



Somerset
Wildlife Trust



Somerset Wildlife Trust Position Statement

Species Translocation & Nature Recovery

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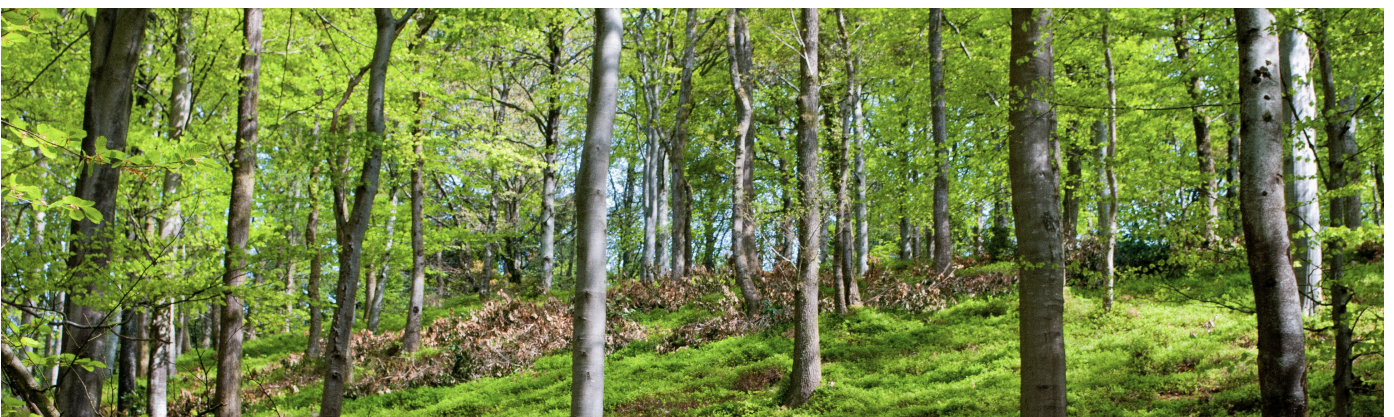
Introduction

Globally, there is a biodiversity crisis. The Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII) measures how species are responding in the face of anthropogenic (man-made) pressures (Natural History Museum, 2024). This dataset shows that the United Kingdom is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world with a BII of just 50%, below the 75% global average and well below the 90% calculated as the safe limit for ecological resilience. Further, of the four UK nations, England was the worst-performing. This decline in biodiversity is also resulting in an overabundance of some invasive species due to the lack of predators in higher trophic levels, resulting in further ecological damage (e.g. over-grazing of woodland areas) or illness or starvation as nature's way of controlling excessive population sizes. Adding to the threat this biodiversity crisis poses to us and to wildlife is the twinned climate emergency.

Healthy ecosystems regulate ecological processes, including air and water quality and natural population control. Therefore, nature recovery brings a host of benefits environmentally (e.g. natural population control, natural flood management, improving air or water quality) and socially (e.g. business diversification opportunities and health benefits).

To that end, in 2018, the UK government launched a 25 year Environment Plan (DEFRA, 2018). This includes enabling and prioritising projects that will let wildlife recover, including by addressing the causes of nature's decline, increasing habitat connectivity, and increasing both biodiversity (the range of species) and bioabundance (the number or cumulative biomass of individuals of a particular kind of species).

Species translocations is a term used to cover a number of different conservation interventions. They all expedite the process of nature recovery and all involve moving individuals of a particular species to a different area to either create (species introductions), recreate (species reintroductions) or increase (assisted colonisation or population reinforcement) free-living (wild) populations. Depending on the species and human communities that will be affected, translocations can present environmental and social advantages, as well as potential challenges. Therefore, potential translocations need to be carefully considered and adequately planned before the translocation is carried out. This statement aims to address Somerset Wildlife Trust's position on species translocations and how that feeds into our vision for nature recovery across the county.



Somerset Wildlife Trust's position

Somerset Wildlife Trust's position in relation to species translocation is that:

- Our preference is to prioritise habitat restoration that will enable natural dispersal and benefit a diverse range of species, rather than single species translocations.
 - However, some species have a disproportionate ability to contribute to landscape-scale nature recovery (e.g. ecosystem engineers, keystone species, or flagship species that could attract support for wider environmental conservation). Therefore, we will consider all options for habitat restoration including species translocations. We will develop a specific position on each option after we have gathered all necessary information, including recognising our priorities around habitat and ecosystem function.
 - Any translocation that is considered must have demonstrable ecological and social benefits for the county that outweigh the potential challenges.
 - The translocation process will always comply with the most recent statutory and species specific guidance, and all relevant legislation.
 - Wherever possible, we will work with specialist partner organisations and individuals planning or delivering translocations. We will do this to ensure: the needs and perspectives of Somerset residents are included; the environmental and social benefits and opportunities for Somerset are capitalised on; and any potential challenges are considered in mitigation planning. This includes collaborating with partners in neighbouring counties if it is reasonable to assume that the species might become either a transitory visitor or establish permanent populations in Somerset.
 - Where there is the potential for human-wildlife co-existence challenges, every effort will be made to obtain feedback from local communities and other relevant stakeholders at the feasibility stage. All feedback – positive and negative – will be given equal consideration to identify opportunities and challenges based on local knowledge and needs. However, even after concerns have been addressed and mitigation measures have been co-designed with the relevant communities, there may be instances where unanimous agreement cannot be reached. The decision may still be made to progress those projects but only if there is broad backing for it and it is realistically believed that with ongoing community support and engagement, potential challenges can be managed.
 - Ensuring and maintaining high levels of animal welfare is a priority before, during and after translocation projects. This includes ensuring that: source populations are not jeopardised; the method of capture, transport and release of founder individuals is appropriate to minimise stress and risk of illness given that species' behavioural, social and nutritional requirements; and the translocation does not threaten the conservation of other extant native species.
 - Individually and as part of the larger Wildlife Trust body, we will continue to spotlight to government where there is a need to update policies, regulations or legislation to enable nature restoration, for example, amending policies so that native species can be released into free-living populations, or improving grant payments to reward land managers for adopting wildlife-friendly practices.
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Why habitat restoration?

The aim of nature recovery is to restore healthy ecosystems with fully-functioning natural processes and balanced, self-regulating populations of a diverse, interconnected webs of animals, plants and fungi (collectively “species”). Restoring natural processes means allowing those biotic and abiotic factors to lead and direct change organically and dynamically. Unfortunately, nature recovery is often impeded by suitable areas of habitat being fragmented and isolated from each other. Without suitable, joined-up (contiguous) habitat, wildlife cannot survive, thrive, or contribute to healthy, self-regulating ecosystems.

Within Somerset, just 9% of our land is managed for wildlife (Somerset Wildlife Trust, 2023). This is far below the target of 30% of terrestrial and aquatic environments being actively managed for wildlife by 2030, that has been internationally agreed and committed to by the UK government and many environmental NGOs (eNGOs) including The Wildlife Trusts and Somerset Wildlife Trust. National guidance on species translocations states:

“In most cases, protecting the species and improving the habitat it currently lives in will be lower risk and more cost-effective [than conservation translocations]” (DEFRA, 2021, p.8).

Therefore, we believe that the most efficient approach is to focus on whole ecosystem restoration to improve the quantity, quality, and connectivity of key habitats. Accordingly, ecosystem-based, landscape-scale nature recovery is named as Somerset Wildlife Trust’s first goal in its current 10-year strategy, which runs until 2030.

How do species translocations fit in with nature recovery?

Somerset Wildlife Trust is aiming to restore natural processes, including restoring missing species, and we are excited to see what habitats form, and which species choose to return to those spaces. We are not trying to return land to an historical or pre-existing, pre-defined state. Rather, we believe that if we work to get these foundations right, we will be increasing the potential for an even greater range of species, including humans, to thrive in our landscape over the long-term.

However, as an island nation, land-based species that used to exist in Great Britain but that have been extirpated would not be able to recolonise without active intervention. It may also be that species are present in Great Britain but, due to lack of suitable wildlife corridors, are in areas that they will not be able to disperse to Somerset from or that, due to being in such low numbers, they lack a driver to naturally disperse (e.g. to overcome competition for resources like food or mates). Therefore, should we wish to see an increase in biodiversity across Great Britain, there are instances where we are required to intervene and adopt an alternative, proactive approach like translocation. Indeed, DEFRA’s guidance goes on to state:

“There are some situations where conservation translocations are appropriate, desirable and well-aligned with other conservation actions. For example, if barriers and habitat fragmentation stop the species from being able to naturally recolonise or migrate to new places” (DEFRA, 2021, p.8).

Accordingly, where there is evidence that a specific species could provide wider benefits for ecological restoration and social prosperity, Somerset Wildlife Trust will work in partnership with other experts with a range of knowledge, skills and expertise to investigate the ecological and social feasibility, and deliver the species translocation project if it is considered appropriate.

What are species translocations?

Species translocations are when individuals from a certain species are moved from one area to another. These individuals can be sourced from either wild populations elsewhere or captive breeding programs. If individuals are to be taken from wild populations, population surveys and modelling need to be done to ensure that the source population will not itself be threatened, for example, by being decreased to such a size that it becomes unviable or jeopardised by a diminished gene pool.

The method of translocation can take many forms:

<p style="text-align: center;">Introduction</p> <p>When a species is added to an area that it does not exist in now and for which we have no record that it ever once existed in; that is to say, a new population is created in a new area.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Reinforcement</p> <p>When individuals are added to an existing population in an area in which that species existed naturally; that is to say, the size of an existing population is increased by human intervention.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Reintroduction</p> <p>When a species is added to an area that we do have records it used to exist in but that, for whatever reason, it no longer occupies; that is to say, a population is being recreated after a period of absence.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Assisted colonisation</p> <p>When individuals are added to an existing population in an area in which that species is not found naturally; that is to say, the size of an existing population that only exists due to human intervention is increased by further human intervention.</p>
<p>Introductions and reintroductions are usually done when there are other benefits environmentally (e.g. due to that species being able to fulfill a similar role to another species that has since gone extinct) or socially (e.g. as a flagship species for conservation), or to create a 'safety net' population when the threat level to the species is unacceptably high in its current home range.</p>	<p>Reinforcement and assisted colonisation normally occur to: increase the population size where populations are small following a population decline; as a successive stage following a (re)introduction project; or to increase genetic diversity when the existing population is small or isolated from other populations.</p>

What are native, non-native and invasive species?

To date, translocations have tended to only consider species that are native to a country.

Native species

A species that at any time prior to 1500AD was naturally present (i.e. without human assistance) in a given area, whether or not they still exist there now (Goodenough, Undated).

Non-native species

A species that at no time prior to 1500AD occurred naturally in a given area but that has existed in the area since that date and whose presence in that area is attributable to human intervention. Note that a non-native species is not necessarily an invasive species (Goodenough, Undated).

Invasive species

This is a non-native species that causes severe environmental or economic harm in its new ecosystem.

However, species are increasingly migrating towards the north and south poles in response to climate change. This means that many species are, of their own volition, crossing (administrative) borders between countries that are linked by land (e.g. Spain to France) and they are naturally (i.e. without human intervention) establishing new territories in areas they have not been found in before. While this does not fit the (contentious) criterion of being resident in a country as at the (arbitrary) date of 1500AD, they have arrived without human intervention.

This natural migration and new population creation is forcing some to question whether it is appropriate to only consider native species in translocation projects. The alternative view is that, given the radical and fast-paced change in climate we are currently experiencing, we ought to now also be considering translocations of non-native species if there is evidence to suggest they have the best chances of long-term survival and they would have naturally migrated here had it not been for our status as an island nation. The arguments in favour of this are that we are simply replicating a natural process that is happening in Europe, Africa and America where species are autonomously crossing land borders, thereby increasing biodiversity at a critical time. The arguments against are that we may potentially be introducing an invasive species that could disrupt our ecosystem and cause harm to native species.

What needs to be considered before carrying out a species translocation?

The IUCN has produced written guidelines for translocations, considering all stages of the translocation pathway both ecological and social perspectives, from planning through to ending the project due to either the populations being self-sustaining or, highly unusually, an unresolvable problem that requires implementation of the exit strategy (IUCN/SSC, 2013). Within England, those internationally agreed guidelines are incorporated into DEFRA's *Reintroductions and other conservation translocations: code and guidance for England* (DEFRA, 2021). That Code also lists the core principles that must be followed, namely:

- Identifying conservation needs and clearly defining temporally- and spatially-bound goals;
- Evaluating whether translocation is an appropriate option, i.e. that no lower-risk, cheaper or less intensive management alternative options exist;
- Devising a long-term plan that is appropriate to the level of opportunity and risk and that covers all stages of the project from scoping to post-delivery monitoring and exit strategies;
- Obtaining permissions from land owners and following all legislative processes;
- Considering the particular species' ecological requirements, including addressing the cause of the extinction or population decline;
- Maximising benefits and minimising risks to other species in associated communities;
- Maximising benefits and minimising risks to local human communities;
- Ensuring accountability, transparency and openness about the translocation's potential environmental and socio-economic impacts; and
- Keeping records of successes and difficulties encountered during the translocation process and sharing that knowledge so lessons can be learnt (DEFRA, 2021, pp. 10-13).

This requires both ecological and social feasibility studies to be carried out. The scale of these studies depends on the species. For example, estimating ecological feasibility will be easier when the species: has only been absent for a short period of time and the ecosystem has not changed much during its absence; has a small home range; or has only a small impact on the wider ecosystem. Likewise, social feasibility studies will be more complex for species that may pose more challenges to co-existence, like large animals, carnivores or eco-system engineers.

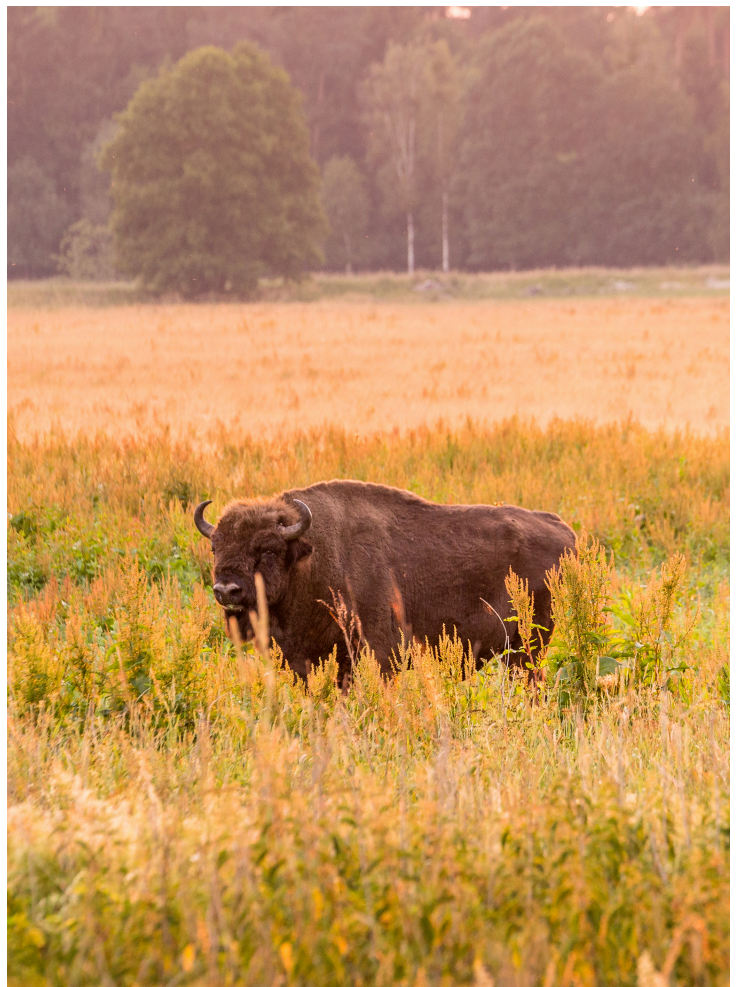


Once it has been determined that a site could support a species, ecologically-speaking, local communities are then consulted with to obtain their perspectives, including the potential benefits and challenges they see for themselves with their local knowledge. This could also include an opportunity for them to suggest support measures that would help them adapt to living alongside the new species. Social feasibility is normally conducted through community engagement and awareness raising events, stakeholder workshops and surveys (online, at events or door-to-door).

Conducting ecological feasibility before social feasibility is not an indication of placing the needs of wildlife before the needs of humans. It is also not an indication that, by the time the public is consulted, a decision has already been made. Rather, this is a practical decision because ecological feasibility can quickly rule out locations as unsuitable, thereby saving all those involved – from conservation teams through to local populations – the time, expense and disruption of obtaining and providing feedback where the project has no reasonable prospect of success.

Other factors that need to be considered are that the project is fully-funded from feasibility assessment stage through to the project ending. If all these considerations can be satisfied, then an application for a release license will be made to the government.

Release licences are necessary as a way to reassure all involved that only species that it is appropriate to include within the British ecosystem are released here. This helps us avoid the introduction of invasive species that could further disrupt and unbalance the wildlife we are trying to protect and restore, or that could cause severe economic hardship to particular stakeholder groups. This will also include details on how specific bits of legislation will be complied with. For example, prior to the European bison (*Bison bonasus*) project in Kent, consideration had to be given to the Dangerous Wild Animal Act with the result that the animals could only be released into enclosures and, where those enclosures infringed on public rights of way, those routes had to be diverted (Kent Wildlife Trust, 2023).



Only once a release licence application has been approved is it legal to proceed with releasing the animal into the wild.

Regrettably, however, there are still many mismatches between species that should be named as native species based on the definition of nativeness and those that are named as native species in wildlife legislation, and there are some that are erroneously listed as dangerous. This is the case for many species including European beavers (*Castor fiber*) and large herbivores like bison and elk (*Alces alces*). This is making it very difficult to obtain licenses to release animals into or create free-living populations rather than releasing into enclosures.

Frustrations about government inertia to adapt the process for obtaining release licences are, in part, what lies behind many of the incidences of 'beaver bombing' where individuals have been released into free-living populations without the proper authority. Explanations for this behaviour are that it is necessary to increase the beavers' welfare where family sizes are expanding but enclosure sizes are not, or to cause a political statement that rhetoric about nature recovery does not match the mechanisms conservation organisations have at their disposal to make positive changes.

Somerset Wildlife Trust does not endorse this approach. Instead, our position is that we will continue to work with, and apply pressure on, government to amend the regulatory process such that it is possible to legally translocate particular species to form free-living populations in the wild.

How does Somerset Wildlife Trust determine if it is appropriate to translocate a particular species?

We do not believe that any species should be translocated as part of 'vanity' projects. Instead, there must be strong ecological and social reasons for embarking on a species translocation. The extent of the advantages and challenges posed by different species, and experienced by different communities will, inevitably, be different. Some species may bring many advantages ecologically, but be more challenging socially, or *vice versa*. Similarly, the scale of the opportunities and challenges offered by the same species will be experienced differently by different stakeholder groups.

When considering possible translocation projects, we adhere to the recommendations laid out in the most recent national guidance for translocations issued by the government (currently DEFRA's 2021 *Reintroductions and other conservation translocations: code and guidance for England*), as well as relevant legislation, and learning from case studies of similar projects elsewhere within Great Britain or globally. Every decision is taken using a cautious approach, including ensuring feedback from people and communities who will be most significantly affected by any proposed translocation is considered. In that way, we aim to ensure that Somerset, its people and its wildlife can capitalise on all the benefits the new species can offer, while also ensuring there is adequate resource and appropriate systems in place to mitigate any challenges to co-existence that may arise.

Case Studies

Westhay Moor National Nature Reserve: *Where habitat restoration alone may be sufficient for nature recovery without species translocation*

Westhay has been subject to drainage and peat extraction that means the site is more susceptible to drought, encroachment of scrub and trees, and being a carbon source (releasing carbon into the atmosphere). Our approach at this peat bog site is to improve habitat quality and enable the restoration of the natural processes it should perform. For example:

- By repairing fissures in the peat, blocking ditches (where this would not increase flood risk for our neighbours), and cell bunding, the flow of water through the site will be slowed and more water retained on site. Regulating the water flow will regulate the water table, contributing to natural flood management during wet periods and drought relief during dry periods. Further, rewetting the peatland and improving conditions for bog vegetation will decrease the amount of oxygen available for aerobic (oxygen-dependent) bacteria that break down methane stored in the soil. Restoring the anaerobic conditions and processes that should be found in a healthy peatland system will reduce the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere, revitalising Westhay's ability to act as a carbon sink. Climate change is one of the top drivers for biodiversity decline. Therefore, rewetting the peat is a powerful action to support natural flood management, reduce the effects of climate change and prevent species extinctions.
- Supporting Westhay to return to its natural state will increase the amount of available habitat required by specialist species that are adapted to and need peatland conditions. For example, the site will be able to support more specialist peat bog species including sphagnum mosses, the carnivorous sundew, micro-plume moth, large marsh grasshopper, bog bush cricket and cotton grasses. This will attract other species to the site, such as ground-nesting birds that will benefit from the more open habitat, invertebrates that will benefit from the wider range of plant species, and bats that will benefit from the greater range of insectivorous prey. Through their role as pollinators, those bats will complete the cycle, further supporting natural and dynamic plant species restoration. As these assemblages recover and flourish, so we will see an increase in the range of different species in the county and, therefore, our resilience to the biodiversity crisis.



While we are open-minded about translocating peat-forming plant species in future, Westhay Moor demonstrates why we believe it is so important to take a whole ecosystem approach and prioritise habitat restoration before considering species translocations.

Two Moors Pine Marten Project: *Where we are working with partners to combine habitat restoration and species translocation*

Pine martens used to live across Great Britain until as recently as the 19th century. While some free-living populations have been returned to England and Wales, these are small and there are barriers to natural dispersal. Therefore, based on the demonstrable ecological and social benefits pine martens have brought to other areas, and the likelihood that local people and the wildlife of Somerset would be impacted if this project went ahead, Somerset Wildlife Trust became a partner to the Two Moors Pine Marten Project. This project will include:

- Community-led projects to recreate, restore and reconnect key habitats for pine martens. One of the major reasons for pine martens' decline was the loss of diverse woodlands that they rely on to form dens in tree cavities and to source a broad range of food that meets their need for a varied diet. The lack of connected (contiguous) suitable habitat and barriers to wildlife corridors (e.g. urban areas and road networks) means it is unlikely that wild pine marten will be able to naturally disperse to the West Country. Habitat restoration is, therefore, crucial to remove the reason pine martens died out, enable the reintroduced pine martens to survive and establish permanent, self-sustaining colonies, and to create safe corridors for natural dispersal, thereby decreasing the need for as many future translocation projects across the country.
- Enabling natural population control by increasing predation on over-abundant species (e.g. grey squirrels) that will, in turn, allow rarer species (e.g. red squirrels, dormice) to recover. Using natural population control will prevent the ecosystem going into shock as might happen if those species are rapidly reduced through culling programmes, and decrease welfare concerns (e.g. that non-target species might be killed, or that animals may be injured but not killed in traps). Natural population control will also be aided by pine martens dispersing seeds in their coats and, due to their omnivorous diet, in their scats (faeces). Cumulatively, this will stimulate regeneration of balanced, self-regulating, more resilient woodland communities.



The Two Moors Project is necessary because there are occasions when habitat restoration alone does not overcome all the barriers to nature recovery and species translocations are required. It demonstrates how reintroducing a single, carefully chosen, species can exponentially advantage a whole range of other species and natural processes. This is also a good example of Somerset Wildlife Trust working with multi-disciplinary, expert partners to ensure all stakeholders are considered and have their needs met at all stages of the translocation project to maximise opportunity for ecological and socio-economic prosperity across the county.

What is Somerset Wildlife Trust doing?

Our position statement is detailed at the start of this document; all of our actions are guided by this.

- Our hierarchy for nature recovery is first to restore natural habitats and processes to 'pull' a greater range of species to Somerset.
- However, we will consider translocations alongside habitat restoration where: this will expedite nature and ecosystem recovery; the species would be unable to (re-)colonise that area without intervention; there are clear environmental and social benefits; and the benefits outweigh any potential challenges.
- We will work with other organisations that are conducting single species translocations that have demonstrable ecological and social benefits to ensure: the opportunities can be capitalised on; any challenges that may be experienced by the people and wildlife of Somerset are considered; and appropriate support is included in mitigation planning.
- We will continue to offer advice to communities to increase their awareness of the benefits and support that can be offered to overcome challenges that relate to particular translocated species.
- As an individual organisation and as part of the Wildlife Trust movement, we will continue to highlight to government the importance of amending administrative and regulatory practices so that species that bring opportunities for recovery from the combined biodiversity and climate crises and for social prosperity can be released as free-living populations.

What can you do?

- Make space for nature at your home or in your local community. Whether that is turning a small container into a wildlife pond, planting pollinator-friendly plants, or creating a gap in your garden fence to decrease barriers to wildlife movement, or using fewer pesticides, planting hedgerows, or allowing wetland formation, you will improve and extend the amount of land available for wildlife to return to. If we all take action where we can, the effects will add up, increasing the amount of land managed for wildlife in Somerset from 9% and closer to our 30% target.
 - Write to your local MP or support campaigns to ensure that species reintroduction legislation is amended or policies are created that enable native species, or species that form similar ecological roles to extirpated native species, to be released as free-living populations. We need your support to end the bureaucracy and hypocrisy of national policy stating it wants to leave the environment in a better condition but blocking the mechanisms that would let us do that.
 - Read around the topic, attend webinars or get involved with volunteering opportunities. The greater your knowledge and understanding, the more empowered you will be to co-exist with – and enjoy – a more biodiverse, and bio-abundant Somerset.
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Conclusion

There is a global, national and local need to urgently address the biodiversity crisis. No species exists in isolation but, instead, everything is interlinked in overlapping and interdependent ecosystems. This means that supporting the recovery of certain species will enable the recovery of other species while simultaneously restoring natural processes and increasing resilience against the effects of climate change. However, for species to recover and become self-sustaining long-term, we also need to address the reasons for the initial population decline. Therefore, Somerset Wildlife Trust will prioritise taking a whole-ecosystem approach when considering nature recovery projects, focusing on habitat restoration that will support a range of species rather than single-species translocations. Supported by nationally and internationally agreed conservation guidance, we believe this has the largest beneficial impact for nature restoration and ecological recovery, is the most efficient and effective use of time and financial resources, and carries the least risk to wildlife and people.

However, there are occasions when single-species translocation projects are important and necessary; for example if there are barriers to natural dispersal and that species can provide significant ecological and social benefits. In those instances, we will cautiously and carefully engage with expert partner organisations on species translocations to Somerset and neighbouring counties ensuring that the most recent guidance and legislation relating to translocations is adhered to.

We will also only proceed with a project if we are confident that the needs of both local communities and other species in the county have been fully considered and there are appropriate support mechanisms in place to help all affected stakeholders capitalise on the opportunities and overcome any challenges they may experience.

