

DEVELOPING A HERPETOLOGICAL CONSERVATION STRATEGY FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM

TONY GENT

*Species Conservation Branch, English Nature, Northminster House,
Peterborough PE1 1UA*

&

TOM TEW

*Conservation of Vulnerable and Dispersed Species Unit,
Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Monkstone House, City Road,
Peterborough, PE1 1JY*

INTRODUCTION

Like others involved, we in the statutory conservation bodies have to make choices about how we can further herpetological conservation. For instance, what publicity does it need, should particular sites be protected, what research projects should we fund, should licences be issued, where should we direct man-power and effort? At first sight these may appear to be unrelated questions, but in fact they are closely linked.

First of all we have to be clear what we are trying to achieve. Will what we plan to do advance conservation in a coherent way? Secondly the effort and resources that we put into each task must reflect its relative importance.

We are also keenly aware that the statutory conservation bodies are only part of the herpetological conservation movement. In Britain there is a very active group of herpetologists with an interest in conservation. Some of them are professionals working for scientific institutions, other public sector organisations or voluntary conservation bodies, but most are involved in a voluntary capacity – perhaps as recorders or though working on conservation tasks. The value of the contribution that people outside the statutory sector make is hard to overstate. With their involvement much is already being done to study and safeguard our reptiles and amphibians. It is obviously important that our collective efforts are used to best effect.

We appreciate that we all have limited resources (whether of time or money) and recognise that joint action will achieve a lot more than independent effort. But that joint action must truly reflect what is best for the conservation of these groups of animals. We are therefore keen to gain people's views on priorities, on action to achieve these priorities and on what you would like to see us doing and what you would like to be doing yourselves.

This is why we are developing a national Herpetological Conservation Strategy.

The objectives of the Strategy

The strategy aims to provide an overview of the important issues for the effective conservation of British Herpetofauna. This allows directions and objectives to be set and the means to achieve them to be identified. This approach shows which projects are important and how they fit in the overall scheme of things. The strategy

is not intended simply as a work programme for the statutory nature conservation bodies. It allows a understanding of how we can most effectively work together and will help to clarify who should be doing what.

Above all, the strategy will highlight the most important issues and the most urgently-needed actions. It will allow others to see how they can best contribute to the conservation of reptiles and amphibians nationally and what their priorities should be within this overall framework.

The development of the Strategy

Because the strategy considers the whole UK the Joint Nature Conservation Committee is taking the lead in its development, working with the statutory conservation bodies for England, Scotland and Wales (English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales). However, if everyone interested in herpetological conservation is to feel committed to it, the strategy must reflect their views too. We are keen that it should not be seen as *our* strategy; we want it to become *your* strategy as well. We have therefore prepared a draft document and invite you, if you have not already seen it, to obtain a copy and let us know your views on it. Nothing in the document is fixed, although we hope that it will provide a useful starting point for further development.

What is in the Strategy

When we started writing the first draft of the strategy, we had to step back from everyday problems and specific issues and ask some very basic and fundamental questions: why should we conserve reptiles and amphibians? and what sort of approaches are needed? These extracts from the strategy summarise our answers.

Amphibians and reptiles are an important and integral part of Britain's natural and cultural heritage, and their future should be safeguarded. This will require a coordinated and strategic approach which integrates active conservation programmes, the improvement and dissemination of knowledge about species and their habitats and the development of protection mechanisms."

"Partnerships should be developed to enhance the effectiveness of conservation action for these species, and a heightened awareness and concern should be generated in a wider audience. Through these partnerships a sufficient understanding of the ecology and distribution of these species will develop, to ensure that populations are adequately conserved."

The strategy covers a five year period from 1993 to 1998 and sets a series of aims which should be achieved by the end of that period. These aims include the development of suitable conservation measures to prevent the decline of widespread species and to enhance the status of the rarer ones; the further development of survey and recording schemes; and the much greater involvement of a wider sector of the community in herpetological conservation.

Supporting these aims, four general project areas are proposed. These cover:

- setting conservation objectives ('recovery goals')
- science and monitoring
- legislative mechanisms
- conservation projects.

The strategy deliberately identifies only general areas and does not go into detail on individual projects that might occur within each project area. However, the rationale behind each project area is given, and different sub-headings within each explain why the sorts of activities suggested are needed.

The strategy aims to be comprehensive. At this stage we want to identify all the different pieces of the jigsaw so that we can see what needs to be done and, equally, what will get missed out if other projects are taken forward as a higher priority.

To some this might seem to be simply a paper exercise, but it is more than that. Already the process of preparing this strategy had identified certain priority projects, and has given us sound justification for taking them forward within the statutory conservation organisations. This has already had a bearing on ideas we are developing with the voluntary sector.

This strategy will serve as the basis for much of the work that we will be developing over the next five years. We want to make sure that it is the right strategy and that it incorporates your views. To receive a copy please write to Tom Tew at the address above. Of course you are not obliged to comment, but we would very much like to hear your views on the development of this initiative.