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Seventh meeting of the UKRSG, Plas Penrhos, Bangor, 17 December 2002

Those present:

Jessa Battersby (Secretariat)
Fred Currie (England squirrel forum)
Liz Halliwell (Welsh squirrel forum)
Brenda Mayle (Forest Research)
Tony Mitchell-Jones (England squirrel forum)
Alex Morris (Scottish Squirrel Group)
Gordon Patterson (FC)
Jason Reynolds (Wildlife Trusts)

Guests John Ratcliffe (CCW), Craig Shuttleworth and Hugh Knott (Menter Mon)

1. Apologies: Martyn Howat (EN, Chair), Mairi Cole (Scottish squirrel group), John Milburne (EHS).

2. Minutes of the last meeting

It was noted that the minutes should have page numbers and version control by adding 'draft' and 'finalised' to the different versions.

Action 1: JB to send information on dates of future meetings to all UKRSG members

3. Matters Arising from the Minutes

Action 1: The Wildlife Trusts have put together an outline bid to HLF around forest management plans. This received a favourable response from HLF and the WT are now working on producing a final bid. HLF appear to prefer regional rather than countrywide bids.

Action 2: Jason Reynolds to produce a note for the UKRSG on the bid process.

Action 2: SNH and FC funding is being requested for two projects, one a joint project to identify priority sites in Scotland, and the second is the appointment of a Scottish squirrel co-ordinator, a three year post. The main function of the co-ordinator will be to survey, monitor and record red and grey squirrel populations and liaise with local groups. Neither organisation is in a position to guarantee funding but both projects are under active consideration. Both projects are likely to start next financial year if funding is available.

Action 3: On the agenda for the next English squirrel forum meeting. The Scottish squirrel group has discussed the plan and comments will be made under item 8 on the agenda. The Welsh squirrel forum has looked at the plan and will discuss more fully in the policy group meeting in January 2003.

Action 4: Carried out.

Action 5: Not carried out.

Action 3: TMJ to obtain update of IoW situation and circulate to the rest of the group.

Action 6: Covered under agenda item 6.

Action 7: Covered under agenda item 7.

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Actions 8, 9 and 10 are in progress.

Action 4: JB to update on progress with advice notes and website at next meeting in April 2003.

Action 11. JNCC may have some funds in 2003 for this project.

Action 5: JB Update the group at the next meeting regarding funding for a monitoring scoping study.

Action 12: Carried out.

4. Chairmanship of the Group

JB advised that Martyn Howat was stepping down as Chair because of work pressures. The group wished to thank Martyn for all his efforts on behalf of the UKRSG and to wish him well in the future.

It was agreed to appoint a chair from within the group rather than seek an independent chair. TMJ agreed to act as chair, provided there was no increase in his workload as a result of chairing the UKRSG. The group agreed to review the situation after four meetings.

5. Presentation by Menter Mon

TMJ took the opportunity to thank the Menter Mon personnel for the field trip, which had provided the opportunity to visit red squirrel sites in Anglesey. Hugh Knott (Environmental Project Leader) provided an overview of the work carried out by Menter Mon on Anglesey. Menter Mon, Enterprise Anglesey, is an independent non profit organisation employing 45 people, providing an integrated approach to developing and improving the rural economy and local environment on Anglesey. The principle activities include being the Enterprise Agency for Anglesey, supporting agriculture and tourism, managing and administering the New Deal Environmental Task Force on Anglesey, which includes Local Nature Reserve work. They also run a rural skills workshop and are engaged in a major project to create the Anglesey Coastal Path. They run a number of habitat and species projects including red squirrel, otter and water vole. The species projects include survey and monitoring, habitat creation and enhancement and where applicable, control of introduced species.

Total funding for the project has been £292,000 from a variety of sources. European Objective 1 funding ends in 2003 and a new bid has agreed funding of £890,000 for all species projects from 2003-2005.

Presentation by Craig Shuttleworth on the red squirrel project. The background to the project had been provided by the field trip to a number of red squirrel sites on the previous day. The group were given copies of a detailed report on red squirrel conservation on Anglesey. CS advised that grey squirrel populations had been reduced substantially in certain areas as a result of trapping and red squirrel populations had increased in those areas. It was felt that red squirrel populations had reached saturation point in some areas and were being prevented from spreading to other woodlands on the island because of habitat fragmentation. There was a plan to create habitat corridors to link woodland areas and facilitate movement of reds between woodlands. There was also a plan to reintroduce captive bred red squirrels to Newborough forest, an area of coniferous woodland in the south of the island. There were no plans to modify woodland management to favour red squirrels.

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CS noted that the red squirrel conservation project needs to be sustainable to obtain funding into the future and had to fit in with other conservation priorities, but it also needed to be sustainable in terms of red squirrel populations.

A discussion of the project by the group focussed on aims and objectives of the project and the long term plans for grey squirrel populations. CS noted that complete elimination of grey squirrels from the island was probably not practical but functional elimination might be. If trapping was carried out for five years then grey squirrel numbers could be reduced to a level where they did not impact on reds.

JR noted that trapping effort would have to be targeted and measured and the project would need clear objectives. If the ultimate aim was to protect populations of reds in Newborough and Mynydd Llwydiarth then a number of issues would need to be considered:

- The costs of permanently defending the two populations using trapping.
- Any conflicting management strategies, for example a significant reduction in the size of Newborough forest as a result of SAC designation of an area of the sand dunes.
- Possible conflicting results of creating habitat corridors that could facilitate movement of greys into woodlands with red squirrels.

CS noted that it would be difficult to decide on the best conservation strategy until the success of the trapping programme had been determined.

FC advised that the best strategy for success would be to have a holistic plan for nature conservation, including wetland and forest areas and a number of species, and market the holistic approach for tourism.

6. Translocations and reintroductions

JB provided a short discussion document outlining the main issues to be considered when planning a species reintroduction. TMJ mentioned the reintroduction programme in Thetford and some of the problems that had been encountered, namely the inability to reduce the grey squirrel populations and released red squirrels dying from disease.

CS outlined the plans for Newborough forest. Historically, red squirrels had been present in Newborough forest but had disappeared in the 1990s. An extensive hair tube survey in 1998 had provided no evidence of reds in the forest. A grey squirrel trapping programme was underway and reds would be released into an area as free of grey squirrels as possible. Captive bred animals taken originally from populations in Cumbria would be kept in pens in Newborough during 2003 and their offspring would be released into the forest. DNA testing would be carried out in January 2003. Parapoxvirus was present in the grey squirrel population and this was a problem.

Concerns were expressed about following IUCN guidelines for reintroductions and not rushing the reintroduction before most of the greys had been removed from the area. It was also noted that a large area of the forest would be lost to the SAC and FE, who managed Newborough, did not consider red squirrels to be the priority issue here.

CS advised that there were plans to set up a steering group for the project. Also, if all the squirrels succumbed to parapox infection in the first year then the project might be abandoned.

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TMJ drew the discussion to a close and requested that whatever happens at Anglesey should be recorded because it would provide valuable information on future management of red and grey squirrel populations more generally throughout the UK.

7. Grey squirrels in North America

BM gave a short presentation of her visit to the USA to assess the impact of grey squirrel populations in their natural habitat.

Action 6: BM to circulate FC report to UKRSG members

8. Regional updates

Scottish Squirrel Group

The SSG had discussed the implementation plan at the last meeting of the group and decided that it was a useful document for reporting progress at a UK and Scottish level. In the case of the latter, the plan would need to be modified for specific use by the SSG for their purposes. Point 5.2.1 – Site management plans – it was felt that these would not be appropriate for Scotland because of the large number of sites. A different approach would be adopted, looking at the strategy for Scotland as a whole and producing generic guidance on forest management that could be incorporated in the Forest Plan process covering priority woods.

JR noted that generic guidance may not be sufficient to give appropriate management for any particular woodland. GP noted that there was a need for planning for red squirrels where there might be conflicting issues or where buffer zones need to be managed in a particular way. AM advised that a strategic and integrated approach would need to be developed that took cognisance of matters such as conflicting conservation priorities and management of buffer zones.

It was suggested that generic guidance for producing management plans was required. TMJ noted that the Annex to the contract awarded to Jason Reynolds, for developing management plans for the north of England, could be produced as an advice note providing generic guidance for red squirrel management plans.

Action 7: AM send amendments to the implementation plan to JB.

Action 8: Carry advice note suggestion forward to the meeting of the Advice note group.

AM drew the attention of the group to the changed role of the UKRSG and country fora. It was felt that the country fora were not set up for an executive role and required full-time co-ordinators to carry out the work.

There was a funding gap in the FC's grant schemes, e.g. with only 60% of costs being available for grey squirrel control in Scotland, and no way of the country fora providing the extra funding. It was felt that lack of funding should be raised as a constraint in the BAP report.

Development issues and red squirrel conservation. It was suggested that the SSG should draw the attention of the SE to the lack of guidance on priority species in relation to development.

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Warfarin issue. It was agreed there was little point in discussing the paper by Stuart Barber that had been presented to the Borders Red Squirrel Group and circulated to members of the UKRSG, until the EU situation on pesticides had been resolved, which would probably be late 2003- early 2004.

Wales squirrel forum

LH advised that the Welsh forum consisted of two groups, Policy and Practice. The Practice Group had met recently and the Policy Group would be meeting in Jan/Feb 2003. CS suggested an interactive website might be useful as a way of getting the two groups to work together. It was suggested that the decision to have two groups could be reviewed in the future.

Action 9: LH to provide JB with Wales forum contact details.

England Squirrel Forum

FC reminded the Group that ESF covered all squirrel issues and not just red squirrel conservation. Currently the ESF are assisting FC England in developing a grey squirrel control policy for England. A draft policy position will be circulated in due course.

FC advised that the paper on selection of priority sites should be put in the public domain. The Group agreed.

Action 10: TMJ to prepare the paper for publication

The IoW is agreeing a MoU with FC England and English Nature regarding the immediate release of funds in the event of grey squirrel incursion. The FC had funded trapping following the July grey sightings and would be funding trapping work again in February 2003.

Northern England. Cumbria Wildlife Trust is contracted by FC England and English Nature to draw up costed management plans for priority sites in priority areas. The plans would be put together to provide a summary Action Plan for north England. Jason Reynolds is carrying out the work and is also leading discussion with HLF and others in formulating a bid based on this detailed plan.

9. BAP Reporting

JB provided a print out of the red squirrel 2002 BAP report and amendments suggested by the group were noted. The report has to be finished by 31 December 2002.

10. AOB

None

11. D.O.N. Meetings 10 April 2003, Scotland. Two day meeting, arrival on 8 April, field trip on 9 April, meeting 10 April. 3 September 2003, Belfast. 17 December 2003, London. Spring 2004, Isle of Wight.

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Jessa Battersby
UKRSG Secretariat
10 October 2002