Written evidence submitted by Marilyn Dance

Executive Summary

- Grey squirrels are a part of our modern landscape in both rural and urban settings and they have become established because the ecosystem supports them;
- Grey squirrels now have a place in the heart of the nation and this is reflected in modern tales of morality from Hollywood and others;
- Grey squirrels are perhaps the only wildlife mammals that most children will see and rather than exterminating injured creatures modern instincts are to rescue them;
- Dealing coldly with grey squirrels as invasive species will get the government on the wrong side of public opinion;
- Organisations that rescue injured animals must be able to deal with all animals ethically and the Law should support them to do so; even in the case of grey squirrels.

Introduction

1. I signed petition 235425 “Make grey squirrel rescue exempt from Invasive Alien Species Order 2019”. In response to my action the Petitions team UK Government and Parliament; contacted me via email writing “the Environmental Audit Committee, are investigating invasive species. They want to hear your views”.

2. I signed the petition because I am an animal lover and couldn’t bear the thought that rescued wild grey squirrels would be kept, under the 2019 Invasive Alien Species Act, in captivity for their life span or be destroyed. I am a subscription member of the Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB) and Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). I have read the Governments Strategy documents on the Environment and Invasive Species which on the whole I agree with. I live in Breckland which has a reserve of native red squirrels in the coniferous forest of Thetford. However, I have never seen a red squirrel outside of this reserve. In my deciduous village garden there are five contented grey squirrels who form part of the developing healthy bio-diverse triangle with predator at the top. They are smart and amusing.

Evidence

3. Like myself the majority of the public’s experience of a squirrel is a grey. The reason is they can survive in urban and deciduous landscapes. The red squirrel depends on pre 1940’s type coniferous landscape which sadly has been badly eroded. Despite best intentions and aspirations urban and deciduous landscapes will not be turned into coniferous ones. Therefore the best red squirrels can expect is to live within reserves that cater for their needs; watched over by devoted specialists.

4. For those living in urban areas and deciduous landscapes the grey squirrel can only ever be the squirrel the public will see. Ecologists are reputed to agree that the grey squirrel will never be eliminated from this country.

5. It has also made an entry into our popular culture via Walt Disney’s animated film – “The Nut Job”. This presents Surly, the grey squirrel, who with his friends: Buddy, Andie, and
Precious, uncover a plan by the mayor of Oakton City to destroy their home to build a giant amusement park. The story is about how the animals stop the mayor in order to save the city park.

6. A lap top study of wildlife rescue charities confirms that very few grey squirrels are received by them. Those that are consist of adults suffering dog bites or kittens that have fallen out of their nests. Very many of these charities say they are prepared to keep rescued squirrels for their life span in confinement and neutered.

7. Infestation of grey squirrels in house lofts are dealt with predominantly by the Pest Control Officer who destroys them. I remember an office conversation where one of my colleagues let slip, to the rest of us, that she was waiting for the Pest Control Officer to deal with a grey squirrel in her loft. The animosity that arose from this comment was uncomfortable.

8. When the full implication of the Invasive Species Act 2019 for rescued grey squirrels is made known to their altruistic public supporter they may become convinced that best practice for their charge is to develop skills themselves to look after the animal and then release it clandestinely back into the wild. In addition to flaunting the Law, resentment will develop against Parliament and the Government. This will compound that which is already felt.

9. Public opinion can be fuelled by emotion rather than logical argument and more so when wild animals are involved. Perceived persecution of a vulnerable grey squirrel that requires help will add to the division in our society. Examples of this may be gauged by the public backlash against culling badgers and the lobby to reinstate fox hunting.

10. The Prime Minister wisely said that compromise rather than standoffs achieve aims. The Law is not flexible unless this is built in. Therefore, I humbly request Members of the Environmental Audit Committee, investigating Invasive Species, to agree to exempt rescued squirrels from this Act.

Recommendation for action

- That Members of the Environmental Audit Committee, investigating invasive species recommend an exemption for rescued squirrels under the Invasive Species Act 2019.

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