Scottish Wildlife Trust

Policy

Credit: Elliot McCandless/Beaver Trust

Wildlife Management

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Wildlife management policy

Background

Humans manage wild animal populations in Scotland in a variety of different ways for a variety of different reasons. The Scottish Wildlife Trust broadly takes the view that humans should not interfere with the integrity, or wildness, of healthy populations of native wild animals. We do recognise, however, that as a result of human actions, many of Scotland's ecosystems are severely degraded, and the loss of keystone species or the introduction of invasive non-native species may mean that some wild animal populations need to be artificially controlled, either to prevent further degradation, or to promote the restoration of a more healthy, balanced ecological state, where a greater diversity of life can thrive. Conversely, restoring ecosystem health may also involve reintroducing lost species or assisting in the range expansion of species through conservation translocations. As part of the Trust's Strategy 2030, we are actively advocating for wildlife management interventions which benefit biodiversity and deliver wider ecosystem services at a national level, and carry out such interventions on our own reserves when needed and where resources allow.

Wherever wildlife management interventions are deemed necessary, the Trust advocates for practices which have the highest regard for animal welfare. This means minimising any pain or distress inflicted on individuals and minimising the number of animals that may be subject to such harms[i].

The Trust is opposed to the illegal management of wild animals, or wildlife crime, and as such, these activities are not included within the scope of this policy.

Listed below are the main ways in which humans manage wildlife in Scotland and a summary of the Trust's policy on each.

Wild gamekeeping, shooting wild animals for sport and angling

We are not against the sustainable harvesting of wild animals in a social setting, particularly if the quarry is intended as a food source, and we recognise that the sport shooting and angling industries have a place in rural economies. We further recognise that sustainable local harvesting of deer can help reduce numbers to an ecologically sustainable level. We are, however, not in favour of the intensive management of landscapes to maximise game species populations at the expense of other native species and to the detriment of healthy ecosystem function[ii]. Examples of practices of particular concern to us include the use of lead ammunition and the inappropriate use of medicated grit to control parasites in wild game birds. Please see our Living Landscapes in the Scottish Uplands Policy[iii] for more detail on these topics.

Culling wildlife hosts to control disease and parasites

Mountain hares

We do not support the culling of mountain hares on grouse moors to prevent the transmission of louping-ill virus (LIV) to red grouse chicks. No compelling evidence exists to suggest that culling mountain hares increases red grouse densities, and as such there is no scientific basis for this management technique[iv]. IUCN classify mountain hares as 'Near Threatened' in the UK and their populations in the Scottish uplands, particularly on moorland managed for red grouse, have seen severe declines since the 1950s, the steepest declines having happened since management to control LIV became more commonplace in the late 1990s[v]. The Trust believes that population management decisions to control protected species, including mountain hares, should be based on rigorous

scientific evidence and should accord with the conservation status of the species. See our position statement on mountain hare management for more information[vi].

Badgers (bovine TB)

The culling of badgers has been used as a measure to prevent the spread of bovine TB (bTB) to cattle in England since 2013. Scotland has been bTB free since 2009, so no badger culling is carried out here. The evidence for the efficacy of badger culling as a preventative measure against bTB in cattle has been contested through an independent review by veterinary experts[vii]. Vaccination of badgers and cattle against bTB could be an alternative to culling, however there is still uncertainty around the potential efficacy of this strategy. We are in support of strict biosecurity measures to prevent bTB becoming prevalent in Scotland again. If there is ever another outbreak of the disease here, the Trust would advocate for any management decision to be based on rigorous scientific evidence.

Controlling populations of native wild animals for ecosystem benefit

In the absence of large apex predators (e.g., bears, wolves, lynx) populations of some generalist herbivore and predator species can grow unchecked. Where this is the case, it may be necessary to lethally control herbivores/predators in the interest of biodiversity and ecosystem health.

Deer

We are strongly in favour of the active management of deer, including through lethal control, in places where their numbers have reached unnaturally high levels, resulting in intense grazing pressure on native vegetation. In the absence of large predators, human intervention is required to control deer numbers for the benefit of wider ecosystem health. Reducing numbers can also improve the welfare and condition of the remaining population, as when deer densities are too high, a proportion of the population may suffer from starvation due to insufficient food availability[viii]. We are supportive of an ecosystems approach to deer management and are in favour of the use of statutory powers by NatureScot to enforce management where necessary for the purposes of nature restoration. Management should be carried out with the highest regard to animal welfare and should allow sustainable populations of deer to persist in the landscape. On our reserves the Trust strives to keep deer at ecologically sustainable levels where resources allow and where it is achievable in a wider landscape scale context.

Common generalist predators

We accept that, in the absence of large predators, some common generalist predator species (e.g. foxes, crows) may need to be controlled to protect less common species which are vulnerable to predation (e.g. ground nesting birds)[ix]. We do not believe, however, in the wholesale culling of native predators from managed landscapes. Predator management should be done in such a way that mimics the role of absent apex predators, restoring the natural predator-prey equilibrium and reducing, not eliminating, the pressure on vulnerable prey species. We believe that more attention should be paid to how certain habitat management decisions can affect generalist predator numbers, i.e. edge effect of fragmented woodland can increase predation pressure on grouse moors.

Badgers (predation)

Badgers are often cited as contributing to the decline of hedgehogs and ground nesting birds through predation. Although badgers will opportunistically predate hedgehogs and birds' eggs when their usual food sources (e.g. earthworms and other invertebrates) are scarce, both hedgehogs and ground nesting birds are primarily threatened by loss of habitat and decline in invertebrate prey due to the intensification of agriculture, urban development and climate change. High badger densities may

locally affect hedgehog populations, but generally the two species can coexist as long as their shared food sources are abundant[x]. We therefore do not support the idea that badgers should be culled to protect either of these taxa.

Bird flu

Scottish Wildlife Trust do not advocate the large-scale culling of wild birds to control the spread of bird flu. We would instead advocate for strict biosecurity measures during bird flu outbreaks wherever the spread of the disease is a possibility. We would advise close adherence to NatureScot's guidance for site managers[xi]; Scottish Government's guidance on how to spot and report the disease[xii] and biosecurity guidance for poultry keepers[xiii]; and the Game Farmers' Association's standing advice on bird flu and gamebirds[xiv], as appropriate.

Introducing non-native species for sport shooting

We are opposed to the introduction of pheasants and red legged partridges for sport. There is no other circumstance where the intentional introduction of a non-native species into the wild would be deemed acceptable. The release of large numbers of game birds into the countryside has ecological consequences. These birds can cause nutrient enrichment of soil, water and air; damage woodland ground flora communities through pecking and trampling; compete with native animals for food and displace them from foraging sites; spread disease to native animals; and adversely affect native invertebrate and small vertebrate (including amphibians and reptiles) populations through predation[xv]. There are also animal welfare issues surrounding the battery breeding of these birds[xvi]. Additionally, we find the magnitude of waste in this industry as a result of roadkill unacceptable.

Invasive species control

We are strongly in favour of invasive non-native species[1] (INNS) control. INNS are one of the top five drivers of global biodiversity loss[xvii]. Invasive non-native animals, such as the grey squirrel and the American mink, can displace native species through mechanisms such as predation, competition, and disease transmission. INNS control should be carried out in the most humane way possible by trained personnel.

Managing endangered native species to resolve conflict with human interests or other species

Beavers

Beavers are ecosystem engineers and as such can have a significant impact on their physical environment[xviii]. Where their behaviour impacts upon human economic interests (e.g. agriculture), has implications for human health and safety (e.g. infrastructure) or threatens the conservation status of another native species (e.g. rare lichens or bryophytes), it may be necessary to intervene to minimise any potential negative effects. The Trust advocates for close adherence to the hierarchy of mitigation and management laid out in Scotland's Beaver Strategy[xix] (accommodation > mitigation > translocation > lethal control) and we believe that the first three options in the hierarchy should be fully explored before lethal control is considered.

[1] Accepted definition of non-native species: "those that have been introduced to a country, whether deliberately or accidentally, by humans." Invasive non-native species - Wildlife management - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

Pest control

We accept the need to control some species for the purposes of disease prevention, welfare, hygiene and prevention of damage to property. We would, however, advocate for restraint in the use of rodenticides to control rat populations. Rodenticides can harm other wildlife – either through direct ingestion, or secondary ingestion by predators. Steps should first be taken to prevent rat infestations (e.g. removing access to food source, ensuring property is sealed to prevent entry by rats). Trapping should then be considered before resorting to poisoning. Where rodenticide use is deemed necessary it should be done in such a way that avoids poisoning other wildlife[xx].

Intervening to assist individual wild animals

Where a sick, injured or orphaned wild animal is found in a human setting we would advocate for the course of action which minimises any potential distress or suffering to the animal. If the animal is deemed to require assistance to ease its suffering, the SSPCA should be called. Generally, however, we do not believe in assisting individual wild animals to improve their chances of survival or breeding success outside of species-wide or landscape-wide strategic conservation actions. Events which negatively affect individual members of a species, such as predation and failed breeding attempts, are a natural and necessary part of the evolutionary process – artificially assisting less successful individuals could lead to a genetically less resilient population. Furthermore, the natural demise of one animal creates feeding opportunities for other animals, plants and fungi, so is an essential ecosystem process.

Reintroducing nationally extinct species

The Trust is in favour of reintroducing species that have been made extinct in Scotland through human actions. We believe that there is much to be gained from restoring lost keystone species to their rightful place in the Scottish landscape and that meeting the 2045 target to restore nature will be impossible without further reintroductions. The removal by humans of apex predators and other keystone species, like the beaver, from our ecosystems has led to a breakdown in the processes that we rely on to keep our natural environment in a healthy state. We do recognise, however, that our landscape has changed dramatically since many of these lost species existed here, so it may not be feasible for all of them to be restored. We advocate for rigorous feasibility studies, planning and consultation prior to any species reintroduction and close adherence to the IUCN's Guidelines for Reintroductions and Conservation Translocations and the Scottish Code for Conservation Translocations.

Conservation translocations

The Trust is in favour of moving members of a native species, either from locations where they are abundant, or where a conflict exists, to new locations where their presence can bring a significant conservation benefit. A species may be introduced to a location in which it is not known to have previously existed; a location in which it was once present but has become locally extinct; or a location where it is currently present, but where the population is struggling and could benefit from reinforcement. We believe that translocations should only happen within a species' native range to locations that have been assessed as having the ecological potential to support a healthy population of a species (taking potential future climate change scenarios into account), and where conflict with other (human / conservation) interests is likely to be minimal. As with species reintroductions, we

advocate for close adherence to the IUCN's Guidelines for Reintroductions and Conservation Translocations and the Scottish Code for Conservation Translocations.

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