November 2004
Issue 7

Great Crested News

Edited by Dorothy Wright, UK Great Crested Newt Conservation Officer, jointly funded by the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature, & The Herpetological Conservation Trust

Note from the Editor

Hello & Welcome to the seventh edition *of Great Crested News*. Changes have been afoot since the last issue; the Conservation Officer post has re-located from Froglife to The Herpetological Conservation Trust, down in Bournemouth where I took over the mantle in June.

I am thrilled to be in post, and I look forward to working with local authorities all over the country; redefining targets for the GCN SAP, achieving survey work in areas where data is lacking, and of course helping administering grants for great crested newt projects, amongst many other things!

Look out for the new feature on page 3 and send me your views on what you would like to see included. I am always keen to receive news items for the next edition & to hear your views! I look forward to working with many of you in the future.

Great Crested News is produced twice a year by the UK Great Crested Newt Conservation Co-ordinator at The Herpetological Conservation Trust, 655A Christchurch Road, Boscombe, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH1 4AP Great *Crested News* is also available on The HCT's website (www.herpconstrust.org.uk). **Articles and comment are invited for the next issue, by 31st March 2005.**

The Effectiveness of Mitigation

English Nature commissioned DICE at the University of Kent to investigate the effectiveness of mitigation projects for GCN's as it remains controversial as to whether these activities secure the conservation of this species in the UK.

The report researches mitigation projects undertaken between 1990-2001, by reviewing the licences issued by EN and DEFRA. Comprehensive questionnaires were also sent to consultants involved in such projects, which dealt with pre-development assessment of existing GCN populations, mitigation projects used, receptor site information and post development monitoring programmes etc.

Findings of the report

- The number of licences issued has increased
- Most projects last for over a year at an average estimated cost of £15,000- £20,000.
- Mitigation work often starts just six months after the pre-development survey.
- Generally, receptor sites for translocation projects were at the edge or bordered the development site.
- New ponds created for mitigation, were generally smaller than those lost.
- Under 50% of ponds kept as part of mitigation measures, had any management/ enhancement work carried out on them.
- In general, just under a third of GCN terrestrial habitat inside a development site was destroyed. However 75% of potential GCN habitat was impinged upon in more than 30% of projects.
- No post-development monitoring was undertaken in over half of the projects.
- When successful translocation projects are assessed in a UK context, there is very little conservation achieved for the GCN.

Many of the areas of concern, highlighted in this report have been addressed by the mitigation guidelines produced by English Nature in 2001. However, Richard Griffiths and Paul Edgar (the authors of this report) outlined the following recommendations to accompany the measures already in-place.

The recommendations included:

1. Improvement in the management of licences through a fully relational database.

2. Better guidelines; in the form of information supplied to Local Planning Authorities and English Nature local teams concerning GCN ecology and mitigation advice.

   It was felt that specific guidance was required to i) ensure that pond loss was addressed, ensuring that the number, quality and overall aquatic habitat area was maintained or improved.
   ii) Pre-development and post development monitoring should be consistent, allowing the condition of the newt population to be assessed over time.

3. Detailed post-development evaluation of a sample of projects.

The follow-up surveys need to occur for no less than three consecutive years for each site sampled, employing a standardized methodology. It was also thought that mark-recapture analysis might be needed to determine population size and recruitment levels over the study period. Further to this, both the aquatic and terrestrial habitat should be studied to monitor the habitat suitability.

For full details, download "The Great Crested Newt Mitigation Research Report "(Research report 575) from English Nature's website: www.english-nature.org.uk

Why do GCN only matter when they are 'in the way'?

I asked **Jonty Denton** (consultant) to comment on the following statement ' *Why current legislation is doing nothing for GCN's, apart from making consultants rich!* and this is his thought provoking response. *Ed*

A major inconsistency in relation to the licensing process is that great pains can be taken on some sites, where the habitats are very peripheral to the needs of the local population. At the same time works to maintain pathways and car parks, and indeed pond restoration (which are not in need of planning permissions) may be posing far more serious threats to newts!
In a similar vein, I have monitored populations vulnerable to extinction simply through succession. In such cases local development may be a blessing, as it means something gets done to improve matters. The biggest irony is sites where lavish proposals are put forward for the improvement of ponds and terrestrial habitat, only to be shelved as soon as permission is denied.

Inconsistency in the licensing process

Methodology for assessing population

Many efforts have been made to try and make what is basically an art, into a science. Calling for full scale surveys with repeated bottle trapping in the summer months and larval monitoring, at sites where it is already clear GCN are present, simply to guide future capture programmes is a recipe for needlessly disturbing newts (not to mention water shrews, grass snakes etc.). Obviously many consultants will be keen to stick to the letter of the guidelines if it means more work. If this in turn just happens to lead to longer more intensive trapping programmes, then the cynical amongst you might think that we have a case of a self-fulfilling prophecy!
I offer two brief examples of the problems of population monitoring. I have many, many more!
One extensive survey of ponds in Wales missed 5 GCN populations, two of which were in weed choked ponds listed as being 'no longer extant'. Invisible maybe, but certainly extant, as I found out when I wandered into them at night and sank to below wader level! Un-trappable, and un-torchable! <u>But</u> GCN eggs a plenty!

Time and again such surveys are undertaken at least one-year before applications are sent in, by which time the population size may have changed dramatically. For instance 500 adult newts have already been removed from one site where various 'scientific' methods estimated that no less than ***47*** adults were present in 2002 (though this may be more attributable to the abilities of the original surveyors, than to quite such a dramatic population increase!)

Assessing the importance of terrestrial habitats, and mitigating against habitat loss.
Over the past few years I have been involved with over a dozen sites, mainly following up existing licensable activities, which there is no reason to believe are exceptional amongst the many thousands of applications. I have taken over licences which were granted by DEFRA with English Nature approval. Of the most recent dozen or so, one involved the complete destruction of 8 hectares of prime newt habitat with no mitigation whatsoever. A further huge block was annexed from the newts by a new road; of course this was still available to newts via newt tunnels. Which brings me onto a major gripe-

Newt Tunnels
John Poland has looked into the effectiveness of newt tunnel schemes countrywide and in Europe, and the message is a stark one. Their effectiveness remains highly questionable, yet they have become a firm favourite on the hymn-sheet of the way things get done. The assumption seems to be that they work for toads (for which they were designed) so should work for newts). In most cases the expense of putting in tangible items such as tunnels is serving no more use than making people 'feel better' and developers can point to the vast expense on their balance sheets!

Cost effective
I know of at least 5 GCN licensed projects for which the cost per GCN was in excess of £1000!

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE MATTERS DIG FOR VICTORY!
One thing developers have in abundance are excavators, and there can be no excuse for not putting in /or restoring as many water bodies as possible within the mitigation package. It is abundantly clear that GCN do best where there are lots of ponds. The correlation is a clear one both nationally and locally.
Again at one large site which has been at the top end of the scale of expenditure on ecology, I am in no doubt that the only real lasting contribution to conservation has been the construction of three new ponds, two of which were dug by a excavator borrowed along with driver, in his lunch-break, and a third I cleared and dammed by hand with a shovel!

DO WE NEED A CENTRALISED SLUSH FUND?
One Welsh site saw £20000, being spent to clear 13 newts from a small area of land, which ultimately was not disturbed. Next door was a fine biodiversity hot spot, which the same amount would have saved from death by shading!

With the average project costs of a newt translocation exceeding the value of enough land to create a decent sized nature reserve, some thing must be wrong.
It as long been known that the major problem facing GCN is loss of ponds through succession. Again a central slush fund could then direct money to help restore such ponds.

Herptile mitigation is big business, and the appointment of sufficient independent government employed staff to oversee such works is long overdue. This could be part funded by a tariff on GCN licence applications, and costs for site visits and overseeing projects in the field. The same should go for reptiles, with species such as the Adder deserving more serious protection.
In recent months England appear to be coming slightly more in line with the position adopted in Wales. Here applications regularly get turned down, and sites with licences get visited, and occasionally the riot act gets read! As a consequence developers in the principality take GCN much more seriously! This is clear when

working over the border in England, with site managers familiar with the Welsh position!

I believe that the best way forward is to have appropriately experienced officers, in each EN Region, who can drop in and check out sites.

Targets Review

Important work on the first full review of the BAP (Species and Habitat Action Plans) is underway.

As the great crested newt is one of the UK BAP Priority species, English Nature alongside the Lead Partners (The HCT, BHS and Froglife) and steering group members are working to re-focus the Species Action Plan. The new targets will improve the direction and conservation effort for the great crested newt.

To facilitate this process, feedback is being sought from all those who contribute to the LSAP's of the GCN (local authorities, Wildlife Trust's etc). Contact Dorothy Wright (dorothy.wright@herpconstrust.org.uk) with your local information and help feed into the Targets Review.

ARG CORNER

Great Crested Newts thrive in Berkshire

Back in the summer 2000 great crested newts were discovered at a small development site in Winnersh near Reading. Because of the strict legal protection the newts enjoy, the discovery set in train a concerted effort to see how many other ponds within Wokingham district supported this protected species. Initially Wokingham District Council engaged a consultant to carry out surveys of likely ponds and to train local volunteers to a standard that they could obtain their English Nature survey licenses. The training courses proved so popular they are now in their fourth year, an average of 20 people have attended each of the four courses run so far (2001 through to 2004).

The combination of consultants and local volunteers paid dividends almost immediately and by the end of the 2000 season, Wokingham has gone from 1 known great crested newt breeding pond to 7, and by the end of the 2001 season the total stood at 12. In 2002 local volunteers trained at the courses produced their first report which found 2 new great crested newt breeding ponds. In addition Wokingham's approach to great crested newts within the planning system also paid dividends and the total at the end of the 2002 season stood at 24.

In 2003, Wokingham's volunteer newt surveyors were not only instrumental in setting up the Berkshire Reptile and Amphibian Group (BRAG) but also found a further 4 which helped bring the total at the end of the 2003 season to 36. This success was repeated in 2004 with a further 5 great crested newt breeding ponds located by BRAG surveyors and this taken with the efforts of consultants took the Wokingham total over 50. This is a quite remarkable figure considering that the District is only 178 km^2 and around third of it is still unsurveyed.
BRAG are aiming to run another great crested newt surveyors course in the spring 2005, which is mainly aimed at volunteers from other parts of Berkshire.

BRAG Great Crested Newt Survey

License Training Course

The aim of the course is to enable those that attend to make an application for a license to survey for Great Crested Newts. The course will involve a short lecture on the ecology of the great crested newt followed by a practical session setting and checking bottle traps.

Tutor: Mat Smith
Dates and Times: TBA
Venue: The Loddon Room, Dinton Pastures Country Park.
Costs: The course will cost £15 per person.

Booking is essential as spaces are limited. To book a place contact Andy Glencross on 0118 9342016 or by email at andy.glencross@wokingham.gov.uk

One of the key initial aims of BRAG is to establish enthusiastic teams of licensed volunteer great crested newt surveyors throughout the county. In 2003 and 2004 this approach paid dividends in neighbouring areas of Bracknell Forest and West Berkshire where 3 new great crested newt breeding ponds each were found. BRAG are currently validating and checking records for the county but it is thought that there are currently about 70 known breeding ponds. Having established volunteer survey groups in all of the major unitary authorities areas in Berkshire, it is hoped that over the next few survey seasons we should be able to double the records of great crested newt populations in Berkshire.
Andy Glencross (BRAG)

A New ARG for Dorset

Dorset, a county rich with both reptiles and amphibians has recently launched the Dorset Amphibian and Reptile Network (DARN). Our activities are organised by a reptile and amphibian coordinator respectively, with work already planned for the winter months as well as for spring. If you would like to join us please contact either Dorothy Wright or Chris Gleed-Owen at The HCT (01202 391319)

Correction

The note on a conviction for a newt offence ("Damaged Mitigation Site Results in Conviction", Great Crested News, Issue 6, Sept 2003) contained some factual errors. The defendant was not arrested; he attended a Police interview voluntarily. The conviction was for the offence of damaging the resting place of a great crested newt under Regulation 39 (1) (d) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994.

There was no conviction under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Originally the defendant was being considered for offences under both the 1994 Regulations and the Wildlife and 1981 Act. However, the 1981 Act offence was dropped following confusion at the court about the relevant legislation, and discussions between the defence and the prosecution. Mr Turner pleaded guilty to the 1994 Regulations offence. Apologies for any confusion arising from the errors in the original article. **Jim Foster, English Nature**

If you go down to the woods today!

Pam Eastwood (FC, Farnham, Surrey)

Thanks to a donation from The HCT the Forestry Commission was able to hire a digger for a day and dig out an old filled in pond at the Forest of Bere, near Wickham. Using Forestry Commission staff, every attempt has been made to remove the exotic species such as bamboo, rhododendron, Japanese knotweed and New Zealand pygmy weed and put up a fence around the pond to keep dogs out.

The Forest already has a World War II bomb hole that has a colony of Great Crested Newts and it is hoped that they will find their way across the forest and start up a new colony in the recently dug pond.

The Forest of Bere has a high number of visitors which means there is always some disturbance, but the fence hopefully will curtail some of this and a notice has been put up to request that the public do not introduce any plants or animals into the pond, especially fish. In the autumn plants will be introduced to the new pond from a nearby source known to be fish-free, using native British species that give good cover for tadpoles and provide egg laying sites. Logs have been put around the pond as further habitat, and the surrounding pine trees have been thinned to encourage ground flora and invertebrate species for the newts to feed on. Further funding will be sought with the intention of providing interpretation boards for educational purposes and to raise awareness of the importance of great crested newts.

GREAT GRANTS FOR NEWTS

Funding available for habitat creation/restoration for great crested newts

After reading Jonty Denton's article on page 2, I hope you feel inspired to create some ponds in your local area. There is some serious funding available for great crested newt work; here is your chance to make a difference to the warty newt in your locality!

Great Crested Newt Grants (CCW)

The Herpetological Conservation Trust has two main pots of money for great crested newt conservation work. The first one is specifically for GCN projects in Wales. This award is immediately available to projects that will help to achieve Wales' targets for the UK Species Action Plan. Deadline for applications is 24 December 2004.

Projects involving the creation or restoration of habitats (ponds and/or terrestrial habitat), linking populations, or encouraging the species to re-colonise its former range will be considered. This generous award provides up to £1000 per site and will fund 50% of the project costs, with the remaining 50% coming from volunteer time or from other grant sources.

The HCT

The second source of money is from The Herpetological Conservation Trust itself; projects funded include those outlined above, but also GCN survey work and pond management. Projects are part-funded, with the usual grant award ranging between £120- £600, the application deadline is 24 December 2004.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at The HCT, to discuss project proposals for both of these schemes. Application forms, further information on GCN's and the GCN Handbook are also available. We are keen to spend our grant budget, so if you have a GCN project in mind this could be the opportunity you were looking for!
Dorothy Wright (contact details on front cover.)

Herpetofauna ecology & conservation seminar

Saturday 4 December 2004, Berrill Lecture Theatre, The Open University, Milton Keynes

This one-day seminar with a theme of "Targeting research where it's needed" has been organised by The Herpetological Conservation Trust & The British Herpetological Society.

The aim is to present research that addresses conservation problems and knowledge gaps, and to encourage greater communication between academic researchers, conservationists and others. Registration is £20 including lunch (£10 for students/concessions, £5 to BHS & ARG members).

The day will begin with registration at 0930-1000, followed by four sessions of presentations, and a discussion on the question "Is research addressing current needs?" The speakers will be: Trevor Beebee (natterjack inbreeding effects), David Sewell & Richard Griffiths (GCN metapopulation dynamics), Tim Halliday (amphibian declines), Jim Foster (pool frog reintroduction), Daniel Pickford (ecotoxicology and amphibians), Brendan Godley (marine turtle conservation), Jonathan Houghton (UK leatherback turtles), Tony Sainsbury (translocations and disease risk), Oskar Kindvall (sand lizard PVA), Ina Blanke (sand lizard conservation), Nick Smith & Calista Bebbington (effectiveness of reptile refugia).

Send name/address and cheque payable to "The Herpetological Conservation Trust", 655a Christchurch Road, Boscombe, Bournemouth, BH1 4AP, UK. Contact Chris Gleed-Owen (chris.go@herpconstrust.org.uk). University location maps are available online from http://www.open.ac.uk/maps/. There will be a free shuttle minibus to and from Milton Keynes Central train station.

15th Anniversary Amphibian and Reptile Workers National Meeting

Keele University Conference Centre
5th and 6th February 2005
(HGBI & Froglife initiative)

To reserve your place please contact Melanie Hamlett on 01733 558844 or email melaniehamlett@froglife.org by Tuesday 30th November 2004
Further details available on www.froglife.org

REMINDER: 31 March 2005 is the copy deadline for the next edition. I look forward to hearing from you.