Workshop – Translocating water voles

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Session 1

What other mitigation techniques can we use to avoid translocation?

- Translocation should be the last option – often used first
- Translocation should be avoided – NE can be critical of leaving voles in place – objections sometimes 'by the book' rather than looking at sites
- NE response – challenge desk based objections
- Time taken between surveys and planning permission doesn't allow time for habitat works – vole population fluctuations can be cause issues
- Grey area around low impact disturbance and when licences are needed
- Displacement licence can be limiting regarding vegetation stripping at times of vole dispersal
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How can we make the best use of translocated water voles?

- Need to move to places with no mink
- Could be used to diversify genetics of existing populations
- Can translocated voles be added to reintroduction schemes?
    - 2 distinct genetic groups {northern/southern)
    - Locally difference characteristics (possible due to isolation
- Where small/low density populations exist can they be moved, habitat improved and voles brought back at a later date?
- Ratty voles are from North Pennines and Scotland – is that too far?
- Concerns about voles being removed from urban sites because it is easier that habitat improvement – leads to disconnect from nature.
- Do consultants know options for alternative sites for translocations?
    - Consultants rely on Wildlife Trusts/Derek Gow for options to go back to clients with
    - Knowledge of reintroductions very useful – conference useful in that respect

Translocating water voles in the autumn? (October)

- Not good – flood risk, vegetation dying off, less likely to survive winter
- Project on Thames in Autumn appears to have worked – more study needed
- Is it better to keep captive over winter?
- Site dependant – flood risk etc
- Populations are at highest so already displacing
- Food stores will be built up – translocating will remove voles from this
- Any concerns about winter captivity?
    - Stress – can be minimised through good practices
    - Expensive – trade off is cost of delaying development
    - Advantage of breeding to increase number of voles that can be released
- Translocation site should be similar to removal site.

- Current guidance of trap early in year and release ASAP doesn't always fit with developers timing – consultants can advise on costs vs timings
- Translocation is a useful tool – are we looking at it wrong?
- Need to look at bigger area around development sites to ensure no future issues/disturbance.

How can we minimise predation in a new population?

- Soft release preferable to hard release
- Can habitat type mitigate predation? Location can depend on developers/consultants
- Should voles be moved to areas with existing mink control or should control methods be set up at relocations?
- A database of mink control locations could help consultants choose translocation sites.
- Landowners do not always share information on control efforts
- Better pre-planning with developers needed. Explain options before voles are confirmed to give plenty of time.

Session 2

What other mitigation techniques can we use to avoid translocation?

- Translocation for this discussion means 'trapped and moved' – they could be taken back to same site, or taken elsewhere.
- Translocation is an important tool if handled carefully to minimise stress – displacement within adjacent area will often lead to voles returning to former habitat and is a waste of time.
- If it is a small scale project (eg pipeline over river) there is no point in translocation – displacement might make sense here. Need critical mass of 40-50 voles to make worthwhile.
- Historic idea of mowing banks to see if voles will move of own accord has no evidence, should have been a licensable activity.
- Would always prefer voles to stay but translocation recommended if needed – would rather not take invasiven step of translocation if at all possible.
- Fossorial voles live at very high density –when translocated they go into grassland and dig 'starter' tunnels. Seen that translocated fossorial voles in NE Scotland became riparian – plasticity of species.

How can we make the best use of translocated water voles?

- Assumption is to try and keep them local where possible, but some projects move voles over big landscapes.
- If a site is being developed and voles moved adjacent, it's likely there will be future development and could end up moving same population of voles several times.
- Need good records to know where the voles should go. Do consultants making the recommendations have all the info? Water vole mapping project could help here. Where should the voles go? Where is a long term safe place for them – eg mink control ongoing.

Translocating water voles in the autumn?

- Wouldn't normally do this due to river level changes/weather etc.
- Recent paper suggests that voles released in October do no worse than those taken captive and released in spring.
- Ethical issues – putting animals in habitat with low food resource – stress? Winter causes disease spikes, so combined with this stress could be much worse than captivity.
- Evidence is too limited currently – differing climates S England compared to N Scotland. Study needs to be scaled up.
- Could have economic benefits to developer – lower costs involved.
- In Scotland there is only a 6 week window for trapping, so could see pressures from developers to want this autumn opportunity. Only if we have evidence.
- Agreed that we don't know that current practice is the best way – always worth exploring other methods.

How can we minimise predation in a new population?

- Naïve population of voles is vulnerable.
- Strategies should include good/dense vegetation and proven absence/control of mink.
- Translocation from development sites is different to reintroductions (where typically a Ranger is employed). There is no monitoring that looks at these smaller scale interventions to look for presence eg 10 years later. We should be putting voles in to safe environments with ongoing work, rather than a local site 'just because'.
- Should developers have obligation to fund mink control for eg 5 years post release?

- Still work to do on eDNA for water vole. No eDNA on mink as far as we know.
- Should use other methods alongside rafts as these are not foolproof.

Final thoughts…

- If we want to use translocations for reintroductions then we need to feed that back. It could be a very important tool for genetic diversity and giving voles the best chance.
- We need a co-ordinated national plan for next 5-10 years with central information. Need one organisation to take leadership.
- Glasgow has retained a significant water vole population – require advice from different people and consensus.

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