

Petitioner submission of 28 December 2023

PE2035/E: Recognise legal control of generalist predators as a conservation act

Whilst we do not want the consideration of this petition to be reduced solely to the consideration of the role which the control of abundant generalist predators plays in Capercaillie conservation, we do wish to respond to the correspondence by NatureScot and the Minister regarding this particular species.

It is important to note that, in commenting, we do so from a position of local knowledge or knowledge acquired over many combined centuries by 'doing', observing and adapting rather than by science, per se.

Firstly, while the response to the NatureScot SAC report by Scottish Government does take into account some of the report's key recommendations, we feel it does not reflect the urgency required. We have lost over 50% of the remaining birds in 5 years.

NatureScot's SAC stated that, without significant and urgent interventions, the Capercaillie could become extinct in 20-30 years. In the correspondence received by the Committee, both NatureScot and the Minister state that predator control (despite the report stating that breeding success is too low to allow species recovery) was not taken forward as the *primary recommendation* of Scottish Government 'not least because it is *already available* as a conservation tool'.

However, because something is available, does this diminish, in some way, its usefulness?

Given the urgency, the need for adaptive management and the SAC report's conclusion that foxes pine marten and crows and 'the cumulative effect' of all of these was the cause of poor breeding success, a neutral observer would surely have questions as to why neither NatureScot or Scottish Government did not propose a measure which is a/ already available without any impediment and b/ which would act to reduce the 'cumulative effects' causing the accepted main problem ie: poor breeding success.

Instead, it selected measures which the report acknowledged were less tested than predator control (diversionary feeding), would likely take longer (more research on predator interactions) or would have insufficient impact on the problems the report identified (ie: habitat quality or availability was not seen to have any bearing on poor breeding success).

We feel, here, that there is a need for greater honesty on the part of Scottish Government and NatureScot when it comes to the Capercaillie and the difficult subject of predator control.

For example, whilst Scottish Government has taken forward things which the report stated was comparatively 'untested', like diversionary feeding of predators, it could also (at the same time) be emphasising to key partners the need to quickly initiate the options which, they admit, are already available ie: legal management of foxes and crows or 'control of abundant generalist predators', as this Petition describes.

This would help to arrest or stem the continuous unsustainable losses whilst (at the same time) other measures they have taken forward are given the time to either fail, succeed, be adapted or studied further. To improve breeding success, both or all could be done simultaneously. One does not preclude the other.

Where the honesty is required, and what should be explained to the Scottish people, is that only 2 partners within the species' priority action group (the private enterprises of Seafield and Rothiemurchus) are prepared to carry out the legal management of fox and crow populations which is likely to have a positive impact.

The conservation tool of legal management of abundant generalist predators is freely available, now. It is not being carried out in the majority of the last remaining core forests because it is against the interests of those managing those forests ie: Cairngorms Connect partners, etc.

This may be because some are membership organisations which do not want to offend their members or core funders. Whatever the reason (and this is their prerogative) there is a need for honesty about this and, if the Capercaillie is to become the casualty of other prerogatives, that should at least be made clear so the Scottish public have the full picture.