



THE COUNTRYSIDE
RESTORATION TRUST

CREATING A LIVING AND WORKING COUNTRYSIDE

MEDIA RELEASE

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Embargo: None

Date: 3rd December 2008

Sea Eagles in Norfolk – a Disaster Waiting to Happen

The Countryside Restoration Trust is today writing to the Secretary of State at DEFRA, and to the Chief Executive of Natural England expressing its concern over the recycled plan to introduce sea eagles to Norfolk (recycled from an abandoned, discredited scheme to introduce them to Suffolk).

The Sea Eagle is Britain's largest and most spectacular bird of prey, with an eight foot wingspan, and the CRT believes that the reintroduction project in the Western Isles, started in 1975, was excellent. It considers that the recent re-introduction to Eastern Scotland was seriously flawed, and that the proposed introduction to Norfolk is highly dangerous, threatening fragile colonies and populations of terns, cranes, bitterns, returning spoonbills and waders along the North Norfolk Coast. In addition, farm livestock could be at risk – lambs (definitely), free-range hens and ducks, of which there are thousands, (almost certainly) and outdoor piglets (highly likely). Because of the population density of Norfolk and its popularity with holidaymakers at all seasons of the year, domestic pets – cats and dogs – would also be at risk.

Vice Chairman of the CRT, Norfolk Farmer, Conservationist and a leading wildlife photographer Chris Knights says: **“I like to watch sea eagles, preferably in their right habitat, wide, open country such as western Scotland where they have been successfully re-introduced. Norfolk is completely different with active farming, a much higher density of population and small areas of conservation. The consequences for conservation, particularly the tern colonies, could be catastrophic. Then, what happens if the eagles home in on a chicken farm – or the wonderful Pensthorpe Wildfowl Park, home to BBC's “Springwatch” this year – it doesn't bear thinking about. This proposed release could have serious consequences for farming and conservation”.**

CRT Trustee, Tilly Smith, herself a scientist (with a degree in zoology from Bristol University) and who, with her husband Alan, is owner of Britain's only free-ranging reindeer herd in the Cairngorms and Cromdale Hills is also worried: **“The re-introduction**

of the sea eagle to the East of Scotland has caused a lot of consternation among farmers and land managers. Not enough attention was given to the genuine concerns of farmers and it would appear that proper Environmental Impact Assessments were not produced. Now Natural England and the RSPB seem to want to make the same mistakes in Norfolk”.

Life-supporter of the CRT, leading wildfowl expert, and founder and former owner of Pensthorpe, Bill Makins says. **“The re-introduction of sea eagles to Norfolk is a flawed idea. The sea eagle is a wilderness bird, and to turn it loose into a well populated area which is no different to Suffolk, which was thought unsuitable, is to court disaster. We have fragile populations of other very desirable, suitable and endangered birds – why put them at risk and cause needless controversy with many landowners and conservationists. It is important to remember two things – the sea eagle is not an endangered species and many conservationists, including wildlife wardens, are against this ill-thought out scheme”.**

Robin Page, farmer, writer, conservationist and Chairman of the CRT is puzzled on two counts: **“The first scheme was due to take place near the RSPB’s reserve at Minsmere. The RSPB objected because of fears for its bitterns and disturbance. So what is the difference between the bitterns and the threatened birds at Titchwell, Cley and Blakeney?**

I have also major concerns over the misleading Press Release put out by Natural England, the RSPB and Anglian Water. In my view it is misleading to the point of deception.

The press release seems to imply that sea eagles were breeding in East Anglia as recently as 1700. There is no evidence to support this claim. It says that in a recent opinion poll 91% of the 500 people asked, wanted “to see a bird like this over Norfolk”. Of course, the question put was: “It would be good to see a bird like this (sea eagle) in Norfolk? Agree – tick the box”. Naturally 91% would agree to that question.

If the question had been: “It would be bad to see a bird released into Norfolk that could drive away the terns, kill bitterns, and take lambs and pet dogs,” then I am sure 98% would have been against introduction.

The release says “Birds could take decades, if not hundreds of years to spread from Scotland without assistance”. Natural England’s scientists should know that the nearest British sea eagle is about 400 miles from Norfolk. However, they also know that sea eagles are also breeding 125 miles away in Holland at the 14000 acre Oostvaardersplassen nature reserve. If conditions were right in East Anglia they would arrive naturally from Holland – however, disturbance in East Anglia from tourism is already high and all the nature reserves in East Anglia are a fraction of the size of Oostvaardersplassen.

The release says that NE, the RSPB and AW have been investigating the feasibility of introducing the sea eagle. The facts are that an Environmental Impact Assessment has not been completed, or made public, and so the findings have not been available at the various so-called “public consultations” – making the process a complete sham.

It should also be said that at the recent consultations in three Norfolk villages, officials from NE and the RSPB have been claiming that the twenty eagles released a year for six years, at a cost of £600,000, will be eating carrion – “particularly road kills”. Sea eagles eating flattened hedgehogs along the A47? Come on. The facts are that sea eagle research shows that sea eagles kill and eat mainly live prey and of this between 39-87% is bird prey, depending on the season and availability.

In my view the sea eagle project is an act of almost unbelievable irresponsibility – it is about PR, tourism and money – not conservation – and it could destroy Norfolk’s wonderful and spectacular tern colonies.

A few years ago the RSPB lost Britain’s only large colony of Roseate terns, one of the most endangered species in the world, due to predation. Incredibly, it appears to have learned nothing from the experience.”

Ends

Notes for Editors:

For further information, please contact The Countryside Restoration Trust office on 01223 262999 or email info@livingcountryside.org.uk.

The Countryside Restoration Trust is a farming and conservation charity which aims to protect and restore Britain's countryside with wildlife-friendly and commercially viable agriculture. The Trust is committed to promoting the importance of a living and working countryside through education, demonstration and community involvement.

The Trust is establishing a network of model farms across Britain which, using sensitive farming methods, will demonstrate how to protect wildlife, produce quality, seasonal food and preserve our countryside for future generations.

The Trust is also using living, working farms as educational centres of expertise to inspire farmers, land managers, the general public and politicians.

AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

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