



February 2012

## **Windermere Geese:**

### ***Why the proposed cull is unethical and unjustified***

In its document, **Management of Canada Geese on Windermere**, the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA) gives the following reasons for proposing a cull:

1. Canada and greylag geese have increased in numbers
2. Geese droppings damage agricultural land
3. Geese droppings contribute to the phosphorus in the lake, and subsequent algal growths
4. Their grazing may contribute to damage and loss of reed beds (eyewitnesses have seen geese nibbling at the shoots)
5. To reduce the increase of waterborne E. coli bacteria levels
6. To reduce economic loss of grass crops to farmers - grazing for farm stock is 'decimated' and economic loss sustained
7. To reduce the burden on indigenous ducks of finding nest sites

#### **1. Canada and greylag geese have increased in numbers**

This is not a reason to kill them. When other species are doing well – such as the recent increase in the numbers of nuthatch, blackcap, goldfinch and coot – there is no call for them to be killed. Besides, there is no consensus about how many geese there are at Windermere.

#### **2. Geese droppings damage agricultural land**

The LDNPA does not make clear what damage is done by geese, but an article in *Smallholder* magazine says: 'Droppings are just macerated grass, and far less smelly than sheep or cattle droppings. They rapidly disappear in wet weather and do not foul the land as much as is commonly supposed.' Research conducted in 2001 found that applying nitrogen fertiliser to an area of grass can draw geese towards it and away from other areas. Feeding the birds in designated areas only would help.

#### **3. Geese droppings contribute to the phosphorus in the lake, and subsequent algal growths**

Dr Stephen Maberly of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology says that roughly half the phosphates in Windermere come from the sewage works, and half from the land: 'Farmers will put fertiliser on their fields, and some of that will wash into the lake. Humans use detergents and dishwasher tablets, and human waste too will feed into the lake.' The run-off from 100 farms makes its way to the lake and in June 2011, South Lakeland District Council gave the go-ahead for up to 700 litres of raw sewage at a time to be pumped into the lake by United Utilities, a plan dubbed 'alarming' by Westmorland and Lonsdale MP Tim Farron. The idea that geese contribute more phosphorus to the lake than raw sewage, detergents and dishwasher tablets, and agricultural fertilisers is implausible.

#### **4. Their grazing may contribute to damage and loss of reed beds**

Since the middle of the twentieth century, reed beds have been declining nationally and there are many causes including drainage, lack of management, grazing, waste tipping and development, water pollution and excessive water extraction. At

Windermere, water is extracted from the lake (by the same company that pumps sewage into it) and local lake users suggest that people dragging their boats through the reeds could also be to blame. On its own website LDNPA admits: 'Reed bed areas are getting smaller and smaller and we don't know why.' Whatever the cause of the decline, it is likely that the geese – if they eat the reeds at all – eat only the new growth shoots, not the reeds themselves. If so, they are not to blame for the decline, but may prevent regeneration and new reed beds can be protected from geese with wire until the reeds are sufficiently robust.

#### **5. To reduce the increase of waterborne E. coli bacteria levels**

If there is E. coli in the lake, more likely sources than the geese are the sewage pumped into the lake and the run-off from the 100 farms (mentioned in point 3). Environment Agency statistics show that a drain has overflowed on average 248 times a year since 2000, pouring 131 million gallons of sewage on to the town's streets and into Windermere annually. Dr Nigel Calvert said 'It's a risk to people's health as waterborne diseases like salmonella and E.coli can be picked up from sewage.' The Health and Safety Executive says: 'Cattle and sheep are the main recognised carriers of E. coli O157,' and three-quarters of E. coli cases can be traced directly back to livestock.

#### **6. To reduce economic loss of grass crops to farmers – grazing for farm stock is 'decimated' and economic loss sustained**

This appears to be the real motive for the cull. Under the General Licence, geese can only be killed if they cause 'serious damage to livestock and foodstuffs for livestock'. This may be why LDNPA uses the word 'decimated' to describe the grazing. If this is really the case, LDNPA should provide supporting evidence of this. Outbursts from farmers – who receive around £20,000 a year each in subsidies – is not sufficient. Even if the non-native geese do eat grass that farmers wish to feed to non-native sheep, there are three million sheep in Cumbria. Is there really no room for 1000 geese?

#### **7. To reduce the burden on indigenous ducks of finding nest sites**

If there is research showing that geese are causing a serious decline in any other species around Windermere, LDNPA should make that public. In any case, wild animals and birds compete for natural resources – that is entirely normal. Neither geese nor any other animal or bird should be persecuted simply for doing well.

#### **Cruelty**

Steve Tatlock of the LDNPA says that the cull will be conducted 'sensitively' using silenced shotguns. It seems he is mistaking 'sensitively' for 'secretively'. Shooting 200 geese can never be handled sensitively. It will be impossible to make sure each goose is not left bereaved by killing both the male and female of each pair. And it is not possible to guarantee a clean shot unless the birds are first trapped, which would be stressful and unacceptable.

#### **Cull Won't Work**

Culling in the nesting season appears to be aimed at trying to kill both the male and the female of each pair. But those pairs left alive will, no doubt, continue nesting, and the pre-cull figure will quickly return. This inevitability has been accepted by the LDNPA, which in its document admits that there will be a cull each year for five years – a proposition that will damage the reputation of the Lake District and will not reduce the number of geese in the long-term.

*References on request*