

CONSERVING GREAT CRESTED NEWTS

JAN CLEMONS, BHSCC CHAIRMAN

INTRODUCTION

British populations of this species are of international importance as this country contains some of the largest populations within Europe. In several European countries they are considered as endangered. As Britain has a relatively large number of Great Crested Newt sites, effective conservation measures need to be taken as soon as possible, whilst the species is still generally widespread.

STATUS IN GREAT BRITAIN AND REASONS FOR DECLINE

The number of Great Crested Newt populations in the UK is unknown. More than 3000 have been identified out of an estimated 18,000 populations, but the total has certainly declined in recent years, owing to the loss or deterioration of suitable breeding ponds and degradation of surrounding terrestrial habitat. Studies in the 1980's indicated a national rate of colony loss of 1.4%-2% per year. On this basis at least 72-360 populations are lost annually but the actual number may be a lot higher. English Nature has estimated that nationally 182,000 ponds have been lost since the 1940's and of the 291,000 remaining, at least 23% are in poor condition.

The reasons for decline include urban development, lowering of water tables and a range of modern farming practices. Lack of management of farm ponds which no longer serve their original function is a significant cause of loss. Colonisation by fish, either naturally or deliberately can, in time, eliminate Great Crested Newt populations. Pollution and the toxic effects of agrochemicals may also threaten newt populations. As more of the Great Crested Newt's habitat is lost and the distance between remaining populations increases, so the movement of animals between populations diminishes. This means that natural fluctuations in population size are less likely to be buffered by immigration and emigration, and chance local extinctions are less likely to be followed by recolonization.

Many Great Crested Newt populations may already have become isolated by the rapid changes in the countryside in recent years and we cannot assume that the present situation is sustainable in the long term. At the very least, there should be no further net loss of Great Crested Newt populations. A net increase in the number and connectedness of populations should be an objective in any future conservation programme for this species.

These declines could be halted by pond restoration and pond creation programmes by urging the government to promote agri-environmental schemes and incentives, and secondly, by gaining funding for specific schemes from the National Lottery Charities Board or charitable Trusts.

PROTECTION MEASURES

The Great Crested Newt is listed on Annexes II and IV of the EC Species & Habitats Directive and Appendix II of the Bern Convention and protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Schedule 2 of the 1994 Conservation (Natural

Habitats, etc) Regulations (1994). This legislation makes it an offence to kill, injure or take the species or to damage or destroy their habitat.

Under the terms of the EC Habitats directive Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) must be designated for the Crested Newt, which will be selected from the most important Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) for the species. SAC protection will only be afforded to a few exceptional populations on the basis of population density and geographical rarity, however. As a protected species, the Crested Newt and its habitat must be taken into account by planning authorities when considering planning applications under the DoE Planning Policy Guidance: Nature Conservation (PPG9). Such strong guidance further strengthens the status of the Crested Newt, especially in a local context.

Despite this degree of protection, there are several current cases where Great Crested Newt colonies are threatened by legal development. Often this is due to inadequate environmental assessment at the planning stage. While such cases attract attention, there may be other instances where damage is done as a consequence of actions that require no planning permission, largely through ignorance either of the presence of newts or their protected status.

SITE THREATS

a) Mitigation

If a Great Crested Newt site is threatened, the first priority is site safeguard and *in-situ* conservation but this requires prior knowledge of the locations of Great Crested Newt colonies. Often the presence of the species is not known before the planning processes are beyond the point of no return. In which case, the next priority will need to be the negotiation of suitable mitigation. Adequate habitat should be retained or provided within the development as a condition of the planning application and sufficient time must be made available for habitat enhancement or creation and to rescue the animals. Suitability and accessibility of the terrestrial habitat, buffer zones and wildlife corridors, such as hedgerows and ditches, will need to be considered.

b) Translocation

Rescues of Great Crested Newts from threatened sites, followed by translocation elsewhere, is the last resort and must be fully documented and monitored for several years. Methodologies that enable us to establish the sustainability of the translocated populations should be employed in order to assess the success or failure of the translocation. Management of the receptor site, with suitable modifications if needed, is an important requirement for any translocation programme.

On the other hand it could be argued that introductions from local donor populations, that can spare eggs or individuals, to newly created or restored ponds, could re-establish the species or increase its range in some areas. Such conservation translocation programmes could help to achieve the 'no net loss of sites' target for the Crested Newt. Certain precautions would need to be taken so that no disease or invasive water plants are inadvertently transferred.

RESPONDING TO THE PROBLEM

What action can be done to offset the decline of the Great Crested Newt in Britain and maintain the species' range and distribution? The Government have produced an outline action plan for the Great Crested Newt which is a step in the right direction, but how this

will be actually achieved and funded is not certain. To take this a step further, any Crested Newt action plan will need to involve working partnerships between the voluntary and statutory conservation organisations at both a national and local level. Local Amphibian and Reptile groups or recorders could get involved with local Biodiversity Action Plans and Local Agenda 21 projects, for example in the national recovery of the Great Crested Newt, which will be best achieved through many local programmes. Local databases containing information on known breeding sites on a county basis, sensitivity maps, conservation plans could be built. This would ensure that the actual and likely distribution of Great Crested Newts is known to the planning authorities. Local surveys could be carried out where information is inadequate and pond creation and habitat restoration schemes could be implemented to offset local losses. Survey programmes should, firstly, aim to survey 30% of the estimated sites within five years and secondly, be targeted towards those areas where the species is poorly surveyed. These programmes need to be put into place as soon as possible. Designation of the most important sites as SSSI or SINC (Sites important for Nature Conservation) in each local authority region should be undertaken, together with positive management programmes for each site.

Why should we be worried about conserving Great Crested Newts when they are so relatively widespread? The signs indicate that this may not always be the case and it is possible that in the future the Crested Newt could join the Natterjack Toad, Sand Lizard and Smooth Snake on the UK endangered species list. By taking action now, we can make sure that the Great Crested Newt will not only be found in a relatively few places in Britain but will continue to be well known the length and breadth of the country.

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BRITISH HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY POLICY ON THE CONSERVATION OF THE GREAT CRESTED NEWT (*Triturus cristatus*) IN GREAT BRITAIN

1. The British Herpetological Society (BHS) considers the Great Crested Newt to be a vulnerable and declining species and will support and promote the conservation of the species.
2. The BHS supports the UK and European legislation and contends that it should be more effectively enforced.
3. The BHS asserts that further loss of Great Crested Newt populations should be prevented and every opportunity should be taken to increase the number of breeding sites.
4. Where breeding sites are threatened, BHS advocates that existing populations be accommodated and conserved *in situ*.
5. Where site destruction is unavoidable mitigation measures to maintain the status of the Great Crested Newt in the immediate locality should be undertaken. The outcomes of these measures must be monitored in order that techniques can be improved and/or revised in the light of experience.

BHS ACTION

1. To contribute to an agreed set of guidelines and establish working partnerships with other organisations involved in Great Crested Newt conservation work.
2. To participate in the development of a national recovery programme, that can be applied locally, to restore the species' range and distribution.
3. To participate in a site protection/management programme to ensure a representative set of sites within the species' geographical range is fully protected and conserved.
4. To encourage BHS members to participate in the activities of Local Amphibian and Reptile Groups, to survey ponds for Great Crested Newts and to report their findings.
5. To contribute to a national herpetofauna dataset of validated records and assist in their analysis.