Written evidence submitted by Animal Aid

Executive Summary

- It is wrong to equate animals and plants when discussing invasive species, as one is sentient and the other is not.
- All wildlife in the UK should be given the same legal protections, regardless of their origins.
- Attempting to eradicate species of animals is morally wrong, and all the more senseless when they are already well-established in this country.
- It is cruel and misguided to cull grey squirrels, and make their rescue illegal, in an attempt to boost red squirrel numbers.

1) I am Jade Emery, Wildlife Campaigner for animal protection group Animal Aid, submitting evidence on the group’s behalf. We are submitting evidence in order to speak up for the wildlife who are considered ‘invasive species’, and are sometimes the victims of government-endorsed cruelty for this reason.

2) Our first and main point when submitting this evidence is that it is unethical and unproductive to equate ‘invasive’ plants with ‘invasive’ animals, and combine the two when considering action to be taken against them. It is widely accepted by both the scientific community and general public that animals are sentient and have the ability to feel pain, which plants do not.

3) It is very important to realise that an animal’s ‘non-native’ origin does not impact their ability to feel pain. Animals such as grey squirrels, Muntjac deer and Canada geese are already well established in the UK, and unless there is a hugely cruel and overblown effort to eradicate the entire species in the UK, they are here to stay. For this reason, the origin of an animal should have no legal bearing on the treatment of that animal. Animal Aid would recommend that the government take action to award ‘non-native’ animals the same legal protections that are already enjoyed by other wildlife in this country. There should be no difference in the legal repercussions of harming or killing an animal due to their origins.

Points relating to grey squirrels:

4) We will now go on to discuss grey squirrels in particular. We feel it is important to do this as grey squirrels are one of the listed ‘invasive species’ with the largest population, and who are threatened on such a considerable scale by government policy on invasive species.

5) As is observable in both the Invasive Species online discussion forum and the number of people supporting the Urban Squirrels petition (https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/235425), many people do not consider grey squirrels a problematic ‘invasive species’ in the same way they would consider a plant such as Japanese Knotweed. Grey squirrels are some of the only wildlife people who live outside of the countryside interact with on a regular basis.

6) Grey squirrels are the only species of squirrel in large parts of the UK. While we do not condone lethal action being taken against these animals anywhere
in the UK, it is important to point out the absurdity of culling and outlawing rescue of grey squirrels in places where there are no red squirrels. The same point can be raised regarding areas where there is no timber industry. Grey squirrels can still be legally persecuted in areas where it cannot possibly be argued that they have any negative impact on other wildlife or trees. Animal Aid would question the sense behind such laws.

7) Grey squirrels have been, over the course of the last century, subjected to blame for the decline of red squirrels across the UK. Animal Aid disputes the idea that grey squirrels are responsible for the decline of red squirrels. The decline of red squirrels is down to a number of factors, and is a complex issue. Deforestation, changes in the climate, pollution, and culling have all resulted in the decline in red squirrels. It is very likely that if not artificially maintained, red squirrel populations would be extremely low in the UK due to these factors, unconnected to the grey squirrel. Red squirrels today are far more likely to die as the result of a traffic accident than following contact with a grey squirrel. It is also very important to point out that red squirrels are not endangered worldwide. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species has them listed as a species of ‘least concern’. To encourage culling of one species in order to help another is morally wrong, but to do this when the scientific literature supports the conclusion that this is not helpful (Harris, Stephen & Soulsbury, Carl & Iossa, Graziella. (2019). Is culling of grey squirrels a viable tactic to conserve red squirrel populations?) is all the more unethical.

8) The revocation of the release licences issued by Natural England is a particularly heinous example of the impact legislation against ‘invasive species’ can have. From October 2019, it will become illegal for rescue organisations to rescue and release grey squirrels back into the wild. Previously, Natural England issued licences to particular organisations in England to allow the release of grey squirrels following treatment. From October onwards, rescue organisations will be forced to either euthanise grey squirrels, or keep them in captivity for the rest of their lives. Keeping these wild animals in captivity for their entire lives is both cruel and impractical. These same rescue restrictions will relate to other non-native species such as Muntjac deer. We would argue that the action of revoking these licences exposes either the intentional brutality of the laws on ‘invasive species’, or the deep flaws in their design. The numbers of grey squirrels released into the wild after being rescued are not significant in terms of their overall population. However, removing the right of rescue organisations to save orphaned and injured squirrels does have a significant impact on our compassion towards animals.

Recommendations

9) To summarise, Animal Aid would recommend that all non-native animals are awarded the same protections as other wildlife in the UK, since they are equally sentient and capable of suffering. In particular, is time to accept species who have been in this country for over a century, instead of allowing needless violence to continue, in a futile attempt to bring down their numbers or eradicate them.

10) It is also essential that the government is not persuaded to subsidise the activities of the bloodsport and shooting lobby under the guise of maintaining ‘native species’.
11) We would also call for an immediate reversal of the decision to no longer issue licences to release grey squirrels in England due to the unnecessary cruelty and distress it will cause.

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