Written evidence submitted by David Saxby, archaeologist and wildlife photographer

Is the grey squirrel a pest or a much-admired animal that promotes health and wellbeing?

Introduction

The EU Regulation 1143/2014 on Invasive Alien Species (Grey Squirrel) only addresses the concerns of the forester and red squirrel conservation, but fails to address the benefits the grey squirrel brings to the happiness and wellbeing to all who visit their local parks, gardens and green spaces or to those who see their antics through a window of a concrete urban environment.

Historically, it is well known that the grey squirrel was introduced to England in 1876, however, by the 19th century many of the red squirrels were extinct in many areas of Britain and those which were present were mainly imported from Scandinavia. In the 1890s red squirrels suffered a disastrous epidemic which nearly wiped out all the red squirrel population from England and Southern Scotland. Writing in 1945 the naturalist R.S.R Fitter states ‘It is often maintained that the grey squirrel has driven out the red squirrel over a great part of England. The truth seems to be that the grey arrived in this country at a time when the fortunes of the red were at a very low ebb and was thus able to occupy the niche left vacant by the red’s decline following a disastrous epidemic about fifty years ago. It must be remembered that the natural habitat of the red squirrel is coniferous woodland, and it was only because of the intensive persecution of its natural enemies, especially martens, by game-preservers, that it was enabled to spread into the deciduous woodlands in the south in such abundance during the nineteenth century’ (R.S.R Fitter, 1945, 216).

Today, the grey squirrel serves the same purpose in the ecosystem the red squirrel did many years ago. The Government plans to plant one million urban trees, which the grey squirrel does with great abundance. The trees planted by the grey squirrel provides food and shelter for other animals and birds. For instance, the Yew tree relies on woodland animals to spread its seeds. The grey squirrel eats the berries and spread the poisonous seeds to more open areas in their poo. They swallow the whole berry, but only digest the sticky outer coating. The poisonous seeds pass through their system undamaged and grow into new Yew trees (from Kew Gardens blog, Ellen Mchale, 19 November 2018).

More and more rural areas are becoming urbanised. With this, the Government has identified the need for green spaces to enhance our wellbeing and mental health and to bring beauty and pleasure to our lives in an ever-changing world. One animal which helps in this is the grey squirrel which brings pleasure to children, happiness and entertainment to the middle aged, comfort to the elderly and lonely and provides health and wellbeing to all communities.

The Government’s new ‘A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment, 2018’ outlines numerous ideas and goals to enhance Britain’s green heritage. Chapter 3 ‘Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing’ outlines a number of strategies.

1. We will: Help people improve their health and wellbeing by using green spaces including through mental health services.
2. Encourage children to be close to nature, in and out of school, with particular focus on disadvantaged areas.
3. ‘Green’ our towns and cities by creating green infrastructure and planting one million urban trees.
4. Make 2019 a year of action for the environment, working with Step Up To Serve and other partners to help children and young people from all backgrounds to engage with nature and improve the environment.

‘Spending time in the natural environment – as a resident or a visitor – improves our mental health and feelings of wellbeing. It can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as asthma. It can combat loneliness and bind communities together’.

‘The Industrial Strategy Grand Challenge for an Ageing Society sets out our aim to help older citizens lead independent fulfilled lives, continuing to contribute to society. A thriving and healthy environment is a vital part of this, and a powerful tool for combatting isolation and loneliness’.

Others have also reported on the importance of green spaces to promote health and wellbeing:

National Parks England says that National Parks ‘are a significant part of the natural health service...Mental illness accounts for 23 per cent of all ill-health in England and affects more than one in four of the population at any time. The Government estimates that obesity costs the NHS £5 billion every year. With over 50 per cent of the population living within one hours travel of a National Park, the National Parks can support measures to help improve health and well-being objectives’ (National Parks England website).

‘There is a growing body of evidence that suggests urban green spaces are good for people’s well-being. Living in an urban area with green spaces has a long-lasting positive impact on people’s mental well-being, a study has suggested’ (Mark Kinver, Environment reporter, BBC News, 12 January 2014).

‘people living in greener urban areas were displaying fewer signs of depression or anxiety...There is evidence that people within an area with green spaces are less stressed and when you are less stressed you make more sensible decisions and you communicate better’ (Co-author Dr. Mathew White, from the European Centre for Environment and Human Health at the University of Exeter, UK).

Countryside Recreation Network states: ‘Today, stress and mental ill-health are becoming more common, and the associated public health costs are growing. The World Health Organisation estimates that depression and depression-related illness will become the greatest source of ill-health by 2020’ (Countryside Recreation Network).

‘...exposure to trees, the sky and birdsong is also proven to boost health and wellbeing — specifically with those who live in the city’ (Kings College London researchers).

‘...short-term exposure to nature has a measurable beneficial impact on mental wellbeing. The interaction of this effect with trait impulsivity is intriguing, as it suggests that nature could be especially beneficial to those individuals who are at risk of poor mental health’ (Dr Andrea Mechelli, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience at Kings College London).

Although the Government's new 25 Year Plan provides a positive outlook to promote health and wellbeing, it does not mention the residence of these natural environments; the insects, the birds and the animals. One of the most popular mammals is the grey squirrel which provides health, happiness and wellbeing in both urban and rural environments. Research by Dr Carl Soulsbury concerning urban wildlife states ‘While promoting education about urban wildlife and its risks is important, the benefit wildlife brings to urban areas is often
poorly communicated. It includes benefits such as regulating and supporting the ecosystem, through to improving human health and wellbeing... We need to identify ways to maximise the benefits, in particular increasing the accessibility of natural green spaces and promoting interactions with wildlife as a form of nature-based therapy. It is only through such an integrative approach that we can advance our understanding of how to live successfully alongside wildlife in an increasingly urbanised world... The main problem is that many of the benefits of living alongside urban wildlife are difficult to quantify. However, we do know that the presence of wildlife gives people an opportunity to connect directly with nature at a local level. This is becoming particularly important in our increasingly urban society where humans are becoming more remote from the natural environment... More work is needed to better understand the role of urban wildlife and urban biodiversity in general, in the promotion of mental health and its greater role as a recreational and cultural ecosystem service. To do so wildlife biologists will need to work with other research disciplines including economics, public health, sociology, ethics, psychology and planning’ (Dr Carl Soulsbury, conservation biologist based in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Lincoln. Wildlife in built-up areas: An undervalued part of our urban ecosystems, 15 July 2015).

Case studies

Evidence for the grey squirrel providing health and wellbeing is abundant which addresses the Government’s Chapter 3 of ‘A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment, 2018’. Below are a few examples:

Earlier this year, at Kew Gardens, an old lady told me that ‘Her only pleasure left in life was to feed the squirrels there, but once a member of the public told her not to which triggered an angina attack. However, she has now ignored this advice and now happily lives out the rest of her natural life feeding the little ones she loves’ (source: David Saxby).

Charlie Oughton, a journalist, was attacked by a gang of youths in Deptford High Street. After leaving hospital Charlie had an interaction with a grey squirrel. Charlie says ‘He was still learning to cope with the post-traumatic stress (PTSD), but he now regularly goes to parks and graveyards to care for squirrels. That involves making sure nobody is hurt and educating people who might be harming them’. Charlie said ‘…They are trying to get rid of grey squirrels because of their colour. I have never had one bite me. With the pace of modern life, having an animal is proven to calm us down. Don’t ask vets to be inhumane. Killing one species to save red squirrels is just cruelty and doesn’t work’. Charlie has names for the squirrels in the graveyard he visits, including Kate, Spike and Abigail (see full story at https://www.newsshopper.co.uk/news/17333624.squirrels-help-man-recover-from-ptsd-after-deptford-high-street-attack/).

‘I was going through a bad time in my life. I made myself go outside and do gardening. From a tree I saw a grey squirrel climb down with something quite large in her mouth and go up another tree. And then she went back to the first tree climbed down again with something large in her mouth. That is odd I thought. Then by the third or fourth trip I saw what she was carrying her babies! I watched in wonder at this precious mother’s care and love for her offspring. She was not afraid of me as I watched her in the full splendour of her motherhood’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

‘I used to go over to the park twice a day in summer and once a day during winter (due to lack of sunlight). Although I was working, I was very lonely. I had a disability that made me want to retreat from human contact. The squirrels were very bold and quite tame. They would sit on my shoulders to eat or my legs. They would take monkey nuts from my hand gently, they never snatched food away. I had names for about seven of the squirrels. They were my regulars and seemed to know when I was about. At one point, a few of the squirrels
contracted eye infections similar to rabbits. A local vet called Amanda, who I found out was very committed to treating all animals, made some medicine in chocolate drops for the squirrels. They all recovered. They also love chocolate. Over time, the squirrels moved on or worse died. My favourite seven all died eventually. I was heartbroken and could no longer go over to the park because I missed them so much. I won't forget those bold little beings’
(source: Urban Squirrels)

’I started feeding the squirrels in Twickenham, very soon they came to trust us and visit the flat we were staying in. Whenever I worked from home, they would actually knock at the balcony door. They were extremely entertaining and brightened up my days. Later we found that grey squirrels frequented the garden in Woking (after the building works stopped) here too, they came to trust us. I have also become acquainted with a squirrel rehabber who looks after orphaned squirrels. Several of those in the garden come to me if I am outside, or come to the house if I am working from home, they are entertaining and friendly’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’I’d put out the squirrel feed every morning at the same time. I was too ill to go back to uni, and I needed something to do. After about three weeks, the squirrels would wait in the trees for me to come out. I'd see them running and jumping from tree to tree and just watching for me. When they had babies, they brought the babies down too, and it made me feel at peace watching them. It didn’t matter that I continued to suffer with an eating disorder, the squirrels were happy to see me. It made me feel responsible for something, like I was having a positive impact in something's life, and that really helped with my suicidal thoughts after discharge’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’Squirrels cheer me up on a bad day I like watching their funny antics one is very tame and comes right up to me the other squirrels are beginning to trust me too’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’At a time I was feeling quite down and depressed with life, this little grey squirrel came into it and reminded me of the precious gift that life is. I will forever be grateful to her. Her love for her children was simply breath-taking’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’I felt wanted. They gave me a mission. To feed them and look out for their welfare. I bought books on urban squirrels and other wildlife so that I could find out more about them. They made me feel less lonely’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’I have always liked them, now I have closer contact with them more regularly, I really enjoy them - I have put out water dispensers and a feeding box and enjoy watching them’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’I can’t bring myself to even imagine the country without those lovely cheeky fluffy friends’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’They are quite intelligent and they are protective of their young, so are just like say a cat, or a dog, any sentient creature, they have feelings and they care and they show fear, trust, contentment, pleasure and probably much more that I don't see. One young squirrel likes stretching out, lying on the small shed roof in the sun. They are a lovely addition to our garden and make going out to feed them in the mornings and afternoons a pleasure’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’Grey squirrels can help people to make a connection with nature’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

’I am pretty upset about the fact that if the new Invasive Species Act closes rescues or forces them to kill squirrels brought in that need help if they are grey ones, I will have
nowhere to go next time I see a squirrel in need. Red squirrels can’t live in urban areas, so all this means is that the cities will become that much more depressing. I have had to talk to my GP about the impact to my mental health, not being able to help these little animals will have, not just on me, but on the friends I have made too. Why is it okay for rich people to release thousands of pheasants, that aren’t native, just so that they can shoot them, but it’s not okay for common citizens who pay their taxes, to help an animal in need?’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

‘Our government need to start being more compassionate to our wildlife instead of destroying it!’ (source: Urban Squirrels)

Conclusion

As demonstrated, the grey squirrel is much loved and admired by many people young and old alike. They bring health and wellbeing to people who can access a green space, park or wood in both rural and urban environments and bring pleasure to those who can only observe nature from a window. The grey squirrel saves the Government money in providing health benefits, brings children from a computer screen to an oak tree and reduces stress and loneliness.

By removing the current licencing, the public will be forced to decide whether to send an injured or orphaned squirrel to a wildlife rescue centre or vets to be euthanised or to keep it knowing that this is its only chance of life. The Government’s decision will only introduce more stress and depression costing the NHS more money, a cure of which is to visit green spaces and enjoy nature as highlighted by the Government’s ‘A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment, 2018’!

Strict control measures and licencing are already in place and therefore Natural England and DEFRA should show compassion in helping injured or abandoned squirrels under the current licencing laws. A compassionate Government will go a long way in connecting the public with its public servants.

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