Written evidence submitted by Shona M Fraser

My interest in this subject relates to my concerns about the management of our wildlife and countryside, my concerns about issues of animal cruelty, and the public’s enjoyment of wildlife, specifically in relation to mental health.

My very first concern, on reading the government’s webpage, is the way in which a plant and a sentient, intelligent animal have been linked together under this banner of ‘invasive pest’. That they are technically ‘invasive’ is not in question here. Anyone with an interest in the issue of grey squirrels knows that they were brought here in large numbers in the 1870s. But the sad fact is that as soon as an animal is labelled as a pest, its rights under law to be treated humanely seem to evaporate. Rescue centres being told that they cannot help sick or injured animals, red squirrel ‘conservation’ groups going out killing adult greys all year round leaving young to starve to death in their drays and the random and crude methods of killing trapped greys are fundamentally inhumane and a disgraceful example of the man’s disregard for the rest of the species we share this planet with.

Red squirrel conservation groups near my home in the North East of England kill greys all year round, leaving young to die of starvation in their drays. They employ crude killing methods in areas where they are not able to use guns to shoot the trapped squirrels and have happily offered to ‘train’ volunteers, to do the same. ‘Cranial dispatch’, in their sanitised terminology, is the act of hitting something over the head until it is dead. This is completely unregulated and, once ‘training’ is given, unsupervised. It seems that anyone who wants to can set up a ‘red squirrel conservation group’ and go out and do this. I have seen the Facebook pages for some of these groups where they proudly share photographs of all the squirrels they have killed. This is clearly open to abuse and bad practice which is causing untold pain and suffering to these animals on a massive scale. ‘Culls’ back in the 1950s and 1970s, when there were actually fewer grey squirrels here than are here now, proved to be abject failures as seen in the current estimated grey squirrel numbers. If we really do want to remove the grey squirrels from the UK, and I don’t believe that most people do want that, we must find a better, and a humane, method of doing so.

At what point is a species no longer considered to be invasive? It has been estimated that if all non-native species of wildlife were removed from our shores we would lose 50% of all our wildlife. How can that possible be a good thing? The grey squirrels have been in our country for 150 years. They now live in far more of our land than the reds do. They have adapted very well to our habitat due to their inherent intelligence and ability to eat a much wider diet than the reds. Our forestry requirements as humans has changed in their favour too with the planting of far more broad-leafed forests to combat climate change. In the past we grew more fast-growing coniferous trees for their wood which favoured the reds’ diet. This swing towards broad-leafed planting is likely to continue as we try to mop up carbon emissions.
The red squirrel is not an endangered species. They are widespread across Europe and northern Asia and any native red squirrel sub-species we may have had here in the UK was wiped out well over a century ago when it was the red squirrel that was the pest and persecuted by us into virtual extinction then re-imported from Europe when we changed our minds and decided we liked them again. So the current persecution of the grey with a view to preserving the ‘endangered’ red is entirely mis-guided. If all the time, money and effort put into ‘saving’ the reds was used to improve the natural habitat in general more species could be helped than just this one red-furred rodent.

The red squirrel issue aside, the other main reason cited for the need to grey squirrel ‘control’ is the damage they do to trees. This is the self-same damage done by red squirrels that caused their persecution in the late 1800s. With the reds restored how long would it be before forest managers/gamekeepers would be calling for another red squirrel cull. Where does it end, all this killing? It is a lazy, cheap and thoughtless way of dealing with a perceived problem.

I would ask the government to look closely, with unbiased eyes, at the motivation behind the calls for the greys to be wiped out. How many of those on that side of the argument are the same people who are running estates where their business is the shooting of the (non-native) pheasant or the (non-native) partridge and they don’t want the grey squirrels taking the food they leave out to artificially encourage the birds to stay around so they can be paid to let people shoot them. And how many of these gamekeepers have been suspected of, or prosecuted for, acts of animal cruelty, the illegal persecution or treatment of raptors, use of unlicensed poisons or the indiscriminate use of traps and snares or flouted the current fox-hunting laws. Business interests should not be an excuse for animal cruelty, ever.

And in answer to the question of what do I do when I see an invasive species, in the case of the grey squirrels that inhabit my local park I smile, my serotonin levels increase, they make me happy as I watch them running around in the trees and therefore my mental health improves. I frequently share that joy with other park users and we watch them together, sharing a bit of social interaction as we wonder at the squirrels’ skill and dexterity or laugh as they scamper across the ground in the Autumn stashing winter food. These are the only wild mammals some of us ever see and, as the effects of being out in nature on our mental well-being is now being widely recognised, we cannot under-estimate the positive effects that seeing these ‘pests’ in our gardens and parks is having on us. Not all of us can afford or are able to travel to the areas inhabited by reds to enjoy watching them too. For most of us, the grey squirrels are the only ones we will ever see. In addition, I’ve helped to take families on nature walks in our local park and the children especially are always thrilled to see the grey squirrels. They will never see red squirrels here because the habitat is not suitable. In the park’s 134 years, it has never had red squirrels. A total extinction of greys here would leave us with nothing. Seeing these animals alive and right in front of them engages children
with nature in a way that even the best tv cannot do which is something that is so important for the future of our planet.

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