Written evidence submitted by Stephen Oades

Argument against categorising grey squirrels as an invasive species.

The argument that grey squirrels damage trees is exaggerated, we regularly visit an area of protected woodland where there are numerous squirrels, the woodlands are in excellent condition – similarly there is no evidence of damage to trees in the numerous parks we frequent in West London, all of which have a good population of squirrels – in addition the behaviour and impact of red squirrels is no different from that of greys. Grey squirrels are accused of "costing the economy" various vast sums of money, however much of these costs are incurred due to the pointless and cruel culls. The supposed losses of the timber industry (where material that has cosmetic damage is calculated as being lost to production altogether, whereas in actual fact it is not taken out of production - cosmetic damage is immaterial in cases of pulp or construction timber.

Grey squirrel rescue are being targeted in the name of helping red squirrels, but red squirrels are not an endangered species. They are plentiful in the rest of the world, wherever the habitat is suitable for them. In Great Britain, however, they declined by the end of the 18th century, before grey squirrels were introduced. It happened because of habitat loss. (therefore even if grey squirrels were eradicated, reds would not replace them in most areas). Red squirrels were later reintroduced from Scandinavia – these are however a different sub-species from the now extinct British species, so they are not native either. The colonies of red squirrels that exist in England today are artificially maintained, with extensive captive breeding, nest boxes and supplementary feeding - like large zoos. It is for the most part a harmless exercise, but only as long as it does not entail cruelty to another species of squirrel! It is often claimed that greys carry squirrel pox which can cause death in red squirrels, but according to the evidence, only 2% of red squirrel deaths are attributable to squirrel pox, in this regard they are far more likely to contract the disease from other red squirrels than from greys. Red squirrels suffer from a variety of diseases with skin lesion symptoms, and these have nothing to do with grey squirrels, but may have a lot to do with the artificial maintenance of red squirrels in unnaturally (for them) high densities. Almost 50% of red squirrel deaths are due to traffic.

The biggest threat to red squirrels is loss of habitat, therefore the most effective way to help the red squirrel, is to restore suitable habitat. Several areas of Scotland, for example, are suitable for red squirrels, and there they easily out-compete the greys. In other areas the two species co-exist - but the habitat has to be right for the less adaptable red in order for this to happen.

Finally - Rescue numbers are not significant in terms of the overall grey squirrel population. But they are very significant for humanity's compassion foot-print. For many people grey squirrels are their only contact with 'wildlife'. The thought that these animals, or their young, can no longer be helped by wildlife rescuers is distressing (Please note that a rescue centre that is not allowed to release animals
has to stop taking in new ones and has to turn away or kill them.)

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