

WRITTEN SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE

SNH has already corresponded with the Clerk to the Transport and Environment Committee regarding SGA No. 187 (letters dated 3 August 2001 and 28 January 2002). This note provides some supplementary information in response to the Petitions. The SGA Petitions have sought to allow limited licensed culling of raptors and an independent investigation of an alleged imbalance between some raptors, ravens, waders, songbirds, fish stocks and game birds.

UK Raptor Working Group

The issues raised in the Petition have been considered in detail by the UK Raptor Working Group. This Group, co-chaired by Professor Colin A Galbraith (now Director of Scientific and Advisory Services in SNH), published its report in February 2000. The report made 25 recommendations concerning the status of birds of prey, and interactions between birds of prey and grouse moors, racing pigeons, lowland game birds and songbirds. Responses to the recommendations were discussed by a further working group in Scotland, involving a large range of organisations (including the Scottish Gamekeepers' Association), and were in turn responded to formally by the Scottish Executive in April 2002. The SNH action plan outlining how it is dealing with each of the recommendations, and the Scottish Executive response, are available on the SNH Website and the Scottish Executive Website.

Scotland's Moorland Forum

In March 2002, SNH formed Scotland's Moorland Forum to develop joint approaches to developing and sharing good practices for the stewardship of Scotland's moorland. The Forum provides an important platform for discussing research, management, advice, policy and PR issues relating to the moorlands of Scotland. The Forum is also taking forward the action specified in *Scotland's moorland; unique and important: a statement of intent*, which has 24 organisations as signatories. This document outlines some key actions for the conservation of moorlands over the next few years. Members of the Moorland Forum include the Scottish Gamekeepers' Association, the Game Conservancy Trust, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, and a wide range of other organisations concerned with the management and care of Scotland's uplands.

Scottish Raptor Monitoring Group

In June 2002 the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Group was formed to provide a robust, objective basis for the survey and monitoring of birds of prey in Scotland. There are 7 member organisations of this group, including the British Trust for Ornithology, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and Scottish Raptor Study Groups.

Raptor-Moorland debate

SNH is clear that the key to the so-called raptor-moorland debate lies with habitat recovery and management. Such management involves measures to restore heather cover (in recent years, on some estates, several square kilometres of heather have been lost to heather beetle outbreaks). Good burning practices, good management of livestock such as sheep, goats and cattle, reductions in heavy grazing impacts of deer, and improvements in control of some species (notably of crows and foxes) are all important components of good moorland management. There is potential also for the use of some innovative techniques such as supplementary feeding of raptors in summer to divert them from grouse chicks; the trapping, transfer and release of red grouse (from productive areas); and the creation of habitat patches favoured by grouse and other moorland birds. Until these practices are tried and tested across a representative range of grouse moors, SNH is not persuaded of the argument that raptors need to be controlled in order to protect game birds in Scotland.

It is important that SNH puts on record that it has much empathy with the wider issues articulated by the Scottish Gamekeepers' Association, namely over the decline in extent of heather moorland, and the need for active management. Grouse moors in Scotland have declined in number and extent by some 25% over the past 50 years, and clearly in some quarters there is a view that gamekeepers' livelihoods are threatened by the changing nature of the countryside. Much of the natural heritage of

Scotland's moorland contributes to the country's wider image and, in turn, to its economy so far as tourism is concerned. The proposed culling of raptors is surely not part of the image we wish to convey to visitors or to the wider world.

Trends in birds of prey numbers

In Scotland, most birds of prey species are still recovering slowly from earlier persecution and pesticide poisoning. Of the 17 birds of prey species nesting in Scotland, seven species are still recovering in number, four have fairly stable populations, and three appear to be declining (kestrel, tawny owl and barn owl). Trends in the remaining three species (honey buzzard, long-eared owl and short-eared owl) are uncertain.

The Scottish Raptor Monitoring Group is developing a robust basis for survey, monitoring and reporting on these changes in status.

Impacts of birds of prey on other animals

Much information on birds of prey impacts on their prey is anecdotal, and not based on data collected in a rigorous and objective manner. In some regions, where birds of prey are virtually absent, populations of waders and songbirds have declined.

Legal position

Birds of prey are protected by provisions of the EC Birds Directive (79/409/EEC). Article 2 of the Directive requires member states to "maintain the population of the species referred to in Article 1" (i.e. wild birds). Further Articles require maintenance of a sufficient diversity of habitats for these birds, and the establishment of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for those species listed under Annex 1 of the Directive (including many raptor species) and for migratory species. Article 9 of the Directive permits derogation from Articles 5, 6, 7 and 8 "where there is no other satisfactory solution", for several purposes (such as in the interests of public health and safety, or in the interests of air safety).

Any derogation to permit the killing or taking of raptors would require the robust testing (and failure) of all legal means of reducing the impacts of raptors on 'the protection of flora and fauna'. Much has still to be done to investigate and test various legal measures to reduce any adverse natural heritage impacts of raptors on their prey. Scotland's Moorland Forum offers an important grouping of organisations to devise and practise such novel, legal management practices.

There have been calls for the licensed control of ravens and buzzards (protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981). We are not aware of any scientific information to indicate significant lasting impacts of these species on other wildlife. Indeed, there is evidence that the range size of ravens declined in Scotland between 1970 and 1990.

Final comment: opportunities

There are important and timely opportunities within the ambit of Scotland's Moorland Forum to develop new objectively based trials to test alternative means of reducing the take of red grouse by birds of prey. Such work could involve habitat and food supply manipulations, and could involve researchers, land managers (including gamekeepers) and other conservationists. Some important new work has begun in this area, and there is considerable scope for further collaborative research here. Ideally, such work should build on experience gained from other studies and might be funded by a consortium of interest groups.

Scottish Natural Heritage
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