
CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

FOR INFORMATION

Title: THE LEGACY OF THE CAIRNGORMS WILDCAT PROJECT

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Purpose

To provide a summary of the achievements of the Cairngorms Wildcat Project and information on what the next steps will be to conserve the Scottish Wildcat in the Cairngorms National Park and further afield.

Recommendations

That the Board acknowledge the successes of the project

Executive Summary

The Cairngorms Wildcat Project ran for three years and dramatically increased public recognition of the plight of the Scottish Wildcat. The nickname *Highland Tiger* originated by the project, captured the public imagination and greatly assisted awareness campaigns. The greatest success of the project has been the partnerships between all those with an interest in wildcat conservation including: land managers in the National Park, vets, *Cats Protection* and local volunteers. Guidance provided to gamekeepers in the National Park has been readily adopted and widely applied. Although the project has officially come to an end, many of the actions adopted will continue and national initiatives are now being progressed. The wildcat is far from being safe from extinction, but it stands a better chance as a result of the positive partnership work generated by this project.

THE LEGACY OF THE CAIRNGORMS WILDCAT PROJECT – FOR INFORMATION

Background

1. The Cairngorms Wildcat Project was a practical trial of targeted conservation actions for the Scottish wildcat in the Cairngorms National Park. The Project was a partnership between the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) and Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS). It was informed by a stakeholder conference in 2008, was officially launched in May 2009 and ran until March 2012. It was largely funded by SNH under the Species Action Framework and by additional funds generated through the Highland Tiger appeal. The aims and objectives are shown in Annex I.
2. The actions of the Project fall into four main headings.

Raising awareness of wildcats and their conservation

3. A key feature of the Project was the promotion of the wildcat as a nationally important species, and using the awareness-raising brand 'Highland Tiger', communicate to a wide audience the species' rarity and the actions they could take to help conserve it. The project established a website (www.highlandtiger.com/) as well as other internet resources and promotional materials and stimulated much coverage in the print and broadcast media. Many educational talks were delivered at a local level and included targeted presentations to key audiences such as farmers and gamekeepers.

Neutering domestic cats

4. The Project sought to develop a close working relationship with the cat welfare charity Cats Protection in order to co-ordinate the promotion and delivery of neutering and vaccination of domestic and feral cats within the CNP. This element of the Project relied on volunteer effort and collaboration with local veterinary practices, who collated available data on the number of animals treated locally. The Project also sought to raise awareness of responsible domestic cat ownership in the Park, by delivering talks and through the production of a leaflet which was made widely available.

Working with estates

5. The Project worked with the gamekeeper community to establish a practical protocol for feral cat control that minimised the risks of harming wildcats. The protocol included:

- a) A practical, but precautionary, set of criteria which helps identify a wildcat in the field, i.e. a tabby-marked cat with a thick, ringed, blunt tail; a dorsal stripe which does not extend onto the tail; and no white feet;
 - b) Promoting methods of control which endeavour to avoid harm to wildcats, i.e. cage-trapping;
 - c) Advice on what action to take if a wildcat is accidentally caught;
 - d) Guidance on the humane treatment of feral or domestic cats.
6. Five estates participated in the Project by adopting the protocol and reporting on their feral cat control activities and any wildcat sightings.

Research and monitoring

7. Intensive camera trap monitoring was adopted by the Project to obtain baseline and trend data on wildcat and feral cat presence on the five participating estates. In addition, the Project collated the results of opportunistic camera trapping, sightings records by the public, and the recovery of wild-living cat carcasses for analysis.

Key findings and outcomes

Public engagement

8. The Project has successfully engaged the public about wildcats which is reflected in the species' greater prominence in the most recent *Scottish Nature Omnibus* survey; by increased participation in voluntary feral cat neutering work; by attendance at local talks on the subject; by the volume of public sightings records submitted; and by donations to the Highland Tiger Fund.

Feral cat management

9. Feral cat management by a network of trained Cats Protection volunteers has been substantially stepped up within the CNP with the help of the Project. Over the course of the project there was no increase in uptake of pet cat neutering via local veterinary practices, however, there was a significant increase in feral cat neutering by volunteers.

Conservation and land management

10. A major success of the Project was the effective partnership between conservation and land management interests. The Project's engagement with estates was very positive and raised awareness of wildcats and the need for their conservation amongst gamekeepers, and appears to have directly benefitted their conservation. The proactive management by land managers of feral cat populations for wildcat conservation could potentially be supported by public funding mechanisms e.g. SRDP.

Research

11. Our knowledge of wild-living cats in the CNP has been much enhanced. Research has focused on establishing the status of cats currently living wild in the CNP. This

has included the assessment of distributions based on submitted public records as well as assessing the extent of hybridisation from analysis of camera trap images and roadkill carcasses (genetic results to follow). The findings suggest wildcats are very rare, but are present in low numbers in the western half of the National Park, i.e. Badenoch & Strathspey, Highland Perthshire and possibly Glenlivet. No records substantiated with photos or carcasses were obtained from the eastern side of the Park, i.e. Deeside, Donside and the Angus Glens. Camera trap images and recovered cat carcasses indicate that feral cats and hybrids are more numerous and widespread and occupy the same areas as wildcats, hence the risks from hybridisation appear to be real and continuing.

Next Steps

12. The main actions stemming from the end of project conference in April 2012:
 - a) To set up a new National Steering group for the wildcat charged with the task of drawing up a National Action plan and
 - b) To encourage the Scottish Government to consider ways of incorporating the estates protocol into the Scottish Rural Development programme in order to fund active management for wildcat conservation
 - c) Publish and end of project report to inform future conservation work
 - d) Publish a conference report.
13. All of the above have been progressed.
14. In addition, a number of elements of the Cairngorms Wildcat Project are continuing on a low-key basis in order to maintain ongoing awareness raising and support for wildcat conservation:
 - a) "Highland Tiger" Website and blog updated by RZSS
 - b) Project camera traps available for wildcat research, on request through SNH
 - c) Wildcat records passed to the National Biodiversity Network
 - d) Keepers continue voluntary adoption of the feral cat management 'protocol'.
 - e) Feral cat neutering continued by Cat Protection volunteers
 - f) Project Steering Group committed to developing the National Action Plan and to meeting again to review status and opportunities for wildcat conservation in the CNP.

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Annex I

Cairngorms Wildcat Project Aims and Objectives

Aims:

- a) To secure the future of the Scottish wildcat within the Cairngorms National Park (CNP), leading to further action across a wider area of Scotland
- b) To raise awareness of the plight of the Scottish wildcat
- c) To ensure wide public support for wildcat conservation measures

Objectives:

- a) To work with land managers to ensure that the population of Scottish wildcats benefits from existing feral cat control activities
- b) To set in place sustainable feral cat management elsewhere, with the support and co-operation of landowners, such that this will become self-sustaining beyond the life of the project
- c) To establish a programme of research and monitoring to develop a greater understanding of Scottish wildcat conservation status, ecology, genetics and epidemiology
- d) To engage the support of the local community for responsible domestic cat ownership, including participation in voluntary neutering and vaccination schemes
- e) To provide an efficient and effective programme of activities which can be applied for the benefit of Scottish wildcat across a wider geographic area of Scotland
- f) To capitalise on the charismatic nature of the Scottish wildcat to nurture an ethos of collaboration and ownership across a wide spectrum of interest groups and individuals.