

A response to “Feral Wild Boar in England”



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Introduction

Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) are the only wild species of suidae, which was a former native of the British Isles. Recent escapes from farmed populations have re-established this species in known English locations some of which are now breeding. It is the author's opinion that this restoration – albeit accidental – constitutes a return of a once indigenous species and should be supported for the following reasons.

- Wild boar are a former native species.
- They have an important ecological role.
- There is suitable available habitat for them.
- They can be effectively managed.
- They have the potential to provide a sporting resource in rural areas.
- With appropriate information the general public will largely welcome their presence.

Our past track record on this island of interaction with our indigenous large mammals has to date been uniform. They have caused us inconvenience. We have exterminated them. This approach, as the global threats to a myriad of species spiral, is simply not tenable.

A failure to support the presence of wild boar in Britain would expose our international commitment to the preservation of biodiversity as one of clear hypocrisy whereby we advocate tolerance by others whilst failing to do so ourselves.

Response to section A

Future management options

(a) This is not a preferred option, as it would not address the central issues arising from the presence of this species in England, which have been identified in the consultation document.

(b) This is not a preferred option, as it would result in the extinction of this species in England. The extermination of any verifiable feral pig populations would be desirable. See notes in Appendix 1 below.

(c) This option is advisable where proven feral pig or wild boar/hybrids can be identified. In practice it may be extremely difficult to implement and should not be employed on a cursory basis to allow for the elimination of colour variant or leucistic wild boar. A code of hybrid body/shape characteristics should be compiled with professional assistance to advise this process and could be incorporated in a hunter's guide. See Provision of Advice and Guidance (v).

(d) This is the most suitable option. Although it would not deter natural re-colonisation in the long term, consideration should be given to a predisposition against licensing boar farming in large outdoor pig rearing areas in order to lower the immediate risk of creating wild living populations. It may require a legal ability for statutory intervention in areas where landowner control is either absent

or limited. This might be best accomplished through the employment of the existing wildlife management skills base of the Forestry Commission.

Where conflict with large scale outdoor pig rearing is not significant consideration should be given to the genetic reinforcement of isolated populations with unrelated individual animals drawn from either captive breeding programmes or other wild living groups. Meta-population corridors through the wider countryside should be identified to allow for the natural dispersal of this species in future. These would focus on the retention or creation of rough grassland, scrub and woodland zones which could be incentivised for private landowners through existing agri-environment schemes. Priority should be given to the development of corridors between existing habitat blocks. This policy would be of significant worth for a wider range of associated wildlife.

(e) This is not a preferred management option, as it will

- Only defer a long-term requirement for government action to address the inevitable requirement for mitigation options and solutions.
- Could be employed to eliminate free-living wild boar populations forming in areas where they pose little threat to human interests and could be ecologically desirable.
- It would ignore the immediate need for animal welfare based legislation identified in section B (i).

Response to section B

(i) Disease and animal welfare

(f) This is an important action, which should be implemented.

(g) This is an important action, which should be implemented.

(h) This is an important action, which should be implemented.

(ii) Changes to legislation

(i) This is a highly desirable animal welfare issue, which should be implemented to prevent the unnecessary suffering of pregnant or suckling females and their dependant offspring.

(J) This is an important action, which should be implemented.

(k) This action would allow for a more rigorous process of control of captive populations. It should ensure a standardisation of holding facilities, which at present are highly variable. It should incorporate holding facility design, animal welfare and individual identification. Particular attention should be paid to the design of transport vehicles, slaughter, receptor and handling pens. A number of individual escapes are known to have occurred through the failure of such facilities.

(l) This option is important in that it offers an ability to control wild boar in the light of a disease outbreak or for the purposes of population management. It should have consideration for the fact that this is a desirable ecological species and that the purpose of any such control should be to alleviate temporary targets and not eradicate the species.

(m) Although an appropriate action this will only be of worth if it is clearly enforced. The established populations to date are in part descended from known release sites, which have not been subject to legal action. Particular care should be taken to ensure that animal hospitals which have the capacity to turn large numbers of non-native rehabilitated species back into the countryside each year are aware of the forgoing.

Monitoring of feral populations and establishments containing wild boar and wild boar/domestic hybrids

(n) This is a desirable action, which should be pursued for all establishments holding wild boar or their hybrids to a common standard. At present there is still considerable variation in any common standard of care and holding between Zoo Licensed collections and open farms, boar farms and sanctuaries.

(o) This is a desirable action. Consideration should be given to marking with freeze brands or microchips in a prescribed body zone to eliminate confusion raised by tag loss. External freeze brand marks would have the added advantage of proving ownership easily in the case of escaped individuals.

(p) This is a desirable action.

(q) This is an important action, which should be implemented. See Appendix 2 below.

Provision of advice and guidance

(r) This is a reasonable action. Guidance should focus on the most commonly encountered problems such as aggression from sows with piglets towards dogs, sudden appearances of wild boar in equestrian areas and car accidents with wild boar. Consideration should be given to potential future problems, which could arise in residential areas such as bin raiding or public feeding of wild boar resulting in increased human contact. Consideration should be given through DEFRA for provision for of a central contact point of information regarding wild boar interactions.

(s) This is a reasonable action and is likely to be covered by the above.

(t) This is a reasonable action. Advice could be made available via seminars and land based advisory organisations such as ADAS or FWAG. Consideration should be given to the provision through DEFRA of an advice portfolio which allows landowners to respond through the use of proven techniques to wild boar activity. As a mitigation support mechanism in areas where the presence of wild boar is desirable a modest budget administered by DEFRA could provide for free or subsidised mitigation equipment such as electric fencing to reduce conflict with human interests.

(u) This is an essential action. At present there is no uniform standard for the containment of wild boar, their transport, handling or temporary enclosure. Several historic escapes have arisen from failure to secure animals adequately under all the forgoing circumstances. Guidelines should be devised to address these issues, which should be administered on a uniform basis under Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

(v) This is a reasonable action. Consideration should also be given to this provision covering the calibre of required weapon, stalking standard, safety when approaching an assumed kill and a hybrid

characteristic guide. It would be additionally worthwhile to identify with the assistance of these organisations/bodies individuals capable of following and destroying wild boar wounded by car accidents. This information could be made available through local DEFRA offices, local vets or the police.

Conclusion

The absence of any traditional practice of wild boar management in the British Isles offers an opportunity to devise a 'fresh slate' approach to this species so that any emerging management practice is as informed as possible, based on biology and not on tradition. In the medium term the control of wild boar population growth will be necessary to avoid conflict with agricultural, silvicultural, ecological, game rearing and associated human land use interests. This essential control must be designed, promoted and implemented by impartial interests taking full account of the issues pertinent to the long-term survival of this species in the British Isles. Government will therefore have an important role to play in this process and it is to be hoped that the rational balanced approach instigated by the consultation process is developed further to result in a positive management strategy for this ecologically important species.

As a footnote to the above in the light of the recent release of wild boar in north Devon I would urge that DEFRA adopt an immediate role in this matter.

- A media statement should be released highlighting the consultation process currently underway regarding this species.
- This should contain guidelines for countryside users which afford a sane appraisal of the threats posed by the presence of free ranging wild boar. This approach may additionally require on site consultation with local residents concerned or affected by wild boar.
- Any form of attempted control which is likely to further disperse the population should be officially discouraged and where possible legally prevented
- Contact should be established with the owner of the boar farm to develop a recovery strategy with professional assistance. This should be based on feeding the boar into holding pens or strategic shooting with approved calibre rifles.
- Given that this population is large and the escape zone is within the criteria discussed for the allowance of free living wild boar consideration should be given as to whether extermination is actually desirable.

Appendix 1

It has been argued that wild boar exhibiting any coat colour other than dark is a sign of hybridisation with domestic pigs. There is ample evidence from both historic and contemporary sources that wild boar populations occasionally present colour variants. In 1779 in the Aretzen forest a spotted wild boar was killed and white piglets are still commonly found as single individuals in litters in both France and Germany. In our contemporary countryside without 'capital predators' selecting against any unusual variants, a small founder gene pool with a predilection towards a colour morph could easily result in a population exhibiting an unusual coat pattern. This is typically evinced for example in free-living herds of fallow deer (*Dama dama*) and has additionally appeared in red deer populations in Scotland. Domestication of our common livestock has been based through history on the selection of odd 'sports'. For example wild or semi feral sheep are generally coloured while most contemporary sheep breeds are white. 'White' pig breeds came from wild boar.

As wild boar become more common hybridisation will become an inevitable factor. This is a common feature of this species throughout its substantial range. There would seem therefore to be little point in launching a vague regime of control, which is unlikely to succeed. The best dictum might be to accept that if it looks like a wild boar, acts like a wild boar and performs the ecological function of a wild boar – then it is a wild boar.

Appendix 2

The rooting activities of wild boar in search of an omnivorous diet of roots, vegetation, tubers, seeds, nuts, berries, fungi, grubs and carrion are an incredibly important factor in the creation of a vegetation structure. This rooting which can occur over substantial areas provides life opportunities for annual plants, smashes up the roots and upper vegetation of dominant species such as bramble or bracken and can act as a catalyst in the local distribution of rhizomes, bulbs or tubers.

The soil ridges this activity creates can morph into microclimate habitats for burrowing insects or reptiles and there is an undoubted link between the abundance of truffles and the abundance of wild boar. This subterranean fungus, which exudes an odour similar to that produced by a sow in oestrus, has developed this specific attraction to encourage its predator to exhume it and thus release its spores. The rooting activities of wild boar herds in winter open the forest floor and frozen soil providing essential feeding opportunities for insectivorous and seed eating birds. The hyena like qualities of this powerful omnivore also enables it to break large carcasses down rapidly, crunching up bones or hide and returning their nutrients to the soil.

A range of their other behavioural activities also produces biological gains. Wallowing in mud produces ephemeral pools for aquatic insects, dragonflies and amphibians. Regularly used runs through dense vegetation act as highways for a host of other species. This game trail usage by smaller creatures has been overlooked in importance in Western Europe. Stated simply most animals will always follow the easiest route through a landscape. If you are therefore a newly hatched chick trying to push through dense, deep, wet vegetation how much energy would you consume doing so? If you found no easy routes how long would you last? How vulnerable would you be to starvation, predation and exhaustion?

In contrast if you were able to feed and move along the open tracks, formed by large ungulates lined with their insect rich dung how much faster you would you grow and how much better would your survival prospects be?

With a caveat on their effective population control wild boar is a brilliant ecological asset and their impact on habitat ecology is a subject worthy of immediate research.

Concern has been expressed as to the effect of wild boar predation on isolated populations of rare indigenous species. Although it is highly unlikely that dormice, orchids, wild daffodils or bluebells will ever be eaten out of existence by wild boar even local extinction of these species (albeit highly unlikely) could rightly be viewed not as an indictment of restored predation but rather as a failure of our own ability. We all know that the isolation and fragmentation of our wildlife heritage is perilous. If we cannot reconnect the areas of Britain, which contain water voles, black grouse, swallowtail butterflies, dormice, heath fritillaries, or sand lizards, then they will forever remain hostages to extinction through casual chance. Wild boar cannot be held to account for this calamitous state of affairs which has been wrought by our activities, for our benefit, and which we have the responsibility to resolve.