

Wolves should be reintroduced into the wild in Britain

The context: reintroducing lost natives

Over the 9000 odd years that human beings have lived on mainland Britain, many species have been introduced (alien invaders)^[1] and many others driven to extinction (lost natives)^[2]. In particular the make-up of the mammal population has been radically altered. Many people would like to see alien invaders controlled or exterminated and to see lost natives reintroduced^[3]. This idea has a long history in the UK, from the reintroduction of Capercaillie into Scotland in 1837^[4] to the reestablishment of red kites in the North East of England in the last few years^[5]. However, a more controversial prospect has come to the fore in recent years – the idea of reintroducing large mammals such as lynx, wolves, bears, beaver, wild boar and elk^[6]. One major consideration in such reintroductions is the large areas of habitat that large mammals tend to need to survive. One argument for reintroductions is that ecosystems can only function naturally and properly if such animals are present. However, many argue that reintroductions would jeopardise some people's livelihoods and may even put human lives at risk. Others argue that large scale ecological reconstruction is simply not practical. One moral argument is that British conservationists have been very vocal in campaigning to save large mammals such as tigers and pandas yet have done little or nothing to restore Britain's own large mammals. Some even believe there is a moral imperative to reintroduce lost natives to atone for past mistakes. There are even arguments that such mammals could create eco-tourism possibilities.

Over the last 30 years there have been an increasing number of reintroduction programmes in Europe. The Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife ^[7] of 1979 encourages reintroduction of native species. The Species and Habitats Directive ^{[8],[9]} of 1992 introduced an obligation for European countries to investigate the desirability of reintroducing native species where it may contribute to species conservation. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) identifies a number of reasons for reintroductions – to increase likelihood of long term survival of species, to re-establish keynote species, to promote biodiversity and to provide economic benefits.

[1] <http://jamesmartin.suite101.com/britains-alien-invaders-a282932>

[2] <http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/NE233>

[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jun/07/great-bustard-countryside-bumblebee-salisbury>

[4] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/nature/scotlandthewild/content/features/extinct/extinct2.shtml>

[5] <http://www.northernkites.org.uk/>

[6] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/wildlife/7330504/Bears-lynx-wolves-and-elk-considered-for-reintroduction-into-British-countryside.html>

[7] http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/environment/nature_and_biodiversity/128050_en.htm

[8] <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-1374>

[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitats_Directive

Wolves

Wolves have been extinct in Britain for over 300 years. Proposals for reintroduction of the wolf have included suggestions for the release of a number of wolves to the Glen Affric region of

Scotland or the island of Rum, which some calculate could support the minimum sustainable population of about 20 wolves (although some argue that it could support as few as four). If the Rum introduction was successful, some wolves would then be reintroduced to the Scottish mainland.

Arguments for reintroduction of wolves

The arguments for the reintroduction of wolves in the UK fall into four broad areas: ethical, ecological, economic and emotional^[10]. From an ethical standpoint, the main argument is that we ought to reintroduce the wolf because it was humans who hunted them to local extinction. The central ecological argument is that wolves acting as the natural predators of red deer would provide a more efficient and natural means of controlling the deer population, reducing or eradicating the need for culling as it is currently practiced^[11]. The economic argument is that wolves could create a wildlife tourism industry, the revenue gained from which could offset any losses incurred by loss of livestock. The popularity of wolf watching in places such as Yellowstone National Park^[12] is cited as strong evidence for this. This argument links into the romantic and aesthetic one which sees wolves as the epitome of the wild.

[10] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jan/28/beaver-reintroduction>

[11] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6310211.stm>

[12] <http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2007/11/watching-wolves-yellowstone-national-park>

Arguments against reintroduction of wolves

There has been substantial opposition to reintroducing wolves from the general public, politicians, land managers and farmers. The most common concern voiced by the public and politicians is the potential threat to human safety, although those in favour of reintroduction point out that it is extremely rare that healthy wolves attack humans^[13]. The concerns of livestock farmers are obvious^[14] – they argue that, compared to wild deer, animals that are kept enclosed and docile are easy prey for wolves, and they would expect wolves to target farm animals, which would also reduce the effectiveness of the wolf population at keeping down deer numbers. Politicians are more concerned about potential compensation claims against the state from livestock farmers, noting that about 5% of the summer sheep population in Norway is lost each year to large predators such as wolves and bears^[15]. Some opposers of reintroduction point out that the idea of wolves controlling the deer population is unrealistic as very large numbers of wolves would be required to have any significant effect on deer numbers and there is insufficient space or will in the UK to sustain a large enough population. Another problem is that if the wolf population is small, the wolves might end up interbreeding with dogs, as has been found in Sweden and Italy^[16].

[13] http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/tm_objectid=17699465&method=full&siteid=50082&headline=-bring-back-our-bears-and-wolves--campaign-sets-its-sights--on-wales--name_page.html

[14] <http://www.allaboutyou.com/country/wolves-in-britain-should-we-welcome-them-back-46792>

[15] <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=icwdmsheepgoat>

[16] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/725601.stm>

Other Links

Full text of the Species and Habitats Directive (1992): <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CONSLEG:1992L0043:20070101:EN:PDF>

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) <http://iucn.org/>

Re-Introduction of the Grey Wolf: <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/wrightfamilypage/greywolf.html>

A look at the reintroduction of predators into the wild: <http://wildwatcher.org/mammals/a-look-at-the-reintroduction-of-predators-into-the-wild/>

Reintroducing the wolf to Scotland:

http://www.wolvesandhumans.org/wolves/wolf_reintroduction_to_scotland.htm

The Case for Wolf Reintroduction by Gregory McNamee:

<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/09/the-case-for-wolf-reintroduction/>

“Wolf Reintroduction Proposed In Scottish Highland Test Case” *ScienceDaily* (July 20, 2009):

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/07/090720134527.htm>

“Wolf reintroduction to Scotland: public attitudes and consequences for red deer management” by Erlend B. Nilsen, E. J. Milner-Gulland, Lee Schofield, Atle Myrseth, Nils Chr. Stenseth and Tim Coulson: http://www.carnivoreconservation.org/files/issues/wolf_scotland_reintroduction.pdf

GB non-native species secretariat: <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/nonnativespecies/>

Northumberland National Park: Reintroducing Extinct Species:

<http://www.northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk/reintroducingextinctspecies>

“The extinct species back from the dead and causing mayhem” by Jasper Copping, *The Telegraph*:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/8642359/The-extinct-species-back-from-the-dead-and-causing-mayhem.html>

Countryfile episode with a feature about reintroduction of sea eagle – although not wolves, programme considers some interesting arguments:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b016yhd9/Countryfile_30_10_2011/

Wildwood Trust Study into reintroduction of large mammals:

<http://www.wildwoodtrust.org/files/reintroduction-large-carnivores.pdf>

“Beavers: Return of the dammed” by Tim Adams, *The Observer*, Dec 2009:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/dec/06/beavers-scotland-controversy-tim-adams?intcmp=239>

Invasive Plants Can Create Positive Ecological Change, *ScienceDaily*, Feb 2011:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/02/110211095555.htm>