

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

19 January 2018

*By letter and email and published online*

Dear Mr Gove

We are writing to you to express our shared concern over ministers' comments published in The Times on 18/01/2018 with regard to the culling of grey squirrels.

Let us begin by expressing how grateful we are for the steps you have recently taken with regards to animal welfare, for example, the announcement regarding the introduction of CCTV in slaughterhouses and plans to increase prison sentences for animal abuse. With that taken into consideration, you can only imagine our deep disappointment when reading about your support for a grey squirrel cull.

All animals, of course, have some impact on their surroundings. However, it is absolutely absurd to suggest that grey squirrels should lose their lives because of the miniscule effect they have on trees. This is especially shocking when considering the grand scale of human destruction of trees. For instance, the development of HS2 threatens 100 ancient woodlands. In late 2014 in Kent, one minor re-routing scheme for the A21 destroyed around one hundred acres of irreplaceable ancient forest. These are just a couple of examples, but it is undeniable that human beings have done considerably more damage to trees and woodland than squirrels, red or grey, ever could.

We feel that once again, grey squirrels are being scapegoated because they are not 'native' to Britain. The entire focus on 'native' vs 'non-native' species is a very outdated and unenlightened approach to take when it comes to conservation. It was not so long ago that red squirrels were being subjected to this same persecution for the same reasons (eating tree bark), and killed in their hundreds of thousands.

If it emerges that squirrel culls will be taking place, please expect a significant public outcry. Grey squirrels are the only wildlife many people regularly interact with, and much of the public is very fond of them. A recent petition against the Wildlife Trusts' cull of grey squirrels gained over 100,000 signatures. Those who are not concerned about the welfare of squirrels may be concerned about what could be perceived as a waste of taxpayers' money; a study by Eschen R et al (2010) showed that the total UK loss caused by grey squirrels is £684,802, while the cost of 'controlling' squirrels is an incredible £5,412,518. The cost of killing these squirrels is significantly greater than the cost of the damage done to trees, demonstrating the pointlessness of a cull.

We hope you will take our thoughts into consideration, and please do not endorse an unnecessary and unjust mass slaughter of grey squirrels.

Yours sincerely

Animal Aid  
League against Cruel Sports  
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)  
Urban Squirrels  
Viva!