

# Wild Animal Welfare Committee

Scottish Charity Number SC045958

## **Briefing: Wild Animal Welfare Committee (WAWC) and wildlife management policy**

### **Introduction**

The Wild Animal Welfare Committee (WAWC) is an independent expert committee set up to inform policy and legislation decision-making in all UK administrations. Members are independent and appointed on an individual basis. WAWC was founded in 2014 to address the anomaly that wild animals are sentient individuals but enjoy significantly less welfare protection than domestic animals under current legislation. In addition, at that time, advisory bodies for domestic animals existed in the shape of the Farm Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC) and the Companion Animal Welfare Committee (CAWC), but there was no equivalent body covering the welfare of free-living wild animals.

The WAWC aims to advance wild animal welfare by:

- Providing an independent evidence base for evaluating, monitoring, assessing and improving decisions affecting the welfare of free-living wild animals in the UK;
- Increasing awareness of the importance and value of wild animals in general;
- Promoting the welfare of individual wild animals in particular;
- Highlighting harm to, and suffering of, wild animals caused by human activity, with the aim of reducing these negative impacts.

In furtherance of these aims, the WAWC:

- Disseminates objective information on a range of wild animal welfare topics;
- Commissions and publishes independent reports, statements and other contributions on contemporary wild animal welfare issues of public and political concern;
- Works to promote the awareness and improvement of wild animal welfare;
- Engages with organisations that can contribute to its evidence base.

The WAWC offers views on wild animal welfare priorities to policy makers and legislators, and already works closely with the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission (SAWC), which includes free-living wild animals in its remit. There is an informal understanding that the WAWC will support the SAWC with advice on wild animal welfare issues and WAWC has previously provided advice on defining wild animal welfare and the welfare impacts of snares according to the Five Domains model. The WAWC has also taken part in face-to-face DEFRA consultations on issues such as bovine tuberculosis strategy, general licences for taking and killing wild birds, the use of glue traps and wild take of raptors and aims to participate in such exercises as frequently as possible.

## **Activities**

WAWC activities aimed at informing relevant policy making and public awareness over the last nine years have included:

Responding to government and parliamentary consultations on issues such as hunting with dogs (Scotland); wild take of raptors; grouse moor management; culling of badgers; use of glue traps; other wildlife traps and snares

Conferences and workshops – three conferences and one marine mammal workshop

Commissioning research into anthropogenic impacts on the welfare of terrestrial wild mammals and marine mammals in the UK

Supporting students with research projects

Promoting developments in animal welfare science and ethics.

## **Ethical principles for wildlife management**

While many wildlife welfare issues arise from direct human management of wild animals, they can also be indirect, for example, bird strikes on buildings, habitat change, marine noise and road traffic accidents. The WAWC focuses to a large extent on the [International Consensus Principles for Ethical Wildlife Control](#) (“the ethical principles”) and how these apply to wildlife management scenarios such as deer culling, badger culling, predator control on sporting estates.

The ethical principles set out a pragmatic framework for those undertaking wildlife management, whether lethal control or non-lethal interventions such as translocation or identification for conservation purposes. They are particularly apposite in cases of human-wildlife conflict.

In summary, the ethical principles state that efforts to control wildlife should:

- begin wherever possible by altering the human practices that cause human–wildlife conflict and by developing a culture of coexistence;
- be justified by evidence that significant harms are being caused to people, property, livelihoods, ecosystems, and/or other animals;
- have measurable outcome-based objectives that are clear, achievable, monitored, and adaptive;
- predictably minimise animal welfare harms and confine these to the fewest number of animals;
- be informed by community values as well as scientific, technical, and practical information;
- be integrated into plans for systematic long-term management; and
- be based on the specifics of the situation rather than negative labels (e.g. pest, overabundant) applied to the target species.

WAWC [Position Paper No.3](#) explaining the ethical principles and their application in practice is available on the WAWC website.

## **Current wildlife welfare issues in UK**

Traps and snares: Our position on lethal traps for terrestrial mammals is set out in full in our [Position Paper No. 1](#). In summary, the WAWC believes that lethal traps, including both regulated and unregulated<sup>1</sup> spring traps, have the potential to cause significant harm to animals and should only be used in accordance with an ethical framework. In particular, it is desirable that alternatives such as changes in human behaviour and interventions that minimise animal harms have been tried and exhausted before deploying lethal means. Lethal traps should be capable of rendering target animals instantaneously and irreversibly unconscious and be designed to capture only the target species.

Poorly designed traps and poorly deployed lethal traps represent a substantial risk to animal welfare since they are unlikely to cause instantaneous and irreversible unconsciousness. They can also inflict unnecessary harm and suffering on non-target species. There is evidence that some types are unlikely to cause rapid death no matter how well they are deployed, while traps that capture females with dependent young are likely to cause additional deaths in neonates and juveniles.

WAWC [Position Paper No. 2](#) covers the live trapping of terrestrial wild mammals and wild birds for lethal control, specifically assessing snares, glue traps, mammal cage traps and bird cage traps against the Five Domains model. The paper concludes that a comprehensive review of the live trapping of wild mammals and wild birds is necessary and should encompass both the need for trapping as well as the welfare impact of the trapping process itself.

Marine mammals: The welfare of seals, dolphins, porpoises and whales is adversely affected by marine animal entanglements, harmful noise pollution and incidents of intentional or unintentional harassment.

Commercial boat-based marine wildlife watching is increasing in UK waters. Our coastline has an incredible variety of protected marine species and maintaining a well-run wildlife watching industry is important for the economy, as well as for marine species welfare. There is currently no oversight of the industry and no record of the number or location of vessels operating. Overload is a concern in some areas, with too many boats offering too many trips for encounters with the small, protected local population of bottlenose dolphins, and there are similar concerns for other protected marine species. The existing law does not allow caps to be put in place where the industry is at capacity and whilst most operators are responsible and WiSe<sup>2</sup> trained, the law does not prevent harassment of individual animals where operators are not considerate of the wildlife being targeted.

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<sup>1</sup> Break-back traps for use with rats and mice and all mole traps are exempt from the welfare approval process required for other spring traps under the Spring Traps Approval (Scotland) Order 2011 (as amended by the Spring Traps Approval (Scotland) Amendment Order 2018 and the Spring Traps Approval (Scotland) Amendment Order 2020). Such traps are not required to undergo humaneness testing but are widely available and widely used.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wisescheme.org/>

The WAWC is preparing a position paper on these issues, to be published this year, with recommendations on measures to provide necessary oversight of the size and growth of the industry, to enable conditions for appropriate training to skippers to understand and prevent harassment, and to allow potential impacts to be monitored and prevented. [Codes of practice](#) for visitors to the coast have also been published by all four UK administrations.

Grouse moor management: In Scotland, concerns over raptor persecution on managed grouse moors, as well as excessive trapping and lethal control of predators, have led the Scottish Government to commit to licensing grouse shooting in line with the recommendations of the Grouse Moor Management Review Group ([the Werritty report](#)). Animal welfare is directly impacted by activities connected with grouse shooting and predator control in particular. The Moorland Management (Grouse) (Scotland) Bill provides further regulation of the use of wildlife traps, such as the requirement for users to possess a licence, to undertake regular training and to attach identification tags to their traps (this is already the case for snares). Further measures on snaring are expected at a later stage in the Bill. The WAWC believes that these measures will be of interest to other parts of the UK where intensive land management for driven grouse shooting is undertaken.

Killing and taking of wild birds: WAWC's 2019 [review of the killing and taking of birds under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) found little or no evidence that the welfare of birds trapped or shot under general licence is protected. There is no requirement to avoid shooting or trapping and killing birds during the breeding seasons of the listed species meaning that dependent young, either in the nest or as recent fledglings, will starve to death. Although traps must be registered with the police, there is no requirement for recording and reporting of birds trapped and killed, making impossible any form of official monitoring or public scrutiny of trapping.

In particular, the WAWC believes that stricter measures should be in place to ensure that shooters are competent in shooting birds humanely (causing rapid and irreversible loss of consciousness) and that they ensure that wounded birds are picked up and humanely despatched without delay. There is currently a general lack of regulation of these and other welfare-related matters. Indeed, there is no competence requirement for the recreational shooting of grouse, pheasants and partridges, or for the killing of foxes and rabbits with shotguns. The WAWC believes there should be mandatory competence for shooters of all species in all circumstances.

Finally, the design and operation of Larsen and similar traps does not take account of the behavioural needs of the main species that are used as decoys or of the target species (primarily corvids). Corvids are highly intelligent birds and their close confinement in Larsen traps, handling of birds and forced containment with other birds in larger communal cage traps, is likely to be highly stressful. The WAWC recommends that Larsen traps be withdrawn from general use.

The WAWC welcomes the increased acknowledgment of welfare issues in general licences for the killing and taking of wild birds published by governments and their statutory nature agencies

over recent years. Nonetheless the WAWC believes that the repeated killing of members of the same species in the same location, year after year, is neither ethical nor sustainable. WAWC advocates applying an ethical framework, as described above, to any decisions governing intervention against wildlife. This would ensure that welfare considerations are central to the formulation of future general licences.

Fox control: The WAWC contributed to recent legislation in the Scottish Parliament on the use of dogs to control foxes and other wild mammals which limits to two the number of dogs used to flush wild mammals from cover, except under licence. The Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 also prohibits trail hunting, in response to concerns that this activity can frequently provide a pretext for the use of a pack to pursue and kill foxes, supposedly by “accident”.

The WAWC notes, however, that the routine killing of predators and other wildlife does not comply with the ethical principles described above and may be incompatible with conservation, the maintenance of biodiversity and animal welfare; it may also not be the most effective way of protecting livestock and other wildlife. These issues should be reviewed as soon as possible.

Rewilding: There is currently considerable public and NGO interest in the desire to restore/recreate damaged habitats and undertake species conservation. This may be accomplished by methods ranging from simply withdrawing active management, and letting nature take its course, to proactive landscape management, including the translocation of plants and animals. WAWC has produced a [Topic Paper on animal reintroductions](#) focussing on animal welfare aspects and the need to consider the potential impacts on both the introduced animals and resident populations. When reintroductions form part of rewilding or conservation activities, it is not clear who is responsible for safeguarding the welfare interests of the animals concerned, since conservation is often the priority. It is encouraging to see that recently there has been an increased focus on considering conservation and welfare together.

### **Further information**

We hope that this note on some current wildlife welfare topics is of use. Members of the WAWC will be pleased to assist with future discussion of these or other relevant topics.

### **Wild Animal Welfare Committee**

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