



Advice Note

Release of red squirrels *Sciurus vulgaris* into the wild in Britain

May 2004

Conservation and welfare

Background

During the last hundred years, the red squirrel has disappeared from large areas of Britain where it has been replaced by the introduced grey squirrel. The latter species is larger, has a less specialised foraging strategy and lives at a higher density. Experience suggests that, in most areas, it is unlikely that red squirrel populations will persist once the grey squirrel is established. The only exceptions to this may be in very large areas of coniferous forest with few broadleaved trees, though further experimental work is needed to verify this. Any proposed translocation of red squirrels therefore has to be considered very carefully and meet with the IUCN guidelines to maintain a protected species at favorable conservation status.

Established grey squirrel areas

In areas where grey squirrels are established, the release of reds is highly unlikely to result in the development of a population, unless grey squirrels are actively and permanently controlled over a large area. The only exceptions to this may be in large areas of coniferous woodland (more than 2000 ha.), where active steps to manage the habitat for red squirrels are being undertaken. The permanent control of grey squirrels to conserve red squirrels over large areas of mixed or broadleaved woodland does not form part of the UK Strategy for the red squirrel.

Grey squirrels present

The national red squirrel groups advise against the release of red squirrels in areas of the UK where grey squirrels are present and are not controlled, where the predominant woodland type is broadleaved and where there are no large conifer forests or plantations. Such releases serve no useful conservation function and may not meet appropriate standards of animal welfare. Well designed and well-monitored releases for scientific purposes may be an exception.

Red only areas

In areas where there are no grey squirrels but reds still exist, there is no justification for releasing red squirrels unless it can be shown that the existing population is so small that its survival is endangered and that there is suitable habitat available to support a larger population. This situation will be very rare. In addition, the release of animals from other areas carries a risk of introducing disease or parasites which may have an adverse impact on native squirrels.

Areas without squirrels

In areas where neither red nor grey squirrels are present, no release of reds should be carried out unless it can be shown that the area was formerly populated with red squirrels and that the reasons for their disappearance are known and have been ameliorated. Red squirrels should not be released onto islands where there are no historical records of their occurrence.



Red Squirrel © Jason Reynolds

Imported and captive-bred squirrels

Release of imported/captive bred red squirrels

It is an offence to release into the wild animals that are "of a kind which is not ordinarily resident in and is not a regular visitor to Great Britain in a wild state" (WCA, S(14(1))). Genetic studies indicate that red squirrels from Great Britain and continental Europe are not separate subspecies, so it is uncertain whether this provision would apply.

Licences

Animals that have been legally imported or are captive-bred may be sold or possessed without a licence, though the onus rests on the possessor to show that they were legally acquired (Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, S 9(6)).

Release of Captive bred red squirrels

Under the Wildlife & Countryside Act, it is not illegal to release captive-bred red squirrels, or other legally-held red squirrels, into the wild. However the release of animals without adequate effort to ensure their future well-being may be an offence under the Abandonment of Animals Act 1960. Once released, captive-bred squirrels are fully protected by the Wildlife & Countryside Act and a licence would be needed for recapture.

Importations

Red squirrels may legally be imported into Britain, provided they meet any requirements of the exporting country and comply with UK quarantine regulations. In fact, recent imports have all been captive-bred.

Breeding programme

The UK Red Squirrel Group recommends that captive-breeders of red squirrels cooperate with the UK Captive Breeding Programme for the species, under the auspices of the Federation of Zoos.

If you have any queries about the information of this advice note please contact:

Countryside Council for Wales (CCW)
01248 385500
Environment & Heritage Service (EHS)
028 9052 0841
English Nature (EN)
01733 455000
Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)
0131 554 9797

UK Red Squirrel Group
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Guidelines

IUCN guidelines on translocations should be fully complied with, whether for re-introduction or re-stocking. These guidelines emphasise the importance of animal welfare and health screening, as well as covering the need for a careful assessment of the ecological situation.

See JNCC translocation policy

<http://www.jncc.gov.uk/species/translocations/default.htm>

IUCN Guidelines for re-introductions

<http://www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/pubs/policy/reintroduction.htm>