Petitioner submission of 10 October 2023

PE2035/B: Recognise legal control of generalist predators as a conservation act

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) welcomes the written response to the Petition from Scottish Government.

On the back of this, and given the number of signatories with a keen interest in the issue, the SGA seeks the Committee's views on how Scottish Government's response may be published for wider Parliamentary record, so that it is 'officially recognised' as the Government's standpoint on the issue, as the Petition seeks. Is there an appropriate Parliamentary mechanism, such as a Ministerial statement or other, whereby such official recognition may be effectively achieved?

Recognition in this way would provide important and timely clarity to professionals who carry out skilled legal control of generalist predators in Scotland and who regard this as important conservation work, backed by a growing body of science.

It would signal, officially, Scottish Government's backing for legal predator control as a component of conservation at a time when policies have led SGA professional members to question if this is, indeed, the case. These mixed messages have led to them feeling their actions do not have support of Government. The recent government announcement of a ban on snaring, an important tool in fox management, has served to cement this impression.

To explain our members' views, and to present further evidence as to why we seek official recognition of predator control as a conservation act by Scottish Government, we cite the example of Capercaillie conservation.

On 25th February 2022, the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) of NatureScot, Scottish Government's nature advisers, published recommendations for saving the Capercaillie.

Reviewing all evidence, the report authors cited predator control as the number one measure likely to make the biggest and quickest positive impact. They recommended predator control should take place over 'as large an area as possible within the core area of Badenoch and Strathspey'.

The authors rejected habitat as a chief cause of recent species decline. 'There is no compelling evidence that changes in habitat quality or availability

(independent of effects of disturbance), parasites or inbreeding can explain the recent reduction in breeding success'.
The reduction in breeding success, the authors said, was down to 'predation on eggs and young chicks', with the main predators being foxes and crows. (Pine martens were also cited but this is outwith the Petition's scope).

Announcing its response, Scottish Government did not place any obligation on stakeholders, who manage the last remaining core forests, to carry out fox or crow control, even although those stakeholders include Government agencies, Forestry and Land Scotland and NatureScot.

Minister Lorna Slater MSP placed Scottish Government's emphasis for Capercaillie conservation on habitat improvement, as did Eileen Stuart, NatureScot Deputy Director of Nature and Climate Change, saying: "We will continue to support and invest in large-scale and well-managed restoration and expansion of the pine forest as ***the key conservation management tool*** to revive capercaillie populations." Predator control was not mentioned in the statement.

As this petition asks, we feel it is necessary that legal control of abundant generalist predators, if supported, is officially recognised by Scottish Government as a conservation act, just as it recognises, prioritises and publicly funds, habitat restoration.

If Scottish Government truly means what it says in its response, it is important that it makes such a statement publicly, to the Parliament, so that policy actions (in deeds, not only words) may flow from it in the future.

Not only would this provide some much needed encouragement for land managers that they, too, may play an important role in species conservation during a Nature Emergency (with Government support), it could help Scotland conserve ground-nesting species such as the Curlew, which the most recent State of Nature report confirms is in deep decline.