Written evidence submitted by Dr Amelia Roberts

Grey Squirrels are not really a problem

Vested interest groups exaggerate the problem of the grey squirrel.

Crucially, preventing the treatment and release of individual grey squirrels will make no overall difference to squirrel numbers and will result in criminalising compassion.

Grey squirrels are well adapted to their habitat across most of the UK in areas that the red squirrel will not thrive. The grey squirrel should therefore be left alone. It should become a protected species and people should require licences to cull them rather than this being unregulated.

Myth-busting:

Despite common belief, the grey squirrel has not been the cause of the decline of the red. The red is less adaptable than the grey. Deforestation and habitat loss caused them to disappear from Ireland as early as the 15th century, long before the grey was introduced. In addition, in the late 19th and early 20th century red squirrels were considered pests and were killed in their thousands. The Highland Squirrel Club killed 60,500 red squirrels in just one area in 15 years (Ritchie, 1920). By the 1920s their population had been decimated. Humans were still killing them in the 1970s as part of 'Squirrel Clubs'.

They even prefer different environments and food sources - Greys prefer deciduous trees and eat acorns, but Reds prefer pine trees and find acorns indigestible.

What about the song birds?

Grey squirrels are mainly herbivorous, eating acorns and hazel nuts, berries, fungi and even bark, buds and shoots. Only on very rare occasions when plant food is very scarce will they eat insects, smaller rodents, bird eggs and nestlings. (Nottingham Wildlife Trust)

Interestingly, when people in Britain were encouraged to kill Red Squirrels, the reason given then was also 'damage to trees' and 'eating song bird eggs'.

Squirrel damage is vastly overrated and rarely happens in mature trees. It tends to be only new plantations that are affected and there are other ways to protect these through location choice, squirrel repellent devices and squirrel proof fencing. The people who really dislike grey squirrels tend to be those with vested commercial interests, like shooting estates.

'The bird-shooting lobby also supports and conducts mass culls. They kill squirrels because they cannot tolerate the animals eating some of the grain, which is intended to keep the pheasants in one place until they can be shot. The shooting industry is extraordinarily intolerant of any animal or bird who interferes with its interests, even if the damage amounts to just a few pence. At its core is selfishness and greed, but it is often draped in the language of conservation. Ironic, then, that the shooting industry releases 45 million nonnative birds into the countryside each year and kills countless native species in order to 'protect' these birds until they, too, can be killed for sport'

Animal Aid
**Culling is cruel**

The University Federation for Animal Welfare says there is no humane way to cull squirrels. Warfarin poison takes several days to work and causes painful bleeding in the skull and joints. Trapped squirrels waiting to be shot experience hunger, thirst and distress as well as injuring themselves trying to escape.

**It cannot work**

Left alone, the grey squirrel population is stable. It cannot be eradicated (Solicitor General statement to MPs). Conservationists such as Steven Harris and Chris Packham are against a grey squirrel cull.

Grey Squirrels are one of the few wild mammals that can coexist happily with us in the barren landscape that humans have created. They are intelligent and charming. They offer children an opportunity to interact with nature. We should not be hurting and killing them on the flimsiest of excuses.

*May 2019*