

19 GREAT CRESTED NEWT SPECIES ACTION PLAN

19.1 INTRODUCTION

The Great Crested Newt *Triturus cristatus*, usually spends most of its life within about 200-500 metres of its breeding pond and requires a suitable mix of habitats to support a viable population. The newts feed on land and in water eating a variety of invertebrates. Ponds are used for breeding and the development of eggs and tadpoles and are typically occupied between early spring and late summer. They favour a breeding pond with a pH of 6.0 or above, usually more than 100 square metres in size, over 50 cm depth and with well developed aquatic and emergent plant communities. Great Crested Newts are more likely to be found where there is a cluster of ponds and it is a species often associated with ponds which periodically dry out completely. This is probably because of the effect this has on predators of this species, particularly fish and waterfowl.

The requirements of this species on the surrounding habitat is the most exacting of all the native amphibians. The main habitat requirements are that it should contain a variety of vegetation under different management regimes, especially lightly grazed pasture and scrub or woodland. Gardens, derelict industrial sites and town parks may also provide suitable habitats. These habitats provide the invertebrate food source that forms the bulk of the adult Great Crested Newts diet. Other essential features include secure frost free conditions for hibernation and a lack of fertilizers and pesticides, which the newts are particularly sensitive to.

Adult Great Crested Newts spend the majority of the year on land and immature newts remain on the land until they reach sexual maturity at between two and four years. They will then find a breeding pond, often the one they were hatched in.

19.2 CURRENT STATUS

19.2.1 UK Status

This species is a lowland animal in Britain, widespread over most of England (although rare in the south-west) and much rarer in Scotland and Wales and absent from Ireland. The British population is estimated to be amongst the largest in Europe, where it is threatened in many countries.

The loss of this species has been dramatic over the last 50 years. Studies in the 1980's indicated a national rate of colony loss of 2% over five years. It is estimated that there are a total of 18,000 although only 3000 of these have been identified.

The Great Crested Newt is listed on Annexes 11 and 1V of the Bern Convention. It is protected under schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations, 1994 (Regulation 38) and schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

19.2.2 Hertfordshire Status

In Hertfordshire, the species shows a widespread distribution. Since 1980, fifty breeding ponds have been identified, but many of these sites may no longer support a viable population. Of a small sample of pond sites (10) revisited during May 1996, only 5 still supported Great Crested Newts and of the ponds where their presence was confirmed, only one area supported a reasonable population. The indication from this small sample is that the population of Great Crested Newts in Hertfordshire is in severe decline. A total of 18 ponds have had the presence of newts confirmed since 1990.

A more recent report in nearby London, suggests that 42% of Great Crested Newt populations in the London area have been lost in 20 years. From these figures a rate of 0.4-2% annual loss of ponds can be assumed. If Hertfordshire has an estimated 250 populations (applying the same ratio as that found nationally, i.e. identified sites representing 20% of estimated existing populations, para 1.2) then between 1 and 5 populations are being lost each year.

19.3 CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE

19.3.1 Habitat Loss

Many breeding ponds and or the suitable habitat surrounding them have been destroyed by drainage schemes, over abstraction of groundwater, agricultural intensification, management, neglect and development.

The Hertfordshire Pond Report (1987) revealed that in just one hundred years the total number of ponds in the County had almost halved to an estimated total of 3,595 in 1978. Work in the early 1980s documented a 2% national decline in the number of ponds every five years.

The largest known local population at Berkhamsted Castle moat is severely threatened due to the recent drought and over-abstraction. No breeding has been recorded in either 1996 or 1997, with the moat completely dry.

19.3.2 Management

Where ponds still exist, the pond itself or the surrounding habitat has often changed to such an extent that there is too little food or shelter for the newts to survive. Less than half a hectare, even of ideal habitat is unlikely to sustain a viable population (English Nature).

However, because of the threatened status of all the diverse forms of pond habitats in Hertfordshire it is important that ponds are properly managed for all species present and not just the requirements of a 'Flagship Species' such as the Great Crested Newt. **Where possible management should be designed around the rotational management of several (at least two) closely spaced ponds allowing the full range of successional stages to be experienced by each pond in turn and so allowing for the needs of other species reliant on these habitats.**

19.3.3 Fragmentation of Populations and Isolation

Clusters of ponds have been shown to be important in supporting a viable population of Great Crested Newts (Swan and Oldham, 1993). In Hertfordshire, ponds are becoming increasingly isolated with the result that local extinctions are more likely to occur. For example, Norton Pond (an ancient pond) on the outskirts of Letchworth has become surrounded by development. Great Crested Newts are still present but numbers are small (observations of only 1-2 animals).

Where possible creation of new ponds should be near existing sites to compensate for local losses and increase chances of successful colonisation of Great Crested Newts and other pond wildlife.

In some areas the low populations or total absence of Great Crested Newts will mean that translocation or re-introductions are the only option for conserving the species. Where such programmes are undertaken, they must be done in accordance with accepted scientific criteria and there must be a commitment to ongoing management and monitoring by the landowner / manager.

19.3.4 Pollution

Pollution and toxic effects of agrochemicals, or run-off from roads, may make breeding ponds unsuitable, preventing the healthy growth of tadpoles.

19.3.5 Predation

Fish (even small species such as Sticklebacks) eat the eggs and tadpoles of Great Crested Newts. Stocking of a pond with fish is likely to be a severe threat to the newt population. Ducks can also cause problems, as they eat the water weed and may also eat tadpoles. Predation by released terrapins may also be a problem in some areas.

19.4 CURRENT ACTION

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) has published a five-year framework (1994-1999) for the conservation of amphibians and reptiles in the UK, in collaboration with statutory nature conservation organisations and voluntary bodies.

The Countryside Commission for Wales, English Nature and Scottish Natural Heritage support a post within the NGOs to develop further local amphibian and reptile local groups, and support surveys and conservation initiatives.

All known breeding sites for Great Crested Newts have been designated as important Wildlife Sites and entered onto the Geographical Information Alert System by the Hertfordshire Environmental Records Centre. Some of these sites have been incorporated into District Local Plans.

19.5 GREAT CRESTED NEWT ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES

Maintain the range, distribution and viability of existing Great Crested Newt populations.

To clarify the current status of the Great Crested Newt in Hertfordshire.

Restore populations to 2 unoccupied sites each year for the next ten years, by restoring existing ponds (with past records of this species), creating new ponds and managing habitat where necessary. (This represents new ponds required to offset losses due to all causes and should be in addition to preventing loss through development or neglect).

19.6 PROPOSED ACTIONS

19.6.1 Policy and Legislation

GCN1. Ensure that all ponds qualifying as Wildlife Sites are identified in local plans at the next review and protected through the development control process.

Action: LA's.

GCN2. Pond creation and management to be expanded through agri-environment schemes such as Countryside Stewardship. Introduction of a separate category, as has been done with hedges, to be investigated at next review.

Action: MAFF, FRCA.

19.6.2 Site Safeguard and Management

GCN3. Notify all landowners and site managers of Great Crested Newt Wildlife Sites of the conservation importance and legal protection of their site, by 2000

Action: HARG, HMWT, CMS.

GCN4. Ensure all landowners of new Great Crested Newt sites discovered are offered management advice within 1 year.

Action: HARG, HMWT, CMS.

GCN5. Seek opportunities to restore former Great Crested Newt sites (both ponds and associated habitats) where appropriate or create new sites, thereby encouraging the natural dispersal of the species to new sites. Target: 2 projects per year for 10 years.

Action: CMS, HARG, GH, LA's, HMWT.

GCN6. Continue sensitive management of HMWT reserves which hold Great Crested Newt Colonies - Balls Wood, Hertford Heath & Patmore Heath. Consider requirements at management plan review.

Action: HMWT.

19.6.3 Species Management and Protection

GCN7. Produce a report assessing the feasibility / desirability of establishing a re-introduction programme to restore populations to appropriate historical sites, where Great Crested Newts are no longer present, by 2006.

Action: HARG, HMWT, HERC, EN, LA's.

GCN8. Develop proposals to create a pilot introduction scheme in combination with habitat creation work at HMWT's Fir and Pond Woods Nature Reserve, by 1999.

Action: HMWT, EN, EA.

19.6.4 Advisory

GCN9. Advice on pond and habitat management, highlighting the vital importance of the surrounding habitats to be given with any publicity on the species as well as in response to direct inquiries.

Action: HERC, HMWT, CMS, FWAG.

GCN10. Management advice to be provided for occupied or potentially occupied ponds.

Action: HARG, CMS, HMWT.

19.6.5 Future Research and Monitoring

GCN11. Revisit all ponds with past records for Great Crested Newts to determine their current status by 1999. All records to be passed to HERC.

Action: HARG, HMWT.

GCN12. Survey all ponds within a 500 metre radius of extant sites, as identified from the re-survey of historic sites, by 2001. This combined with random visits to previously un-surveyed ponds will enable a majority of new populations to be discovered. All records to be passed to HERC.

Action: HARG, HMWT.

GCN13. Set up a monitoring programme to survey ponds on a regular basis, targeted at:
i) water bodies where recent management work has been undertaken
ii) water bodies with exceptional populations (i.e. >100 night torch counts)

Action: HARG, HERC.

19.6.6 Communication and Publicity.

GCN14. Promote through publicity and media opportunities, a wider understanding of amphibian and pondlife conservation. This may also include training courses.

Action: HARG, HMWT, HERC, LA's.

GCN15. Encourage interested individuals to become involved in survey and other work of the HARG.

Action: HARG.

GCN16. With due regard to the protected status of this species, encourage records for private land and gardens not included in the county survey, through a wildlife gardening leaflet, or specific urban survey (see Chapter 10, Urban), by 2000. Information leaflets such as "Facts about Great Crested Newts" (English Nature, 1995) should also be made widely available.

Action: LA's, HMWT, EN.

GCN17. Establish regular liaison between key organisations in Hertfordshire, including HARG, HERC and HMWT, by 1999, to ensure co-ordination in implementation of actions under this action plan.

Action: HARG, HERC, HMWT.