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

The Authority states that it plans to cull geese for five years, depending on the effects of the first cull.

In order to be able to cull under the General Licence, they have to satisfy certain criteria such as:
- preserving public health and safety *(which may explain the vague E coli suggestion)*
- preserving air safety
- conserving flora and fauna (*hence the 'eyewitness' accounts that the birds may have been eating reeds)*
- preventing spread of disease and serious damage to livestock and foodstuffs for livestock *(hence the emphatic statement about 'decimation' of grasslands)*

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[i] - there is no call for them to be killed.

Besides, there is not an agreement about how many Canada geese there are – *or how many there should be.* Clive Hartley, who resigned from the LDNPA over this cull announcement, and who makes a monthly count of all waterbirds on Windermere, said there are around 661 Canada Geese on Windermere. The LDNPA says the figure is double Mr Hartley's.[ii] Whatever the true figure, we know of no authority that can say how many there *should* be. Besides, a cull will not reduce numbers for very long, especially one conducted in the nesting season, since the nestlings will soon hatch, increasing numbers again.

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.'[iii]

Research conducted in 2001 aimed to find a way to protect agricultural land from geese. The authors wrote: 'In some areas alternative feeding refuges have been established which, if made as attractive as possible to geese, are effective at reducing damage to nearby agricultural fields. An experiment was undertaken on a Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Reserve in north-east Scotland to investigate the effectiveness of different application rates of nitrogen fertilizer in the spring on the amount of pink-footed goose *Anser brachyrhynchus* grazing.' It was found that applying nitrogen fertiliser up to around 80 kg N/ha encourages geese to graze an area, thereby reducing 'damage' to other agricultural land.[iv]

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

Dr Stephen Maberly who works for 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.'[v]

This same article continues: 'Anne Cornthwaite and her son Henry run Ashness Farm. The spectacular views from her farmhouse windows look straight down across Derwentwater to Bassenthwaite. The run-off from her farmyard manure heap makes a similar journey - just like that from 100 other farms in the area, Ashness Farm was putting too many phosphates into the lakes.'[vi]

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.[vii]

The idea that geese contribute more phosphorus to the lake than raw sewage, detergents and dishwater tablets, and agricultural fertilisers is implausible.

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

There appears to be no research done as to whether geese have an impact on the reed beds, just the briefly mentioned 'eyewitness accounts' that the birds may eat at the shoots. If it has evidence that the geese cause serious damage to the reed beds, the LDNPA should produce it. Without such evidence it looks as though the Authority is trying to fulfil the General Licence criteria, rather than providing a sound argument. An assertion that 'their grazing may contribute to the damage and loss of reed beds' is not sufficient.[viii]

We do not believe that the decline of the reed beds is due to the geese. According to the Shropshire Biodiversity Partnership, this is a nationwide problem with many causes: 'Nationally, the area of reed beds has been declining steadily since the middle

of the 20th century due to drainage and lack of management. Other activities that have had a negative effect include grazing, waste tipping and development.'[ix]

Warwickshire Wildlife Trust adds that 'the increased demand for improved drainage to accommodate industry and agriculture has resulted in the massive decline of wetland habitat, in particular reedbeds'.[x] Chichester Harbour Conservancy agrees: 'Reedbeds are in decline due to water pollution, land drainage and excessive water extraction.'[xi]

So, in brief, reed bed loss and damage is a national problem that is in large part due to poor management, drainage, water pollution and excessive water extraction (water is extracted from Windermere for water supplies to central Lancashire[xii]) and yet LDNPA blames the geese, even though on the Birdspotting section of its website, the LDNPA admits it doesn't know what is causing the decline: 'Reed bed areas are getting smaller and smaller and we don't know why.'[xiii]

Local lake users suggest that people dragging their boats through the reeds could also be to blame. 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 this is the case, they are not to blame for the decline, but may prevent regeneration. If this is the case, 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

There is no mention of E. coli caused by Windermere geese in media reports but there are plenty of references to it in relation to the sewage that enters Windermere each year: 'Environment Agency statistics show that a drain on the Glebe Road 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."'[xiv]

Furthermore, farmed animals grazing around the lake are a likely source of E. coli infection. The Ramblers Association warns its members to be careful: 'Animal faeces can carry potentially dangerous infections, such as E. coli 0157 which is now fairly common among cows, sheep and goats.'[xv] They are right to be concerned – according to the Health and Safety Executive: 'Cattle and sheep are the main recognised carriers of E. coli O157.'[xvi] Three-quarters of E. coli cases can be traced directly back to livestock, which can harbour the infection without becoming ill.'[xvii] The run-off from the 100 farms in the area (mentioned in point 3) is a more likely source of E. coli than the geese. Perhaps the unlikelihood of the geese really being to blame is the reason why there is no mention of it anywhere in the media reports?

No matter the source of any E. coli – human, farmed animal or geese – spikes in E. coli detection can happen when the bottom of the lake is churned up[xviii] by, for example, the huge number of boats on the lake. There are 10,000 boats registered at Bowness on Windermere alone.[xix]

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. The use of the word 'decimated' is designed to convey devastation of an area, and this seems overstated unless the author had an eye on the General Licence under which geese can legally be killed only if they cause 'serious damage to livestock and foodstuffs for livestock'. It is not enough that the geese eat the grass, they must cause serious damage. 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[xx] – 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.[xxi] Is there really no room for 1000 geese?

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

Once again, there is no mention of this in the media reports, which would be expected if this was a primary motive for the cull. As it is not mentioned, this appears to be a 'belt and braces' approach to obtaining permission to cull under the General Licence. If there is research 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, spokesperson for 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 – unless the birds are trapped first – it is not possible to guarantee a clean shot. The birds in the melee are likely to be maimed not killed cleanly. If they are trapped first, the stress of being in a trap would be entirely unacceptable. There is no 'sensitive' or 'humane' way to conduct this cull.

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.

Alternatives

The LDNPA says it has 'tried all the ways that are often successful in small urban areas, such as fencing or egg oiling, but it's only made a small difference'.[xxii] Animal Aid has asked it for 'full details of these trials including where, when and for how long each took place, as well as the results' and a series of other questions. We do not know whether the LDNPA has acted to prevent lake visitors from feeding the geese. If it hasn't, that would be a good place to start. Other strategies that have worked include using sheepdogs to disturb the geese, and encouraging the birds to move to a

more accepted area through supply of food or the application of nitrogen fertiliser to the grass there.

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