

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 17 April 2024
6th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6)

PE2035: Recognise legal control of generalist predators as a conservation act

Introduction

Petitioner Alex Hogg on behalf of The Scottish Gamekeepers Association

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to officially recognise legal control of abundant generalist predators as an act of conservation to help ground-nesting birds in Scotland.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2035>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 6 March 2024](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to consider the evidence heard at a future meeting.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received a new written submission from the RSPB which is set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage](#).
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial position on 4 October 2023](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,428 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
April 2024

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2035: Recognise legal control of generalist predators as a conservation act

Petitioner

Alex Hogg on behalf of The Scottish Gamekeepers Association

Date Lodged

27 June 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to officially recognise legal control of abundant generalist predators as an act of conservation to help ground-nesting birds in Scotland.

Previous action

Writing to MSPs with responses of generalised understanding but no move towards a concrete action. Participating in forums such as The Moorland Forum and Biodiversity Action Groups for species such as Capercaillie. Liaising with NatureScot officials. Taking part in the Understanding Predation work supported by the Scottish Government.

Background information

In a Nature Emergency, legal control of generalist predators (such as foxes and crows) should be recognised as an act of conservation benefitting the survival of ground-nesting birds.

In 2010, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust published results of their science at Otterburn which compared plots where predators were legally managed and plots where they were not.

On average, lapwing, curlew, red grouse, golden plover and meadow pipit bred 3 times more successfully where legal predator control was carried out.

Reducing populations of abundant generalists can benefit many rarer and fragile prey species from waders and merlins to common scoters.

Just as the Parliament recognises habitat restoration as an act of conservation, so too, should it recognise control of generalist predators as similar. Both are important if we are to see ground nesting species survive in our landscape.

<https://www.gwct.org.uk/research/species/birds/lapwing-and-other-waders/predator-control-and-moorland-birds/>

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2035 on 6 March 2024

The Convener: Item 2 is the consideration of continued petitions, the first of which is PE2035, lodged by Alex Hogg, who joins us this morning at our request to give evidence on the petition, which we last considered at our meeting on 25 October 2023. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to officially recognise the legal control of abundant generalist predators as an act of conservation to help ground-nesting birds in Scotland. Mr Hogg is petitioning on behalf of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association and has indicated to the committee that he would like to make a short statement before we move to questions. Good morning, Mr Hogg. When you are settled and ready, over to you.

Alex Hogg (Scottish Gamekeepers Association): Good morning, everyone. Thank you for having me here today.

In my lifetime I have watched favourite species decline. Today, there are far more predators, far fewer wildlife managers and far fewer ground-nesting birds. Unless the remaining wildlife managers feel more supported, we will lose more of them and more birds in the remainder of my lifetime. Given the Government's written response to the petition, I feel a ministerial statement confirming support would be appropriate. That would send a signal to wildlife managers that their work in conservation is valued, that wildlife managers are recognised as contributing to nature recovery aims, and make it clear that the Scottish Government does believe, through both actions and words, that predator control can be fundamental to the conservation of species. I feel that that message has been lost.

The Scottish Government recently removed two key tools: snares and trained dogs. Foxes are proven to predate ground-nesting birds and the banning of fox snares will hasten the curlew's demise. Using foot packs of trained dogs to control foxes has been strictly licensed. No licences have been granted for conservation. Parliamentary researchers should cost out the public monies spent on habitat for ground-nesting birds compared to sums spent on predator control. The Parliament should also assess the outcomes for species. That would enlighten us on, first, where the Government's priorities are and, secondly, whether those priorities have achieved the right results. I do not believe that they have. I think that we can do both habitat and predator control in conservation and do better. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr Hogg. That is very helpful. Thank you, too, for the submissions that you have lodged to the committee. I invite my colleague Fergus Ewing to lead the questioning.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Thank you, convener, and good morning to Alex Hogg. In the interests of transparency, I should say that Alex Hogg and I have known each other since he first gave evidence on Lord Watson's bill, which I believe was 25 years ago. We have since become friends, and I am also a supporter of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, although I cannot remember

whether I have paid my annual subscription. Having made a clean breast of it, as it were, I will move to questions.

First, Mr Hogg, why is predator control required as a species conservation tool? I think that the main point of your petition is to acknowledge that that is the case. Could you explain why predator control is required and talk us through the main methods used by gamekeepers and the role that gamekeepers, in particular, play in species conservation?

Alex Hogg: A typical week like this week, say, would see your curlews and lapwings just starting to show up back on the moor. We have spent the winter keeping on top of stoats, for instance, by using box traps. We are now spending our energies trying to control the fox with what tools we have left in the toolbox. That means sitting out for many hours, early and in the evenings, seven days a week, in all weathers, just trying to protect any ground-nesting birds because they are so vulnerable now to various species whose populations have gone through the roof: ravens, foxes, stoats and weasels, things like that. We have to control them otherwise we will have a desert.

Let me give you a picture. I was helping Bryan Burrows, who is on the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project team. Yesterday, we drove down through Langholm, a 10,500 acre nature reserve that has been recently bought over, and we never saw one lapwing. We drove 20 miles south to Teesdale and we saw hundreds of lapwings, hundreds. This is what will happen. If we do not take care of things by controlling predators, we will end up with a desert.

Fergus Ewing: Can you confirm that there is predator control in Teesdale but not in Langholm?

Alex Hogg: Yes, absolutely.

Fergus Ewing: So, where there is no predator control, it becomes a species desert.

Alex Hogg: Yes, it really does. There is nothing there at all.

Fergus Ewing: What species are most at risk if there is an absence of the predator control that has historically been carried out?

Alex Hogg: Golden plover, lapwing, curlew, grouse—any ground-nesting species will be vulnerable.

Fergus Ewing: Is that because the predators regard the eggs as breakfast, lunch and tea?

Alex Hogg: Aye, and they cannae get up. Imagine a wee bird nesting in a tree or a hedge—it can get a wee bit safety. When it is on the ground, it is stuffed.

Fergus Ewing: That is very clear. Thank you.

The Scottish Government says that it recognises “that predator control is a ... component of species conservation alongside other” measures. In your opening statement, you called for the minister to confirm the Government’s support and that it values the work that keepers do and that what you described assists with nature recovery. You have also asked for information about the cost of alternative proposed methods such as habitat control. No doubt we can pursue all those things; you have asked us to do that and I hope that we can.

Do you have anything specific in mind when you say that you want the committee to explore how predator control as an important component of species conservation could be officially recognised? Are you asking for a ministerial statement, a letter to the SGA, or perhaps evidence before this committee, where the minister may be given an opportunity to confirm all the matters that you have requested? Do you have something in mind that would embody official support?

Alex Hogg: We would love it if we got a ministerial statement. Imagine this: at the minute, there are massive grants for forestry, say—£8,000 per hectare, although that might be reduced a bit—but nothing for predator control. There are huge grants for agriculture. It would be nice for it to all be intertwined and recognised.

Fergus Ewing: I believe that there is an agriculture bill coming forward and that next year sometime perhaps the Government will come forward with specific proposals about how future financial support for the rural economy should be dealt with. Are you saying that you think that predator control, recognising its value for species conservation, should be a recipient of an element of that future funding?

Alex Hogg: Aye. Imagine a farmer being given a reward for a curlew nest fledging—perhaps £1,000 or £2,000 per nest. I think that as soon as farmers heard that lapwings and curlews came within a predator control grant scheme, we would see an uprise in numbers; we really would.

Fergus Ewing: You think there should be an element of financial provision that would allow more predator control, which in turn would protect species at risk, such as lapwing, curlew, plover, capercaillie and so on.

Alex Hogg: Definitely. Curlew will go extinct. Curlew are nearly extinct in Wales. The situation is that serious.

Fergus Ewing: I have one final question. I am sure that other members of the committee wish to pursue other points, but I have a constituency interest here in relation to the capercaillie.

I think that Mr Hogg has stated that, despite the millions—tens of millions, I think; huge amounts of money—that has been expended with the aim of trying to protect the capercaillie population and see it not fall but grow, we have lost over 50 per cent of the remaining birds in five years. Is that right? Can you expand on that?

Alex Hogg: I think that the capercaillie will go extinct as well. The population is on knife-point if we do not act now. We have other problems, too. For instance, we cannot legally kill pine martens but we should maybe get a licence to move them live, and things like that. We have to work around the different areas where things are more protected. We have to try to pull all the stops out, Fergus, to save the capercaillie, and that is by predator control.

Fergus Ewing: Otherwise the caper is likely to become extinct. NatureScot has also said that it is likely to become extinct if current trends continue. Is that right?

Alex Hogg: Yes. It is very worrying.

Fergus Ewing: Despite tens of millions of pounds having been blown on this already. Has it been completely wasted? Is that the case?

Alex Hogg: Aye, they should have employed keepers from the start. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has been controlling stoats and weasels just off the mainland at the top of Scotland. I am trying to mind the island's name. There is a big control going there. They should probably have employed keepers, who would have done it better and far quicker.

Fergus Ewing: If they did employ keepers, we might have some chance of seeing species, including the caper, recover. Instead, we have had the great caper caper, as it were, with millions being blown. I will finish there.

The Convener: I represent an urban constituency and my life has all been urban. I enjoy the countryside, but I have never had to live in the countryside or depend on it directly. At least, I probably depend on it directly, but I have an indirect appreciation of how I depend on it. I have read a couple of books that were given to me that say that there has been, almost, an evisceration of certain bird populations. I have two or three questions and I would be interested to hear your reflections on them given what has been an occupation and a vocation for life for you.

First, why have legislators and urbanites become so sentimental about foxes and other predators in the sense that they do not wish to see them controlled in an effective manner but, instead, see them as things to be nourished and treasured? Meanwhile, the species to which you refer seem to have an almost anonymous profile in the minds of people who pursue those objectives.

Alex Hogg: I think that it all relates back to Walt Disney and things like that. We really could do with getting the kids on board. We have to try to change perceptions. On our charitable side, we go to teach in schools and colleges, but it is difficult. I spoke at a local school in Peebles recently. Maybe 1,000 kids came through that day, but only about 100 of them knew what a gamekeeper is. We are getting away from the real things in life.

The Convener: I think that you have broken new ground this morning, because I think that this is the first time that the Scottish Parliament has condemned Walt

Disney. [Laughter.] I am sure that that is a headline in its own right. Are you saying that the Disney factor has created an artificial and slightly sentimental view of certain animals but not others?

Alex Hogg: Aye.

The Convener: The various birds that you mentioned have been ever-present species in our countryside. What would be the practical consequence, however regrettable, of losing those species from the Scottish countryside?

Alex Hogg: I just cannot imagine losing them. We must act now to save them. Can you imagine it? It must be in the biodiversity plans to prevent their loss. If we do not—well, I wouldnae like to think about it.

The Convener: You have lived all your life with the species being part of our natural habitat and you obviously have a passion for them. What characterises the appeal of the lapwing, the curlew and the capercaillie for you?

Alex Hogg: With the curlew, it is their call. You go out in the morning and try to protect them at the nest and you hear them calling. It would be so sad not to hear that call each spring. I just cannae think that we should be facing their loss. We must act. It would be nice if the Government would recognise all the effort that we have put into saving these species.

The Convener: Fergus Ewing mentioned his association with you over 25 years. Have you seen a change in the centres of gravity in organisations such as NatureScot in the time that you have been engaging with them?

Alex Hogg: To be frank, NatureScot has been no help in the past 10 years. Years ago, I spoke to Robbie Kernahan, who works at NatureScot. I said, “Look, we have a big problem coming up with ravens. Can you please get your head round it?” However, nobody wanted to put their head above the parapet. Lately that has changed, maybe because biodiversity is going to collapse. NatureScot was at our annual general meeting and it seemed that it really wants to resolve the matter. Colin Galbraith was there and so were the chief executive and the licensing chap, Donald Fraser. It sounded as if they want to help—to get on board and get on the front foot.

It is important to get things moving more quickly because, otherwise, we are going to run out of time. One way that we can do that is by recognising certain zones. When I went to Teesdale yesterday, I saw hundreds of lapwings and curlews, and I could immediately see that that was due to the gamekeepers’ efforts. That could be a zone. We could zone areas where curlew and lapwing numbers are strong, and NatureScot could come in and say, “Let’s protect them even more.” It could give us licences and get on the front foot. At the moment, it is very difficult to get licences. Let us try to beat this.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): At the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee yesterday, we heard that the Scottish Government had used

Wikipedia as a source to explain policy in relation to the environmental court. We might say that that was Mickey Mouse policy making. Do you have confidence in the research by the Scottish Government and NatureScot and their understanding of the importance of evidence-based policy setting?

Alex Hogg: They are very choosy with some of the science. White hares are a perfect example. There are thousands of them on capercaillie ground, but the Scottish Government protected them. We had all the science, but the Scottish Government would not listen to it. Everything was on our side, but nobody took any notice. They said, “Let’s protect the white hare.” There are no white hares in the Abernethy RSPB reserve. Some of the science is believed, but some of it is disbelieved.

Maurice Golden: That is helpful. NatureScot has reviewed capercaillie conservation and it has said that lethal predator control is not its primary recommendation for a range of reasons, including that “widespread removal of a suite of species is not compatible with the overall biodiversity goals as set out in Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.”

What are your thoughts on that? How can we protect biodiversity? What might be the primary methods of doing that?

Alex Hogg: I read that report. When I saw the word “widespread”, I thought that that is where zoning comes into its own. If we focus on saving the capercaillie in zones, all the tools in the box could be used there. That would not be “widespread”.

The Convener: You said that you were in Teesdale yesterday. I have visited Teesdale and I seem to recollect that it is renowned for its waterfalls. Am I in the right place?

Alex Hogg: Yes.

The Convener: People in Teesdale will be aware of what is happening in Scotland in comparison. What observations have they made about the impact that see in Scotland? What concerns do they have as a consequence?

Alex Hogg: We have had to jump through so many hoops with the grouse moor licensing that people are just frustrated. We almost feel like second-class citizens in Scotland—especially the keepers, who have been bashed and battered. We have jumped through all the hoops and done all the snaring training and firearms training. We have done everything, but we are still getting bashed. We would just like recognition that we are valuable in the biodiversity crisis.

Fergus Ewing: I have a question on zoning. It is always good to have specific recommendations from witnesses rather than generalised commentary. I will take capercaillie as an example. There has traditionally been a capercaillie population in Strathspey. How big would the zones be? Can you expand on how the extent of the zoning would be assessed? Would it be helpful if local gamekeepers were part of the

process and they helped to identify which areas should be subject to the measure and controlled? Should there be a requirement that gamekeepers are consulted so that we get the right areas zoned?

Alex Hogg: You know Ewan Archer up at the estate. If you spoke to him, you would quickly find out which area was needed. It is really important to have the local keeper on board.

Fergus Ewing: He is head gamekeeper at the Seafield estate.

Alex Hogg: Yes.

Fergus Ewing: Gamekeepers could not only carry out the control but also be key advisers, given the work that they do on the ground. Am I right to say that only they have that knowledge as those who criticise predator control, unlike you, tend not to work in the countryside? Keepers would not only do the work but be instrumental in guiding the policy and shaping which areas need to be zoned in order to protect the songbirds, capercaillie and other species that are at risk, which might otherwise become extinct.

Alex Hogg: It would be fantastic if we got that recognition.

The Convener: Is there anything further that you would like to say to us, Mr Hogg?

Alex Hogg: Members of the committee might want to get their heads round what happened at Otterburn. The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust carried out a 10-year experiment at Otterburn, just over the border, and you can see the plots where it removed predator control. That important science shows that, without us, biodiversity and birds such as curlews and lapwings will be lost.

The Convener: Thank you for taking the trouble to come in and join us. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your service to the countryside and the species that inhabit it. Your passion is evident from your petition and we are all grateful for that.

Annexe C: Written submission

RSPB submission of 15 March 2024

PE2035/F: Recognise legal control of generalist predators as a conservation act

I am writing to the committee in reference to a comment that was made by Mr Alex Hogg of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association during a committee session on the 6th of March 2024, and the consideration of petition PE2035. In his evidence to the committee Mr Hogg stated that there are “no white hares at Abernethy...RSPB reserve”. This is completely untrue.

Mountain, or white hares (*Lepus timidus*), are found throughout the reserve from the high montane habitats to the forest edge, with recent habitat restoration works on peatlands and grazing likely to benefit the population further.

Records of mountain hares across the reserve have remained consistent with little sign of the highly cyclical population highs and lows often experienced on intensively managed grouse moors. This is likely due to the multitude of habitat types provided at Abernethy, offering different opportunities for food and shelter across the season.

Mountain hares are a key part of the Abernethy ecosystem, grazing vegetation from the high peaks to the forest edge and an important prey item for threatened predators like Golden Eagle and White-Tailed Eagle – which are also present and breeding at Abernethy. Our work at Abernethy provides the species with a naturally functioning ecosystem that can continue to support a healthy, stable population.

If any of the committee would like to visit Abernethy to see the work we are undertaking at this amazing site, then you would of course be most welcome.

Head of Species and Land Management