



Paper 3 Applying the evidence to the land managed by Natural Resources Wales

Introduction

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) is undertaking a review of its policy on the use of firearms and shooting activity on the land that we own and/or manage.

To inform the review a public call for evidence received 36 submissions with over 220 pieces of qualifying evidence. In conjunction with evidence held by NRW, all of the evidence (over 250 references) provided has been considered by the review project staff and a panel of experts drawn from across the organisation.

Most of the evidence gathered covered shooting activities in a wide range of situations and is not specific to land in public ownership. The project steering group and Expert Panel agreed that the evidence needed to be considered in the context of the land managed by us, how our land is managed and in relation to the scale of relevant activity on the land that we manage.

This paper translates the broader evidence to the land managed by NRW to give context to the assessment of the use of firearms and shooting activity as it may relate to furthering the legal purpose of NRW, the sustainable management of natural resources (SMNR) and contribution towards the Well-Being of Future Generations Act (2015) goals (The well-being goals). It sets out the conclusions drawn from the Expert Panel's consideration of the body of evidence and their recommendations to the Review.

The land managed by NRW comprises freehold and leasehold area including:

- Welsh Government Woodland Estate (126,000 hectares)
- National Nature Reserves (58 reserves)
- Flood risk management assets
- Other land management arrangements often in partnership with others

Conclusions and recommendations

The Expert Panel considered three activity areas:

1. Our use of firearms for managing wild species which impact on our objectives
2. Other people's use of firearms for managing wild species that impact on our neighbour's land management objectives
3. Our leasing of land for game shooting and other pursuits using firearms

1. Our use of firearms for managing wild species which impact on our objectives

Context and conclusions

The impacts of some wild species require management to achieve the objectives of NRW and to attain the SMNR. To achieve healthy and resilient woodland ecosystems and for the conservation management of protected and priority species management methods used are various and include lethal control. NRW sets objectives for the land it manages across various habitat types present on the NRW estate. Dubois et al (2017)¹ recommend assessing the need for lethal control before implementation and review of the ongoing need.

Of the five attributes comprising the building blocks of resilience, described in SoNaRR (2016)² as diversity, extent, condition, connectivity and adaptability, it is condition that is most affected if the impacts of wild species are not managed. SoNaRR (2016) states that ‘... if interventions are targeted to these attributes then resilience is likely to be developed or enhanced, and the chances of crossing undesirable thresholds should be reduced.’

Certain species can impact on our land management objectives including the conservation of species and habitats of local, regional, national and international importance (such as Sites of Special Scientific interest, Special Areas of Conservation, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Environment [Wales] Act schedule 7 species) and the management of invasive non-native species. We strive to limit the damage by species that limit the ability of the land we manage to meet Welsh Government policy objectives and its capacity for the people of Wales to derive a range of benefits. This includes the economic potential of quality timber products from our management of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE).

We manage wild deer (both native and non-native species) to protect the condition of the woodland ecosystems and the economic value of the public asset. Strategic objectives are set out in the Welsh Government’s 2009 *Woodlands for Wales Strategy*³. The strategy seeks to increase woodland cover in Wales with more native broadleaf woodland, an increased diversity of woodlands to improve their resilience (tackling impacts of climatic change, tree pests and diseases) and greater regeneration of woodlands both through planting and natural regeneration. Management of wild deer populations is carried out in accordance with Welsh Governments 2011 *Wild deer management in Wales strategy*⁴ and by our highly trained staff applying best practice standards to ensure animal welfare.

We manage several sites designated for their special nature conservation value and it is necessary to tackle factors that negatively impact the habitats and species for which those sites are designated. This can include control measures for native and non-native species. Where no other method can effectively be employed to minimise these impacts, firearms are used, for example mink control on sites where water vole are present.

¹ Dubois et al (2017), International consensus principles for ethical wildlife control. Conservation Biology. doi:10.1111/cobi.12896

² NRW (2016) SoNaRR <https://naturalresources.wales/media/679405/chapter-4-resilience-final-for-publication.pdf> chapter 4 page 6

³ Welsh Government (2009) Woodlands for Wales Strategy <http://gov.wales/docs/drah/publications/090324-woodlands-for-wales-strategy-en.pdf> chapter 1 page 9

⁴ Wild deer management in wales (2011) ref Welsh Government’s 2011 ‘Wild deer management in Wales’ strategy <http://gov.wales/docs/drah/publications/120222wilddeermanagementen.pdf> chapter 2 page 14

Recommendations

- NRW should continue to manage the negative impacts of wild species on the land it manages as it is essential to achieve the sustainable management of natural resources.
- In determining whether lethal control is the most appropriate method of management planning should demonstrate the need for control, consider other options to avoid or reduce the impacts and consider the local social acceptability of the action.
- If lethal control is necessary, it should be part of a long-term management plan which has clear and achievable outcomes and considers animal welfare issues.
- Evidence based decision making, management planning and monitoring, training and best practice should be used in planning and implementing management actions.

2. Other people's use of firearms for managing wild species that impact on our neighbour's land management objectives

Context and conclusions

There is conflicting evidence concerning the impact of foxes on lambs in the UK and few examples of evidence where fox control is not carried out to some extent. Direct comparisons of areas with and without fox control is difficult. There is a recognition that in upland Wales there is a potential higher level of impact by foxes on land management objectives and there are examples of localised instances of significant lamb predation losses.

There is evidence that predation is a factor in the success of upland breeding birds and where this is identified predator control is recommended to improve the breeding success of these species. This is also the case for some lowland bird species such as lapwing.

NRW currently issues permissions for neighbouring land owners or groups representing their interests, to enter NRW managed land to manage pests, primarily foxes. This is usually carried out by using dogs to flush out foxes to waiting guns. This is to prevent damage to livestock. The Hunting Act (2004) provides for this by allowing what can be referred to as 'exempt hunting' under permission from the landowners where control will be exercised for '*... the purpose of preventing or reducing serious damage which the wild mammal would otherwise cause*' as set out in The Hunting Act 2004 Schedule 1⁵. The fifth condition of Schedule 1 states that '*...after found or flushed out the wild mammal is shot dead...*' thus, necessitating the use of firearms. Those seeking permission need to provide documentary evidence from the neighbouring landowner that there is such a risk or that they are experiencing actual losses. NRW also require individuals or groups to apply for permission to undertake control activities so that we can manage safe access to our land and avoid potential conflict with other users. We only consider permissions for this 'exempt hunting' where a neighbouring landowner can demonstrate that they are suffering losses or is at risk of suffering losses arising from predation by foxes or other wild mammals.

Evidence received recommends that lethal control is used only after other methods to reduce the damage have been attempted and /or considered¹.

⁵ *Hunting Act 2014, ch.37 sch. 1, para 1* <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/37/schedule/1>

Recommendations

- NRW should continue to consider applications for permission to carry out management using firearms of wild mammals that impact our neighbour's land management objectives.
- Applications for permissions to carry out control on our land must include justification that the activity is for the purpose of preventing or reducing serious damage which the wild species would otherwise cause.

3. Our leasing of land for game shooting and other pursuits using firearms

Context and conclusions

Both the Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales want communities and social enterprises to get the greatest possible benefit from the land that we manage. We consider all manner of applications for events, activities, projects and enterprise initiatives to make it possible for the people of Wales to make the most of the land that we manage. According to demand we may also actively offer the opportunity to undertake a particular activity on the land that we manage. This currently includes the shooting of gamebirds on a very limited basis. We have received requests to carry out other pursuits using firearms, such as target shooting, on the estate therefore the review recognises the need to include these activities in developing a position.

Rearing

The evidence indicates that the rearing and release in pens of gamebirds can, if not managed to the Welsh Government Code of Practice for the welfare of gamebirds reared for sporting purposes (2010 No.55)⁶, impact on the welfare of the birds. The rearing of gamebirds does not take place on our land and as such is outside of our direct influence. We have no power to inspect the rearing of gamebirds that takes place elsewhere. We recognise our global responsibility in relation to the demand and supply chain for activities which we may permit to take place on the land that we manage. Any permits recommend that the WG Code of Practice for the welfare of gamebirds reared for sporting purposes is followed.

Holding pens and release

Pheasants are kept in holding pens and subsequently released on a limited area of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate. Evidence of the impact on biodiversity and woodland condition from the presence of gamebird pens and their release shows that there are benefits for some groups of species and disadvantages for others. However it is clear that stocking densities in holding pens along with habitat management actions are key in determining if the presence of pheasants in a woodland have a detrimental, benign or positive effect on the biodiversity of the woodland. Active site management is required to ensure that there is not an overall negative impact on biodiversity with adherence to the recommendations of less than 700 birds per hectare of holding pen. Site actions used to benefit conditions for pheasants in a woodland include thinning, encouragement of ground and shrub layers, edge management and ride management. These types of activity are part of good woodland management practice which generally improve the condition of the woodland ecosystem and benefit biodiversity.

⁶ Code of practice for the welfare of gamebirds reared for sporting purposes (2010 No.55)
<http://gov.wales/docs/legislation/inforcenonsi/animalwelfare/110106gamebirden.pdf>

Risk to biodiversity

The Welsh Government Woodland Estate comprises a large proportion of upland planted non-native conifer which is less likely to be impacted in the same way as lowland native woodland, such as ancient semi-natural woodland. There are opportunities for biodiversity to benefit from shoot management activities which is complimentary to woodland management in plantation woodland. The WGWE is certified to the UK Woodland Assurance Standard⁷; the standard requires that game management does not cause long-term or widespread negative impacts to the woodland ecosystem and that shooting of native species does not limit the viability of the species. In offering a limited area of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate for shooting leases sites valuable for nature conservation were screened out of the process. The presence of native flora and fauna at upland sites is comparably low and therefore the impacts of shooting on biodiversity on these sites is also lower. It was suggested that if NRW ceased leasing sites with a low risk of biodiversity impact that the activity may be displaced to woodland of higher nature conservation value and subsequent negative impact.

NRW currently lease four sites comprising 440ha and records show that approximately 6500 pheasants were released. This is a density of less than 15 birds per hectare. This is a very small proportion of the number of birds reported as released across the UK indicating that the third-party lease activity on NRW managed land is minor (less than 0.0002% of total annual UK pheasant release numbers⁸). NRW leases require shoots to comply with good practice which includes stocking densities in juvenile pens situated on our land and avoiding the siting of pens in sensitive habitats. Evidence suggests that the impacts on biodiversity are not negative overall if this guidance along with appropriate habitat management are implemented.

All leases for wildfowling on land that we manage are required to have a management plan and follow the good practice set out in the relevant WG Codes of Practice. Lease holders supply reports on site management and any new applications for leases are considered on the assessment of the proposed activity on the site concerned.

Use of lead shot

The evidence indicates that there are risks to wildlife from spent lead shot including consumption of gamebirds that are shot but not recovered, ingestion of spent shot by birds and escalation through the food chain of lead ingested by soil invertebrates and small mammals. There is a risk to the health of wildlife consuming a high level of game shot with lead ammunition and from livestock grazing on areas where high levels of shot are discharged.

It is recognised that there are risks of continued release of lead into the environment and the conclusion of some authors that there are issues that warrant further research. The UK Government has explored this issue specifically through the Lead Ammunition Group⁹ and concluded that the impacts were not sufficient to justify changing policy. Use of lead shot is

⁷ UK Woodland Assurance Standard (version 3.1) <http://ukwas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/UKWAS-Third-Edition-version-3.1-20122.pdf>

⁸ Bicknell et al, (2010) Impacts of non-native gamebird release in the UK: a review. RSPB Research Report Number 40, RSPB 2010. quote the number of pheasants released in the UK as 35 million/ year. NRW lease reports (unpublished) state that, in 2016, 6500 pheasants were released under those leases.

⁹ Lead Ammunition Group <http://www.leadammunitiongroup.org.uk/reports/>

banned in sensitive habitats and this should continue to be enforced in those circumstances.

Lead shot is used in many circumstances by landowners in Wales and the review has not attempted to quantify or qualify the relative impact of activity undertaken on the land that we manage.

Disease

Disease transmission is a risk to both introduced birds and native species, however the evidence is not conclusive. Medication for disease management will reduce the risk as will recommendations for stocking densities. Management of disease in birds reared for sport is addressed in the WG Code of Practice for the welfare of birds reared for sporting purposes (2010 No.55) and should be applied to holding pens on land leased from NRW.

The scale of risk of disease transmission to wildlife is not clear and good husbandry should be employed to minimise risk. Planning can help to reduce risk to susceptible species for example pheasant releases should not be permitted in areas where native grey partridge populations could come into contact with released birds.

Disease pathways for risk to human health would appear to be in those most involved in managing the birds. Precautions for those working with birds can reduce the risks. Siting of holding pens away from high recreational visitor access reduces risk to the wider public. We are not aware of any documented cases of risk to wildlife or human health arising from shooting leases on the land that we manage.

Economic

Income to NRW from the current woodland leases is £6000 from 4 sites per annum. Whilst the income level to NRW is relatively low the use of the land by third parties facilitates a contribution to the local economy via provision of jobs and expenditure by the shoots. The size of this contribution is difficult to calculate but the reported expenditure indicates a multiplier effect with one of the shoots involved spending nearly half a million pounds locally. The level of income should be sufficient to cover the costs of NRW managing the lease whilst still encouraging the beneficial spend in the local economy.

Social aspects

The evidence provided by the shoots using NRW land indicates a level of social interaction in the local community, supporting local events, supporting businesses with increased trade in quieter winter months. Any complaints about specific shoot activities are usually dealt with by the shoot management, this has historically been at a low level. The level of interest from individuals and campaign groups has been high since the invitation to tender for new leases.

Land managers report that there is less requirement for staff to manage anti-social activities in areas where there are leases. This may be due to the regular presence of shoot management staff in those areas.

Landscape

The role of land management for shooting activities in shaping the landscape in the UK is recognised with regards to upland moorland sites. The impact of leasing areas of the NRW estate for shooting is unlikely to make a significant change to the landscape of the areas concerned. The silvicultural management of the woodland sites continues to be carried

out by NRW in accordance with Forest resource plans. As such the overall characteristic of the woodlands is determined by all objectives for the sites. The areas leased for Wildfowling have a varied level of direct management by the leaseholders but all are under agreed management plans with NRW. The management of these sites for wildfowling is likely to contribute to the maintenance of the landscape character of the sites.

Recommendations

- NRW should continue to consider the leasing of land for pheasant shooting, wildfowling and other activity involving firearms. In considering applications, the impacts of the activity on SMNR and the well-being goals should be considered. The location and scale of the proposed activity should take account of the potential for negative impacts on the woodland ecosystem and local species of flora and fauna but also the beneficial social aspects of local community cohesion and potential economic benefits. Management plans should address issues discussed in this paper.
- NRW land agents should review the charging rate for leasing of areas for shooting and release pens. Costs of managing the leases should be included in the calculation.
- Leaseholders should demonstrate that they source stock from establishments that follow the WG Code of Practice for the welfare of gamebirds reared for sporting purposes, (2010 No.55).
- The management of birds in holding and release pens on NRW managed land should follow the WG Code of Practice for the welfare of gamebirds reared for sporting purposes, (2010 No. 55).
- NRW will not insist on the use of non-lead alternatives on the land we manage except where the use of lead is banned under the Welsh Government Regulations i.e. foreshores, certain SSSI and for the shooting of all ducks, geese, coot and moorhen. Any changes to the Regulations by the Welsh Government will be implemented as appropriate.
- Disease risk should be minimised through adherence to the relevant Codes of Practice particularly for siting holding and release pens in the best location and adherence to the recommended stocking densities.

End.