



## Species Survival Working Group

### Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee inquiry on species reintroduction

#### Introduction to the IUCN SSWG

The IUCN NCUK Species Survival Working Group (SSWG) is one of the expert working groups of the IUCN UK National Committee (NCUK) which support the work of the seven IUCN Commissions. The SSWG specifically supports the work of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC), its programmes and initiatives, tools and guidance. The SSWG aims to connect research and practice within the SSC's thematic work areas and apply them in a UK context, including the Commission's Species Strategic Plan 2021-2025. The SSWG builds relationships between the network of practitioners delivering in these areas in the UK and its Overseas Territories.

#### **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, when properly executed, can play an important role in the delivery of the government's biodiversity and nature recovery goals. Following the ratification of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in Canada in December, of which the UK is a signatory, appropriate reintroductions will be needed to meet many of these targets including:

- target 2 - that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of areas of degraded terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine ecosystems are under effective restoration
- target 3 - that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed
- target 4 - to halt human induced extinction of known threatened species and for the recovery and conservation of species

A recent report by the Wildlife and Countryside Link on the UK's progress towards the 30 by 30 target estimated that only 3.22% of land and 8% of seas are currently effectively managed and conserved. Therefore, there is much work to be done within the next seven years to meet target 3, and species reintroductions will be vital if we are to even come close.

Along with the UK's international commitments, meeting our national aims to restore 500,000 ha of wildlife rich habitat and to meet the targets set out in the Environment Act 2021 will require actions to increase biodiversity and restore ecosystem complexity. These actions will necessarily require appropriate and effective species reintroductions along with other forms of conservation translocations such as reinforcement.

Specific objectives and targets should be set for species reintroductions. They will be needed to prioritise species for reintroduction projects and promote accountability. They can also help with deterring inappropriate reintroductions. Any reintroduction projects must also include ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Ongoing monitoring should encompass monitoring of the reintroduced

population and of flora and fauna that may be impacted by the reintroduction. Population management planning should be incorporated where appropriate.

Species reintroductions can play a positive role in achieving increased biodiversity targets and reducing extinction risk. However, data should not skew or mask declines elsewhere e.g. pine marten releases in England will significantly increase the English population, but as the population is currently negligible, even a small release will be a huge percentage increase in population size which distort the overall trend.

It should be noted that species reintroductions are just one part of a suite of potential conservation translocations. The potential impacts, planning processes, methods of movement and release and subsequent monitoring apply across all of these types of translocations. We, therefore, recommend that EFRA broadens its focus to consider translocations as a whole to avoid the risk of other types of releases falling through the cracks.

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

It is essential that any species reintroductions are based on sound scientific evidence and have a reasonable chance of success. The government must ensure that reintroductions follow the [IUCN Guidelines to Reintroduction and Conservation Translocations](#). This guidance informed Defra's own guidelines, [Reintroductions and other conservation translocations: code and guidance for England \(2021\)](#) which, along with NatureScot's [Best Practice Guidelines for Conservation Translocations in Scotland](#), also provides useful information on how to design reintroduction strategies and projects and should be used to inform future reintroductions to maximise the potential benefits. Animal welfare before, during and after release must also be paramount in any reintroduction project.

To ensure that species are reintroduced in the correct places, government should develop a list of priority species for reintroduction and develop a national strategy which considers impacts at local and national population levels and includes the potential negative effects of reintroductions on other species and habitats and founder populations, along with the genetic and demographic viability of any proposed reintroductions. The strategy should also consider and mitigate any potential impacts of climate change on the future distribution of species. A licencing system could also be utilised to ensure only the correct species are released in the correct locations.

There are a considerable number of experts in species reintroduction and other conservation translocations such as reinforcements working in the UK in zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens, conservation NGOs and seed banks who have experience of successful (and as importantly unsuccessful) reintroduction projects. Developing a reintroduction strategy in collaboration with these experts will increase government's ability to maximise the benefits of species reintroduction.

Conservation breeding facilities for both animals and plants to be reintroduced will be needed where there are no suitable wild source populations. Government support for these facilities, hosted in many cases by zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens and seed banks, would improve the potential for success of appropriate reintroduction projects.

The benefits of a reintroduction programme can only be fully realised with buy-in from major stakeholders, particularly landowners, farmers and the general public. Therefore, it is essential that they are properly engaged as early as possible and involved in decision making processes.

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

Both the Landscape Recovery and Local Nature Recovery Schemes should have a role in supporting species reintroductions. Tailoring activities within these schemes to support reintroductions could be a part of the assessment criteria. They also provide an opportunity for a coordinated, strategic approach and could support projects that will provide landscape connectivity as well as identifying sites for reintroductions in a timely and strategic manner.

It is important to note that, while it may be possible to get some quick wins with reintroductions of some species, for others there will need to be a long-term (possibly decades) commitment. Policies and schemes such as ELMS need to acknowledge and reflect that, particularly in terms of long-term monitoring post-release.

**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?**

There is currently limited government policy that either supports positive reintroductions or prevents negative ones. The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 do currently provide some controls on reintroductions. However, these could be affected by the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill 2022. Without amendment to other legislation the protections provided by these UK statutory instruments will be lost with potentially detrimental consequences.

Licensing requirements throughout the UK should be extended to match those in Scotland whereby a licence is required for all species reintroductions, translocations and return of individuals to the wild to ensure that only properly assessed projects are taking place and to enable effective post-release monitoring, as well as to prevent poorly planned and potentially harmful releases that do not take genetic suitability into account. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 could be amended to facilitate this.

There are some current policies that are causing barriers to reintroduction projects which would need to be amended in order to fully maximise the potential for species reintroduction to play a part in meeting the governments ambitions around reversing biodiversity loss and restoring nature. For example, the difficulties in performing animal and plant transfers between the EU and UK following exit from the EU due to misaligned animal and plant health laws could impact on the use of donor populations from other countries.

**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?**

The benefits of a reintroduction programme can only be fully realised with buy-in from major stakeholders, particularly landowners, farmers and the general public. Therefore, it is essential that they are properly engaged as early as possible. Stakeholder consultation should be facilitated by trained and experienced facilitators to ensure constructive discussions are leading to better outcomes. Properly resourced and appropriate public awareness campaigns should also be undertaken to ensure the reasons for, and benefits of, reintroductions are well communicated and easily understood. Where there is the potential for conflict between released species and particular stakeholder groups, the planning phase should incorporate identification of mechanisms for reporting of issues and subsequent mitigation or conflict resolution during the post-release phase.

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

Government should support a standardised and best practice approach to species introduction based on the IUCN guidelines and associated Defra and NatureScot codes. The process should include case studies illustrating best practice which can be shared with potential project partners, along with lessons learned from unsuccessful or partially successful projects. Long-term monitoring should be a requirement of all reintroductions, to assess the success of the project in-situ on the target species, their wider impact on other species within the local environment and any potential adverse effects at the donor population site. Evidence should be gathered to determine the impact of smaller-scale translocations of both threatened and more common and widespread animals and plants. It is likely movement of individuals undertaken during development work or during wildlife rehabilitation is not always effective and can threaten local populations and raise welfare concerns for individuals.

It may also be beneficial to have a centrally hosted database as a repository for information about all species reintroductions/translocations, with associated open access project reports. The IUCN Species Survival Commission's Centre for Species Survival (UK) is currently compiling a database that could be suitable for this purpose.

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

A full licensing or permit system for all reintroduction projects and translocation work (based on the current licences issued by Natural England and Defra) could help set standards that peers will feel obliged to follow. It could also be useful to dissuade or prevent unregulated species reintroductions or movement of animals and plants. Requiring applications for a permit or licence to include an evidence-based assessment of the need for and viability of that particular reintroduction. Along with plans for long term monitoring and evaluation could also deter unregulated or ill thought-out reintroductions.

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

There are a huge number of global case studies on reintroductions of many taxa in the [IUCN's Global Translocations/Reintroductions Perspectives series of books](#) from which the government could learn. Similarly, the [Wildlife Comeback Report](#) by ZSL, Birdlife International and European Bird Census for Rewilding Europe includes a wealth of information on the reintroduction of 50 vertebrate species across Europe. This report cites increased legal protection, habitat corridors, ensuring prey species availability and gaining public support as contributing to the success of these reintroduction projects.

There is also still much from the Making Space for Nature review and its recommendations to help achieve a healthy natural environment that will allow plants and animals to thrive that could be implemented to support successful species reintroductions.

It should also not be forgotten that there is a huge amount of experience within UK conservation organisations including NGOs, botanic gardens, seed banks, zoos and aquariums, as well within academic institutions where reintroduction biology is a research focus, that can and should be drawn upon to develop strategies and projects with the best chance of success. Furthermore, there is much that could be learnt from the experiences of NatureScot, who are further along in this area than other parts of the UK.

Species reintroductions, while often necessary, should in most cases be seen as the last resort for restoring nature. Funding for these projects should not overshadow or delay work to prevent the decline of species in the first place.