In late 2014, to ensure that the Hawk and Owl Trust was fully informed on current scientific thinking regarding the plight of the Hen Harrier in upland England, three eminent academics agreed to form a scientific advisory committee of the Hawk and Owl Trust to provide advice and guidance on this complex issue. The panel consists of three of the most widely respected raptor specialists, namely Professors Ian Newton, Steve Redpath and Des Thompson.

This article has been prepared by Professor Steve Redpath, University of Aberdeen. This underpins the approach that will provide the most secure long term conservation future for Hen Harriers on Northern uplands.

How Do We Get Harriers Back Into Our Uplands?

Across the world, people come into conflict over the management of particular species such as wolves and elephants. These sorts of conflicts are damaging to conservation and to the affected people, so there is an urgent need to try and improve the way we deal with them (Redpath et al. 2013).

In the UK, I have spent much of the last 30 years working on a bitter, long-running conflict between those representing hen harrier conservation interests and those supporting red grouse shooting.

If anything this conflict has become more intense in recent years. Harriers pose a threat to grouse stocks and for this reason they are illegally killed, leading to their near disappearance as a breeding bird from England. This naturally angers conservationists, some of whom are now calling for driven grouse shooting to be licensed or banned.

So how do we find a solution to this thorny problem? Studies from a range of conflicts tell us that there are two general approaches. First, either side can try and win the battle, irrespective of the costs. This is essentially what we currently see: some grouse managers illegally kill harriers, irrespective of the damage that does to the harrier population and to their own reputations; while conservationists focus their efforts on trying to stop them through enforcement and penalties. For many years, these positions have led to stalemate and harriers have continued to decline as a breeding species on grouse moors.
A different approach to resolving conflict is for both sides to engage in dialogue and see if they can find a solution that is mutually acceptable. Over the last 10 years, such a dialogue between the main groups has taken place and eventually led to the idea of a brood management scheme. The evidence from our research strongly suggests that all grouse moors could successfully have low numbers of harriers and have sufficient grouse for shooting (Elston et al. 2014); it is only when harriers breed at high density that they can make grouse shooting economically unviable.

What essentially a brood management scheme proposes is a cap on the numbers of harriers breeding on any one estate. Once harriers get beyond this threshold density the excess broods would be removed, reared in captivity, and then released back to the wild, but in a different location from where they were removed.

It may sound an unusual way of dealing with this problem, but we have confidence that the scheme could work because a similar scheme operates in continental Europe. Here, harriers breed in agricultural crops and chicks are often killed by combine harvesters before they can fly. So conservationists remove broods before the field are harvested, rear the chicks in captivity and then release them back into the wild at fledging. It works well and the survival of the breeding range, and lessen or end illegal killing.

So which approach is better – dialogue or attempted enforcement and how do we decide? Various people clearly have strongly held views about which of these approaches is most appropriate for dealing with this problem. However, from a scientific perspective, I would argue that we need evidence in order to inform that decision. A brood management scheme certainly has potential, but we simply don’t know if it will work in practice. Therefore we need a rigorous trial to see if such a scheme will actually lead to a rapid expansion of harrier numbers. If it works, we have more harriers in the uplands and less conflict between the two sides. If it doesn’t work – for whatever reason – then we have learned that a different approach is required to tackle illegal killing.

Our ability to find solutions that meet the needs of both sides relies on robust evidence. The risk of relying solely on enforcement is that it will perpetuate the conflict, and possibly lead to further reductions in harrier numbers. In that case, there will be two clear losers – the hen harrier, and the people who enjoy seeing these birds. Surely it is better to build a strategy based around evidence and dialogue rather than through attempting to impose a particular view?

Steve Redpath

References


More Information
This article on the Hen Harrier debate has been prepared for publication in the forthcoming 2015 Spring/Summer issue of the Hawk and Owl Trust’s Peregrine magazine.

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