding Hen Harriers in England only a handful attempt to breed each year and rarely succeed. In Scotland there is habitat for 1790 pairs whereas only 505 nested there in 2010 (British Birds Sept 2016 page 489). The lack of nesting pairs is not considered to be due to any reluctance by Hen Harriers to settle and nest. For instance in a study at the Langholm Estate in southern Scotland between 1992 and 1996 during which time normal gamekeeping activities were suspended, the number of nesting Hen Harriers rose from 2 pairs to 14 pairs which strongly suggests that when left alone Hen Harriers will prosper and increase (Inglorious – Mark Avery page 89).

There are from time to time prosecutions against gamekeepers for killing birds of prey but these are few and far between. The remoteness of the places where raptor persecution takes place makes these crimes difficult to police and sometimes the leniency offered to miscreants does little to discourage a continuation of the practices. For instance when illegal pole traps were discovered in the Yorkshire Dales National Park in May 2016 and the person who set them up subsequently gave himself up to the police he was let off with a caution. The Assistant Chief Constable of North Yorkshire Police has subsequently admitted that this was wrong (British Birds Sept 2016 page 488).

One possible way of making the law more effective might be to make the owners of shooting estates responsible for and legally liable for the actions of their employees. Such a law of vicarious liability exists in Scotland but, so far, the government has not agreed to it in England.

In a government report, A future for the Hen Harrier in England 2008, it was acknowledged that 'very few nesting attempts are successful on grouse moors' and that 'there is compelling evidence that persecution continues, both during and following the breeding season' and that 'it continues to limit Hen Harrier recovery in England'. Despite this acknowledgement the government has not followed up with any action to improve enforcement of the law against persecution and has seemed more in favour of the shooting industry than in supporting the law. For instance the defra reply to the petition to ban driven grouse shooting at the 10,000 signature point might well have been written by the grouse shooting marketing department so biased was it in their favour. There is now a clear perception in the minds of those of us who value wildlife that government has a vested interest in supporting the grouse shooting industry and therefore cannot be relied upon to ensure that the law against raptor persecution is upheld.

Organisations like the RSPB have tried in the past to work with the shooting industry to find ways in which Hen Harriers might be tolerated on grouse moors but the industry has not shown any intention of reforming its practices. Those of us who wish to see greater progress with wildlife conservation are largely resigned to the industry carrying on its persecution as before unless there is some major intervention to prevent them.

5. The domination of the uplands by grouse shooting

Driven grouse shooting estates cover an area of around 17,000 square kilometres which is about a quarter of the full extent of the British uplands. Within this area grouse moor owners exert almost total control over the natural environment in their pursuit of raising the maximum number of Red Grouse that can be shot by their paying customers. This means that the moors are highly intensively managed so as to eradicate any other species that might compromise the size of the Red Grouse population. As well as birds of prey which naturally prey on young Red Grouse for food,

gamekeepers eradicate crows, Weasels, Stoats and Foxes. In those areas where Mountain Hares exist they are ruthlessly killed in the belief that they are a vector for disease in Red Grouse. In addition the moors are severely modified by frequent burning so as to encourage maximum production of young heather which is the principal food of Red Grouse. Overall grouse moors are managed so as to simplify their ecology around two major components - Red Grouse (at much greater numbers than would naturally occur) and their food plant, heather. This approach to the management of the uplands is highly damaging to wildlife and the environment and is very much at odds with the statement in defra's 10,000 signature response that driven grouse shooting 'can offer important benefits for wildlife and habitat conservation'.

The fact that a large area of our uplands is under such damaging management in the sporting interests of the small segment of the population who participate in shooting is to the detriment of the rest of us. It is also highly contradictory that some of these grouse moors are within the boundaries of National Parks and SSSI's that are otherwise protected for their wildlife value. The impoverishment of the wildlife by deliberate extermination and frequent burning must compromise the biodiversity plans of the various national park authorities that have to host grouse shooting within their boundaries. Apart from the interests of nature itself which surely we have an ethical responsibility to protect and respect, there should also be a consideration of the interests of that part of the population who are strongly interested in nature and wish to see and experience a thriving natural environment in our uplands. The membership of the RSPB which amounts to over a million people but constitutes only a proportion of all those that value nature is indicative of the superiority in numbers over the size of the shooting community. The total number of shooters is probably within the range of 10,000 to 15,000 based on the number of 'gun days' available per year (Inglorious – Mark Avery page 60).

6. The ethics of shooting wildlife for fun

Every year around 450,000 Red Grouse are shot for fun on grouse shooting estates in the process of which the owners are paid high fees, sometimes amounting to several thousands of pounds per person per shooting day. The same ethical arguments about cruelty and animal welfare that ultimately led to the banning of fox hunting in 2005 surely apply to the shooting of wild birds and there are the same strong ethical arguments for banning grouse shooting on this basis alone. In addition consideration has to be given to the enormous collateral killing of other species such as birds of prey that get in the way of gamekeepers' objectives. All of this destruction of wildlife is committed in the interests of a few who are in pursuit of fun rather than the side effects of some vital economic enterprise.

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