

## THE FROGLIFE COMMON SPECIES PROJECT

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BHS members will have heard that the Society supports a conservation initiative called the Common Species Project (CSP), operated by Froglife at their offices in Suffolk. This article aims to give an overview of what the project entails. The term "common species" encompasses the nine widespread native herps, i.e. the Common Frog, Common Toad, Smooth, Palmate and Great Crested Newts, Slow-worm, Common Lizard, Grass Snake and Adder. In other words, the three-quarters of our non-marine herpetofauna species that are fairly widely distributed and not as restricted in range as the Sand Lizard, Smooth Snake and Natterjack Toad, but in some cases equally threatened and declining. The conservation of the rarer species are dealt with largely by a combination of the statutory agencies, the Herpetological Conservation Trust and the BHS Conservation Committee.

But is there a need to conserve widespread species? In fact when you start to examine the health of any of these species at the local level in certain areas, you will find that they are in difficulty. Overall, there is little evidence for a nett increase in any of the species, and many are finding it hard even to remain stable at the county level. Adders, Grass Snakes and Great Crested Newts in particular are in decline across much or all of their range, and loss of lizard habitat is also a major problem.

The main reasons for these declines are the loss, modification and fragmentation of habitats. Grasslands and heathland sites are still being snapped up by developers to build new housing estates, factories or industrial units. Flooded quarries, chalk pits and sand pits – so important for Great Crested Newts and several other species – are often subject to resumption of mineral extraction and landfilling. Ponds in traditional agricultural settings are being neglected or infilled, perhaps not at the rate which prevailed a couple of decades back when farmers were actually paid to fill in ponds, but what relatively few remain are still often under threat. Road schemes carve up habitats and restrict access to key habitat patches, and then lead to massive mortality. Even nature reserves which are dedicated to preserving natural habitats can be mismanaged – for example by overgrazing, or cutting at the wrong time of year. Snakes are still being persecuted, despite legal protection for several years.

Ok, so that's the bad news. Now for some glad tidings. Some of these problems can be countered given the right effort and expertise in the right places. There are several "weak points" which obviously need addressing. Protecting sites through the planning process is one of the obvious places to start, but to do this we need to know which sites to protect, and in some areas information on distribution is woefully lacking. Further field survey needs to be undertaken. To do this we need keen field herpetologists with good training or a background in survey skills. Information on site protection and habitat management needs to be able to help with identifying site threats and proposing important sites for designation. The demand for conservation information for the general public has to be catered for.

These activities are where the Common Species Project steps in to help. A Common Species Unit (CSU) was established by Froglife in 1989 from the herpetofauna

programme run by the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society (now Fauna and Flora International). The CSU initially set up one post (the Common Species Co-ordinator or CSC) in 1944, and in 1996 expanded to two posts (the CSC plus an Information Assistant [IA]), with an extended remit. The CSP – which occupies most of the CSC's time and half the workload of the IA – is designed to co-ordinate conservation actions briefly summarised in the preceding paragraph. The target areas which the CSP works on are as follows:

1. **Great Crested Newts Species Action Plan (GCN SAP).** The UK Biodiversity Action Plan is part of the Government's response to the Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992. The Plan contains a list of conservation packages for a number of threatened species, including the Great Crested Newt. BHS and HCT are "Lead Partners" for this species jointly with Froglife. As the great crested newt is declining nationally yet is still fairly widespread, the task of delivering conservation targets is particularly tricky (especially compared to some of the plant species in the BAP which are found only on a handful of small sites; Crested Newts are thought to occur in around 18,000 ponds!). Consequently, the CSP acts as a main conduit through which the activities listed in the Action Plan will be monitored. A meeting was organised by the CSP to discuss this, and to help develop a draft work programme, in February 1998 at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. This work will be co-ordinated by a wider group of organisations through a steering group. Other specific actions being undertaken by the CSP for the Crested Newt include the production of a conservation handbook, to allow site owners, reserve wardens, volunteers and others to manage and monitor Crested Newt populations more effectively. This should be ready in Spring 1999. A grant scheme to fund small projects furthering Great Crested Newt conservation has been initiated, with funding from HCT, and Spring 1998 saw the first round of projects get underway. One thing the humble Great Crested Newt still lacks is a so-called "Champion" – a provider of major resources to fund conservation. One or two other species (including, predictably, some of the "cuter" ones) in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan have secured such a gift horse, usually large commercial companies or utilities. We live in hope for Crested Newts. It would be great to be able to fund a nationwide team of surveyors to help track down colonies and prevent their destruction.

2. **Local group and volunteer support.** A lot of the conservation work discussed above can only realistically be undertaken by volunteers. The network of local groups dealing with herp conservation, Herpetofauna Groups of Britain and Ireland (HGBI), was set up in 1990 and has rapidly grown with the help of the CSP. The HGBI national panel meets annually and acts as a forum for the exchange of views and for campaigning on behalf of herps. At present there are around 20 local Amphibian and Reptile Groups (ARGs) – normally covering a county or equivalent each. We have found that such groups are one of the best ways of delivering conservation "on the ground". These groups develop policies and determine national priorities through HGBI, using information on local status and important issues that are reported to the national panel. New groups are being set up year by year, and part of the CSP is to help emerging groups by suggesting policies, providing contacts and written materials, etc. Training events are held for local groups so that volunteers can get up to speed with identification and survey techniques. Regional HGBI meetings have been happening in a few regions now for several years and are advertised in *The Natterjack*.

3. **Production of literature.** The CSP is heavily involved in writing and distributing key publications, such as its advice sheet series for ARGs and others to use. This set of leaflets covers topics which are the most common source of queries from the public and conservation groups, such as snakes in gardens and correct habitat management, the

“Toads on Roads” scheme, the problems of exotic species, and how to defend sites from development threats through the planning process. Through HGBI, more detailed advice has also been produced on mitigation schemes and other work in the pipeline includes a report on the problems of exotic plants in amphibian ponds. The newsletter of HGBI, *Herp-line*, is now produced twice per year and distributed to over 800 contacts across the UK (and a few overseas too), as well as to BHS members. *Herp-line* contains information on important conservation developments and key issues for volunteers. The *Herpetofauna Worker’s Guide* is now in its third edition with the publication of the 1998 version, and includes a wide range of contacts and lists resources for anyone interested in UK herp conservation. The *Froglogue* lists all publications available from Froglife. Both documents are available free of charge.

4. **Advisory service.** There is a huge volume of requests for information from a variety of organisations and the public which needs to be dealt with carefully. Some people simply need to be told how to tell snakes from Slow-worms, while other more involved requests might entail site visits to assess the degree of threat from a new housing development or pollution source. At Froglife we handle requests by providing advice over the phone, sending out relevant literature, and by referring callers to ARB members or other local experts where necessary. All enquiries are logged onto a computer so that we can keep track of them, pass on details to local groups and reflect on how well we are coping. We are happy to answer conservation enquiries referred to us from other organisations.

5. **The Herpetofauna Worker’s Meeting.** Since 1995, the annual meeting of the HGBI national panel has been held alongside the lectures and workshops concerning herpetofauna conservation. Froglife has organised this annual gathering of herp conservation workers, and the CSP assists with the administration. The meeting takes place over two days in early February. Anyone who has attended these meetings will (hopefully) have found them to be of practical use in their conservation activities. As well as the main presentations, a guest lecture and a social element is included, with a quiz and much time spent in the bar to exchange stories and tips. The meeting rotates between England, Scotland and Wales (1998’s was in Cardiff and 1999’s will be at a venue to be decided in Scotland).

Of course, all of these activities need a high degree of management and are strengthened by participation from a wide range of bodies. A CSP Steering Group provides direction to the project, and comprises representatives from English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Countryside Council for Wales, Froglife, the BHS, The Herpetological Conservation Trust, HGBI, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and The Wildlife Trusts. This Committee sits twice per year. Funding for the CSP comes from a variety of sources, including grant-aid from the statutory agencies, donations, charitable trust grants, and in 1997 BHS also generously gave a donation. BHS’s aim to promote conservation of amphibians and reptiles in Britain – by helping with a national project – will help to ensure a better future for them. If you want to do more to help, you could consider assisting your local Amphibian and Reptile Group with site surveys and practical habitat management. A questionnaire survey (with reply envelope) was circulated with the last issue of *Herp-line* and we would like all members to return this as soon as possible. Try to attend the annual Herpetofauna Worker’s Meeting or regional HGBI meetings. Any records you have gathered of herp sightings should be copied to your nearest herp recorder (see the *Herpetofauna Worker’s Guide* for details) as well as to the BHS Conservation Committee database. Other ways you can get involved are outlined in the *Guide*, which is available free from Froglife.