

PE2151/C: Grant protected status to primitive goat species in the Scottish Borders

The Wild Goat Conservation Trust written submission, 15 August 2025

The SPICe briefing has given a fair account of the largely government agency literature on the subject of “feral” goats. However, the research relies too heavily on these information sources that have a general bias towards the excessive culling of wild goats. The government has already given its response to this petition. A response that explains exactly why so many people have signed it.

Whilst we accept that wild goats were, many centuries ago “feral”, having escaped captivity or having been released into the wild, they are now fully naturalised and therefore more “wild” than “feral”. The persistent use of the term “feral” is a construct used to position the animals outwith wildlife protection legislation and outwith agricultural livestock regulations.

We also accept that wild goats are non-native. They have however, lived freely in Scotland’s more remote places since at least the time of Robert the Bruce (1274-1292).

They are not “invasive”. Despite the rhetoric about rapid population and range expansion, we know of no populations that have achieved this. In contrast to Scotland’s burgeoning wild deer populations, Scotland’s wild goats have undergone a range contraction over the past 100 years. G. Kenneth Whitehead, in his book *The Wild Goats of Great Britain and Ireland* (1972), documented that largely due to culling, half of the known herds had become extinct with a little more than 70 remaining. He calculated that the entire Scottish population of wild goats was about 4000 animals, broadly similar to today’s population estimates. Put in perspective, they are as rare as pine martens. To consider that wild goats are a real threat to Scotland’s nature restoration initiatives is quite fanciful and bordering on hysteria.

In reality, wild goat herds are vulnerable and succumb to overzealous culling, reducing their numbers to a point from which they cannot recover. The SPICe briefing failed to comment on Oxygen Conservation’s claim that a population of 20 animals had increased to 138 in just two years, which they called rapid population growth. Such population growth is biologically impossible and was yet further misrepresentation of the facts by that company.

Oxygen Conservation set about a cull at the onset of the wild goat breeding season with the intention of reducing the heft number on their land by 83%. We argue that not only was the timing unethical but also that such a reduction was unsustainable for the heft. There was little wonder that local people were outraged. In the event, we believe 75 wild goats were shot, a number of them being females.

Although the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) cites “feral goats” as being in the worst 100 non-native, invasive species globally, they are not generally referring to the upper latitudes of the northern temperate zone where Scotland is located but rather are referring to arid or semi-desert regions of the

globe. This is yet more misrepresented science in arguments against Scotland's wild goats.

We should add that the SPICe briefing also failed to mention that since 2014 when the landowner felt that 100 was the correct size of the wild goat population in relation to the livestock numbers on the Langholm and Newcastleton Hills, 170 head of black Galloway cattle and 5,700 hill sheep have been removed.

We do not expect the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) to place wild goats on Schedule 5 of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act; but this is not what this petition is calling for. It calls specifically for the protection of wild goats in the Scottish Borders because:

- the herd of Langholm and Newcastleton Hills is culturally and biologically significant having been identified as morphologically true to the ancient landrace type;
- the goats contribute positively to the upland ecology of the 30,000 acres where they are hefted (for example they were present on this land when 18,000 acres was designated SSSI and SPA for its high conservation value);
- are revered by the public;
- and are clearly endangered by "rewilding" ambitions.

Finally, it appears that the issue has become confused, it is important, we believe, that the discussion focuses upon the ask of the petition. We accept that it is not generally possible to legislate for a sub-population (although examples do exist e.g. Greenland white-fronted geese). However, it should be noted that bylaws are a mechanism for achieving localised legislation and wildlife protection.

We would urge the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee to consider all options to satisfy the genuine concerns of so many people. Surely, in the end, the people of Scotland must have the right to a say in what natural heritage they wish their country to conserve.