

Reintroductions and releases on the Isle of Man

Lessons from recent retreats

Recent proposals for the release of white-tailed sea eagles and red squirrels on the Isle of Man received very different treatment, perhaps reflecting public perception of the animals and the public profile of the proponents, but also the political landscape of the island.

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The Manx legal context

The Isle of Man is a Crown dependency outside the EU but inside a common customs union with the United Kingdom. The Island can request that Westminster's laws are extended to it but usually the Island passes its own laws which it promulgates at the annual Tynwald ceremony. Since it has a special relationship with the European Union, under Protocol 3, EU legislation covering agricultural and other trade is usually translated into Manx law, as is UK law affecting customs controls. The 1980 Endangered Species Act was therefore swiftly adopted in the Isle of Man but the Wildlife and Countryside Act of the same year was not.

When I arrived on the Isle of Man in 1987, the only wildlife legislation was a dated Protection of Birds Act (1932-1975) but the newly formed Department of Agriculture had just been persuaded to take on responsibility for a yet to be drafted Wildlife Act. The then Attorney General told me that the Manx Museum had earlier declined to take on the additional responsibility for the Act and so it had languished for a few years. He also said that the naming of the Isle of Man as one of the few places in Europe not to protect bats, by Bob Stebbings¹, and an account of the extermination of a huge colony of Natterer's bats, gave impetus to the adoption of wildlife legislation and the Wildlife Act was eventually passed in 1990, giving responsibility for wildlife protection to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF).

The draft legislation drew heavily on the UK's Wildlife and Countryside Act, to the extent that we had to fight to have the schedules list Manx species, and the release of non-native species was included as an offence in its own right, in addition to the ban on importation of certain listed species under other pest and animal health legislation. Thus the importation of deer was banned, to the chagrin of certain farmers at a time when deer farming was taking off in the UK, but also common hamsters - although the lack of taxonomic understanding by government led to the seizure of at least one golden hamster and a taxi journey home for another from the check-in desk at Heathrow.



Point of Ayre: The Ayres is a large area of coastal heath and dune grassland in the north of the Isle of Man island and location of the only National Nature Reserve.

Photo: Nick Pinder

A test for the legislation came in the early 1990s when some fox carcasses turned up. One was allegedly run over and then someone came forward having shot two adults at a den site and dug up several cubs. These were taken over by the Wildlife Park and reared by a volunteer eventually to be released on the estate of Miriam Rothschild in Northamptonshire. Although there was, apparently, a history of boxed foxes being brought over for sport, the perpetrator was never found. WildCRU from Oxford was contracted to investigate the situation and although its conclusion that the Island might end up with 400 foxes was widely misconstrued and ridiculed, fewer foxes were reported from then on. From the import of perhaps five animals the vixens had been shot and run over leaving a few dog foxes ranging around the Island until they died of natural causes.

The legislation was used to support a general policy on introductions, based on the then criteria of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which was adopted by DAFF at the recommendation of the Wildlife Committee in 1992. This policy was frequently referred to in subsequent years in proposals for the Isle of Man to "rescue" the red squirrel by providing a haven free of grey squirrels. The latest such proposal came in spring of 2016 (see later).

Interest in re-introductions and genesis of an idea

In 1997 my role with the Wildlife Act came to an end, leaving others to develop and implement the Wildlife Act while I focused on the Wildlife Park, now under

the Department of Tourism. I had commenced my working life in zoos and had an abiding interest in reintroduction as a conservation tool.

About 10 years ago I came across a reference to white-tailed eagles having been native to the Isle of Man which began to spark thoughts, reinforced when the report from the RSPB², on how much sea eagles were worth to tourism and the economy of Mull, began to make the news. I worked for the Dept of Tourism and broached the idea with Roy Dennis of the Highland Foundation for Wildlife and brought it up at a meeting of the Conservation Committee of the Manx Wildlife Trust. Other committee members were worried about the effects of sea eagles on chough and the remnant population of Manx shearwaters on the Calf of Man. In 2009 after a visit to the Isle of Man, Roy Dennis reported that the island might be able to support five or six pairs of sea eagles.

Shortly after my retirement I realised there would never be a perfect time to put forward my proposal for sea eagle reintroductions; this or that a potentially sympathetic politician might not ever be in place or wildlife ever given more serious consideration. Wildlife tourism is woefully weak in the Isle of Man, despite the famous basking sharks. Birdwatching tours were tried in the 1990s but did not last and even now the only wildlife guide on the island can only operate part-time. Yet there are spectacular species to see (choughs, hen harriers, terns, peregrines, sea bird colonies) and they are, by and large, more easier to see than in the UK.

It seemed to me that wildlife tourism in the Isle of Man needed an iconic species to grab the attention and raise its profile. I also thought that the tourism sector would be interested in the sorts of sums being generated by sea eagles in Mull. My ideas were sent to all the politicians and the Manx Nature Conservation Forum which acts as a sounding board and arena for wildlife issues.

Assessment of the sea eagles proposal

My recollection is mainly of a negative reception from bodies I had presumed to be in favour. The Manx Ornithological Society committee were divided on whether the introduction would be beneficial and Manx Birdlife recommending that a feasibility study was carried out, while the Manx Wildlife Trust feared that all biodiversity funding in the island would be swallowed up by the project. Nevertheless, it was agreed to set up a working group to consider the proposal and report back through the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture (DEFA, the successor body to DAFF).

The self-styled Sea Eagle Feasibility Assessment Group first met in February 2015 to consider my paper for the Forum. The Wildlife Trust was mainly concerned whether sea eagles might threaten the Manx shearwater recovery project on the Calf of Man, in which they, MNH, MB and others, had invested a huge amount eradicating brown rats. MNH felt that an assessment was needed of what risk sea eagles posed to other species while a number of FWAG members were wary. The MNFU said that sheep farmers already have issues with gulls and corvids, so a further predator of lambs would be unwelcome. A compensation scheme would not affect this



A winter scene at Snaefell: The Manx hill lands are largely owned by Government and are accessible for walking.

Photo: Nick Pinder

view because it wouldn't ameliorate the distress and a scheme would be difficult to implement fairly. MNH noted that top predators can be a rebalancing force, reducing other issues by their effects on populations of other species which are causing issues but the MNFU wondered how pet owners might perceive the arrival of sea eagles.

The question of what the sea eagles might eat was obviously going to be crucial, reinforced on receipt of a submission from the Manx Game Preservation Society which felt that these birds would undoubtedly turn their attention to live quarry putting many of the species they held dear in jeopardy, in particular both species of hare, red grouse and grey partridge (the first three of those being introduced species). Accordingly, I produced the risk assessment requested by MNH and obtained the paper on sea eagle diet³ referred to on the sea eagle website <http://www.white-tailed-sea-eagle.co.uk/on-the-menu/>. This in turn led to a paper on the impact of sea eagles on sheep farming on Mull which revealed the happy coincidence that at the time of these studies the population on Mull was about what the Isle of Man was expected to support (from comments by Roy Dennis).

Risk assessment

Using published figures for the daily requirements of breeding, non-breeding and fledgling sea eagles, the list of prey species and their percentages and average weights of those prey species, I predicted how much of what species an established population on the Isle of Man would consume in a year. Population figures for those species were available in the Manx Bird Atlas⁴ so I was able to show that annual consumption of any bird species would be less than 10 per cent of their population, and as high as 7% for only three prey species. Lamb consumption would equate to less than 2% and direct predation only 0.3%. These approximate figures put the putative presence of sea eagles in an ecological context.

The Assessment Group next met in August having been given my paper on the potential impact of sea eagles on Manx fauna, and the calculations leading to my conclusions. FWAG had several concerns starting with whether or not the released birds would settle and stay, to overall costs and the realism of the projected financial return to tourism, let alone the potential effects on agriculture. The Museum was interested in the potential effect on meso-predators, benefiting other species, but the Wildlife Trust was still concerned at the effects on seabird colonies, hen harriers and choughs.

The MNFU noted the Scottish Farmer's Union Action Plan based on a survey of its members in Scotland. The representative was adamant that the MNFU and the Flockmasters would fight the proposal "all the way", going to court if necessary. The Chair said that this project, if it went ahead, may need a consultation to provide for the full consideration of social issues, following IUCN guidelines, but for now DEFA want to know whether it added up economically.

Business case

We were in a classic chicken and egg situation, unable to demonstrate the economic benefits to tourism without the funds to undertake a study to generate the business case to attract the funds. The RSPB's latest report on the economic benefits to Mull⁵ showed 4,300 people visited Mull in 2010 primarily to watch sea eagles, from an average distance of 250 miles. 3,671,000 people live within 250 miles of Mull, of which 97,171 might be expected to be members of the RSPB/WT, based on RSPB/WT membership being 2.3% of the UK population. That is, 4.42% of the RSPB/WT membership within travelling distance visited Mull to watch sea eagles, whereas 1 million members of the RSPB/WT membership live within 250 miles of the Isle of Man. At the same visitation rate the Isle of Man might expect 44,200 visitors each year, primarily visiting to watch sea eagles, which closely matches the numbers visiting for the TT races in which the IoM Government invests so heavily. I presented this as a best-case scenario along with a worst case scenario of 10,000 visitors a year if travel costs proved a deterrent, but which still gave the return of 5:1 on the investment.

I passed the business case on to the Chair for consideration within DEFA and took it to the tourism section of DED to attempt to secure the minimal funding for a visitor survey which I was confident would prove my case. However, the civil servant was insistent there was no spare money and the politician (also a member of DEFA) felt that reactionary elements meant that government could not associate itself with a survey linked to sea eagle reintroduction. In January 2016 DEFA reported that the Department was committed to other projects and would not be taking forward the sea eagle re-introduction. Since I had always viewed it as a government project, for a number of reasons, I had to concede that without government support the proposal could not progress.

Red squirrel consultation

We did not have to wait long to find out what at least one of these other projects was that DEFA was committed to. In mid-March the Minister announced a consultation on the introduction of red squirrels. The Minister was aware that the legislation

would need amending to permit the release of a non-native animal but said that as a Minister he always wanted to challenge accepted areas of opinion. He felt that there was strong affection for red squirrels and providing a refuge for them, on an island free of greys, would show that the island plays its part in international conservation where the Isle of Man already punches above its weight. Furthermore, with numbers of red squirrels declining in the UK, they could be an added draw for visitors.

The consultation paper⁶ pointed out the existing presumption on the introduction of non-native species but adding that to provide a conservation justification, interest should therefore be focused on the supposed British subspecies. This point was amplified in a companion briefing paper⁷, drafted in 2010 in response to political interest from a previous member of DEFA. The briefing paper was much more detailed and also addressed the issues that would arise if DEFA were to receive an application for a license to release red squirrels. An application could only be entertained if there was a conservation justification and that would only arise if a "British" sub-species could be identified and sourced. It also noted that an expensive project such as an introduction could not be funded from government wildlife conservation funds whilst native species are under severe threat but the consultation document itself made clear that funding is mainly expected to come from private or charitable sources.

The consultation sparked numerous media articles and letters in the press. It concluded in mid-April and DEFA announced the outcome on June 8 2016. The consultation attracted 107 responses, many individuals favouring the idea. Indeed, in response to the simple question "Should red squirrels be introduced to the Isle of Man?" 54% answered Yes and 35% No. However, DEFA advised that the consultation was not just a numbers game and particular weight was accorded those with specialist knowledge. However, after studying all the views submitted, and given the strong opinions of the scientific organisations and groups who responded, DEFA concluded that it would be detrimental to the countryside to introduce them. UK experts stated that the red squirrel isn't in danger of extinction in the UK and see no scientific basis for creating a refuge for it. They therefore didn't support its introduction to the Island.

Consultation responses

The full content of consultation responses, published by DEFA on its website⁸, makes for interesting reading. Three local authorities wrote in, one in full support observing that our woods are a disappointing, seemingly dead, region of nothingness but two (both with the same clerk) considering the whole exercise to be a waste of money. I'm not sure how to interpret the comments of one lady, writing in support of the proposal, who labelled me "ever grim" but I'll interpret it to mean pessimistic. Although the identity of the charitable source of funding (the Countryside Restoration Trust) was disclosed during the actual consultation, the responses reveal the identity of the private source of funding to be a prominent businessman in the finance sector. In support of the proposal the Marketing Communications Manager in the Dept of Economic Development had the effrontery to quote the tourism benefit to Mull of sea eagles. Six island politicians responded, three positively in favour and three conditionally so.

In contrast, six wildlife organisations were all opposed, including the UK Mammal Society which responded with a letter signed by a number of mammalogists (13 actually, including the Chair) with very many years work in this field and on squirrels in particular. Their response was therefore seen to be of particular value and showed the views of professionals based in the UK and involved with the conservation work there. Their final comment, that there are no scientific grounds or conservation value in introducing red squirrels to the Isle of Man was echoed in DEFA's press announcement accompanying the decision.⁹ Richard Ronan MHK, Minister for Environment, Food and Agriculture, said: "The introduction of red squirrels was popular with many, including me, but many also pointed out pitfalls. As there was no justification on conservation grounds, we have decided not to proceed at present. I am pleased that we have gone through this consultation as my Department is now well informed about the pros and cons of red squirrels' introduction to the Manx countryside and much better placed to make a decision in future should their conservation become an issue."

Nature and economy – choices and priorities

The Department has always been fairly well informed about the pros and cons of red squirrel introduction. It had a robust policy in place from the early 1990s but still staged a consultation exercise, preparing documentation and analysing a large response when the nature of the feedback was largely predictable. Perhaps DEFA elected not to put the proposal before its own Nature Conservation Forum in the hope that overwhelming public sentiment could outweigh the scientific judgement. DEFA was prepared to go against established policy and yet a proposal with the potential to boost the economy by millions of pounds and that accorded with several areas of government wildlife policy (the recently adopted Biodiversity Strategy, the Bonn and Bern Conventions) was rejected without full consideration in the one forum set up to consider such issues.

One contributor to a radio phone-in after the announcement noted, perhaps cynically, that this is an election year. Most elected politicians in the Isle of Man are independents; there are only two political parties, one with one Member of the House of Keys and the other three. Consequently, policy, although much talked about in the executive arm of Government, is little discussed at elections where personalities count for much more and policy seems to be decided on the hoof once the elections are over and Ministers in power. Against that, serious discussion of meso-predator release and trophic cascades can have little traction and re-wilding as a concept is as alien as any of the species in Sch 8 of the Wildlife Act. The irony is that the Isle of Man is so well placed to embark on landscape-scale wildlife conservation, given that government controls over ten per cent of the land, mostly hill land let out to shooting and grazing tenants. However, current government focus on minimising expenditure and maximising income leaves little room for bold wildlife initiatives especially ones which sound as threatening as "Re-wilding" to the average Manx landowner. The Manx political landscape, which in theory could enable proactive policy-making (and arguably does in economic policy), will probably continue to mean that wildlife policies remain merely reactive.

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The Isle of Man hills - still awaiting reintroductions or rewilding...
Photo: Nick Pinder

