

Position Statement

Moving plants and animals for conservation purposes

February 2016



WOODLAND
TRUST

Moving plants and animals for conservation purposes



Gilles San Martin

The Trust's view

- Proposals to move plants, animals and fungi for conservation purposes are likely to increase in the face of increasing environmental change, especially climate change, and pressures on biodiversity.
- Translocation of species from one area to another can be an effective conservation strategy where this is intended to bring measurable conservation benefits at the level of population, species or ecosystem.
- However, it also carries risks. Thorough assessment of potential ecological, social and economic impacts, both direct and indirect, positive and negative, should be carried out. Where there is high risk, or uncertainty of risk, conservation translocations should not proceed.
- Movement of species to areas outside their indigenous range should be treated with particular caution since past experience has shown these can have extremely damaging negative impacts, which are often difficult to foresee.
- There is a clear distinction between conservation translocation and mitigation translocation, where a species is translocated because its habitat is to be lost due to human actions, for example development. Mitigation translocation should be a last resort and treated with extreme caution.
- Accidental introduction of species by humans to areas outside their indigenous range risks damage to native habitats and species, for example by invading an area or by transporting pests and diseases, and steps should be taken to avoid this.

The Trust will

- Continue to endorse and follow the guidelines set out by the IUCN on conservation translocations.

Moving plants and animals for conservation purposes

The deliberate movement by humans of other species has occurred for millennia, including for conservation purposes. The current unprecedented rate of environmental change, including climate change, coupled with loss and fragmentation of natural habitats, places severe pressures on the world's biodiversity. Proposals for movement of plants and animals, both within and outside their indigenous range, are likely to increase. Currently topical are debates around reintroduction of major predator species such as lynx and wolf to the UK, and in future, the impacts of climate change, pests and diseases may prompt more proposals for conservation introductions.

The IUCN has produced guidelines on "conservation translocations", the human-assisted movement of species for conservation benefits. These distinguish different types of movement. Population restoration is movement of species to areas within their natural range, and includes reinforcement of existing populations, and re-introduction of species to areas from which they had disappeared. Conservation introduction involves movement of species outside their indigenous range for conservation purposes, and may be either assisted colonisation, aiming to prevent extinction of populations of the species, or ecological replacement, the release of an organism outside its indigenous range to perform a specific ecological function.

To qualify as a conservation translocation, the proposed movement of species must be intended to yield a measurable conservation benefit at the levels of a population, species or ecosystem, and not just provide benefit to translocated individuals. It does not include mitigation translocation where animals or plants are moved from habitat which will be lost due to human activity, for example development, and released at an alternative site, unless this also fits the requirements set out above.

The IUCN guidelines state that, "Translocation is an effective conservation tool but its use on its own or in conjunction with other conservation solutions needs rigorous justification." Any translocation carries risks and these must be weighed against conservation benefits through a thorough assessment process that takes into account ecological, social and economic impacts, both positive and negative. Where risk is high and/or there is uncertainty about risks and their impacts, a translocation should not proceed. This is particularly the case for conservation introductions, since past experience has shown that release of species outside their indigenous range may cause extreme negative impacts that are difficult to foresee

The Woodland Trust supports this approach and would wish to see any proposals for conservation translocations follow the assessment process set out in the IUCN guidelines. This includes assessing feasibility, including whether any original causes of decline or extinction still exist, any other threats (direct or indirect) exist, and whether any long term management would be needed and is sustainable. The impact on source populations should also be considered, as should potential alternatives to translocation, such as increasing habitat availability and connectivity.

Risks to be assessed should include possible ecological consequences, such as inter-specific and intra-specific competition or hybridisation, parasitism, grazing and browsing damage, interaction with invasive species and introduction of pathogens to the same species, other species or humans. Impacts on ecosystem function through changes in hydrology, nutrient regimes, soil attributes and other factors should also be considered.

Socio-economic risks should also be considered such as potential or perceived dangers or impacts on livelihoods from released plants, animals and fungi, and indirect ecological effects that could threaten food supplies or ecosystem services such as clean water, erosion control, pollination, or nutrient cycling. Finally, financial risks, for example of unintended consequences, should be assessed.