



Short communication

Exploring farmers' perspectives on predator reintroductions in Britain and Ireland

Photo: Robin Rigg

Jonathan (Jonny) H. Hanson

Queen's University Belfast, UK

Contact: j.hanson@qub.ac.uk

Introduction

The potential reintroduction of the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) or grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) to the British Isles, after centuries of absence, is highly controversial [1]. Advocates extoll the possible social, economic and ecological benefits of such reintroductions, particularly control of deer numbers and behaviour, as well as tourism revenue generation. However, the related costs and challenges would probably also be significant, with many likely to be borne by livestock farmers [2–4].

An application for a trial reintroduction of lynx in England was declined in 2018 [5]. Two further initiatives are currently underway: Lynx to Scotland¹ and The Missing Lynx Project². They have made active efforts to engage in structured dialogue with farmers in Scotland and England, but this has not been the case in Ireland to date as there are no active reintroduction proposals. Moreover, while a wide variety of approaches to manage coexistence and mitigate conflicts between agriculture and large carnivores have been used elsewhere [6–8], there has been

more limited consideration of British and Irish farmers' awareness of such measures and their perspectives on using them in their own livestock operations. Furthermore, whichever interventions are applied, their implementation is subject to influence by various political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental factors that should be considered in tandem, as opposed to assessing the efficacy and suitability of technical tools in isolation [9].

Funded by a UK Nuffield Farming Scholarship³, from November 2022 to November 2024 I implemented the project “Large carnivore reintroductions to Britain and Ireland: farmers' perspectives and management options”. Its main goal was to inform British and Irish agriculturalists on the context, management and governance of coexistence between large carnivores and livestock farming. A second goal was to illuminate farmers' perspectives on these issues and communicate them to rewilding and reintroduction professionals, including scientists, campaigners and policymakers. The third goal was to create a series of outputs for informing and engaging the British

¹ <https://www.scotlandbigpicture.com/lynx-to-scotland>

² <https://www.missinglynxproject.org.uk/>

³ The Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust is the UK branch of a global agricultural network, Nuffield International. Nuffield Scholarships are a programme of study and travel for mid-career agricultural professionals to develop their leadership in the agricultural sector in general, as well as in a specific area of their choosing.



Fig. 1. Extensive grazing of livestock in the hills of southern Scotland. (Photo: Robin Rigg).

and Irish public on the complexities, challenges and opportunities of coexistence between agriculture and apex predators, particularly in the context of reintroductions.

The specific objectives of this exploratory project were as follows:

Objective 1: Explore farmers' perspectives

- What are farmers' perspectives towards the potential reintroduction of wolves, lynx or brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) to Britain and Ireland?
- What are farmers' perspectives towards the suite of tools that could be used to manage coexistence in the event of any of these species being reintroduced?

Objective 2: Explore examples of coexistence

- How is coexistence between large carnivores, conservationists, livestock farmers and other relevant stakeholders managed?
- How is such coexistence governed, especially in relation to conflict mitigation and resolution between different stakeholders?

Methods and outputs

Following a review of the literature and drafting research objectives and questions, a cross-sectional and case study approach with multiple methods was employed [10] for two sets of interviews and/or visits, which totalled 56 overall. Between May and September 2023, remote interviews were conducted with representatives from the National Farmers' Union (NFU); NFU Cymru; NFU Scotland; the National Sheep Association (NSA); and the Irish

Cattle and Sheep Farmers' Association (ICSA). For the purposes of triangulation, representatives of several rewilding initiatives were also interviewed remotely over the same time period, including Rewilding Britain, Rewilding Ireland and Lynx to Scotland. A focus group was held in-person with the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) in July 2023 and a short, written submission was received from the Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) in August 2023. Interviews and the focus group were semi-structured, following the questions of research objective one, which enabled between-subject triangulation [10]. Given the limited likelihood of their reintroduction, bears were largely discounted from the discussion. Similarly, because of the time and resource constraints of this exploratory study, and notwithstanding the ecological and coexistence differences between wolves and lynx, the interviews largely focused on large carnivores as a general category. All interviews were recorded and a summary was made immediately afterwards. Coded observations from these memos were subsequently used for qualitative analysis [11].

Between May and October 2023, in-person interviews were conducted with a broad range of stakeholders in Switzerland, the Netherlands and the USA as well as France. Two remote interviews were also conducted during this same period, one with a representative from Agridea in Switzerland and the other with a representative from Copa-Cogeca in Belgium. For the 46 international interviews, the majority followed the same semi-structured interview methodology described above

for the interviews in Britain and Ireland. However, 21 of these interviews also involved some form of participant observation, with the time spent with each individual ranging from several hours to several days [10]. This ethnographic approach was conducted either instead of a semi-structured interview or in addition to it. As with the Britain and Ireland interviews, a qualitative summary was made immediately after the interview and/or participant observation which was used for subsequent analysis. This provided perspectives on the actual implementation of coexistence and management approaches, complementing perspectives on the theoretical use and feasibility of these approaches from British and Irish interviewees.

The rationale for visiting sites and projects in Europe and North America was the cultural, agricultural and regulatory similarities with Britain and Ireland. This therefore increased the validity and applicability of the case study findings [10]. Furthermore, the three primary study locations were also chosen to reflect the diversity of nations and political arrangements within Britain and Ireland. Lastly, given the close cultural, linguistic and political links between Britain, Ireland and the USA, the interviewees and locations in the latter's Mountain West were explicitly chosen to offer comparisons and contrasts with European approaches to carnivore coexistence. Further information on all aspects of the methodology is contained in the project report [12].

A variety of outputs were created to convey the findings of the project to a wide variety of audiences. These include a technical report, video summary⁴ and conference presentation⁵ aimed primarily at an agricultural audience, with the report also shared with rewilding and reintroduction professionals, organisations and networks. Outputs aimed at the general public in both Britain and Ireland included a TEDx talk⁶, op-eds in British⁷ and Irish⁸ media publications and a popular science book [1].

Key findings

Based on five broad categories of approaches (deterrence, finance, force, enterprise and governance) and a

PESTLE analysis⁹, a reintroduction coexistence framework was created to visualise and encapsulate the varied dimensions of the topic (Fig. 1). Agricultural representatives from Britain and Ireland were sceptical about the use of deterrence (i.e. non-lethal damage prevention measures) and financial tools such as compensation, citing their varying effectiveness, as well as labour intensity and cost for the former. There was consensus among all interviewees that the use of force (defined in the interview guide as the hazing, translocation or culling of predators) would be an essential management tool, but disagreement over the flexibility of its deployment, especially of lethal control.

While acknowledging the limitations for tourism of the lynx's elusive nature, rewilding representatives were more likely to emphasise the potential benefits from this approach, while farming representatives were concerned about the allocation of benefits from tourism to landowners bearing the costs of livestock losses and of increased labour associated with deterrence method implementation. There was, however, a greater degree of consensus on the importance of coexistence governance approaches, including frameworks, guidelines, licenses, forums and mechanisms.

A series of short case studies were prepared based on the 46 international interviews and/or visits. These featured: deterrence in Switzerland; finance in the Netherlands; force in Wyoming (USA); enterprise in Montana (USA); and governance in Colorado (USA). They were included in the project report [12] after the discussions of the results from the British and Irish interviews on each of these five categories, providing applied examples to complement the more hypothetical interview data.

Beyond stakeholder perspectives on management and governance approaches, various strategic factors shaping the reintroduction debate were highlighted. The qualitative findings from this project suggest that there is a degree of consensus, among both farming and rewilding representatives alike, about the challenging context in which large carnivore reintroductions are being discussed and proposed, with both groups citing the varied political,

⁴ <https://youtu.be/zqVOMer35kA>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uT3UErMjLCE>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FCUumWaTBo&t=402s>

⁷ <https://theconversation.com/farmers-told-me-what-they-really-think-about-reintroducing-lynx-and-wolves-to-britain-and-ireland-227736>

⁸ <https://www.irisht Examiner.com/lifestyle/outdoors/arid-41417938.html>

⁹ <https://pestleanalysis.com/what-is-pestle-analysis/>



Fig. 2. A reintroduction coexistence framework (Source: Hanson [12]).

economic, social, legal and environmental dimensions. However, agricultural interviewees were more likely to stress the potential negative consequences of reintroductions.

Overall, the strategic context for potential large carnivore reintroductions to Britain and Ireland is currently challenging. Achieving coexistence between these proposals and livestock farming, especially of sheep, is likely to be complex, contested and costly. Nevertheless, dialogue, engagement, information and education, not only about technical tools and governance approaches to coexistence, nor even of the context in which they occur, but also of different stakeholders' valid perspectives on all aspects of this topic, will be vital for mitigating conflict and building trust in the coming years and decades in Britain and Ireland alike.

Recommendations

- 1) Specific conservation translocation guidelines for Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland should be consulted on and developed by the relevant government agency, complementing those already in place for Scotland and England.
- 2) Alternatives to large carnivore reintroductions that might achieve similar environmental outcomes, especially through the control of deer populations via an incentivised bounty system, should be actively considered and explored by all parties.
- 3) More thorough, in-depth and independent cost-benefit analyses, that consider the costs of training and equipping farmers in deterrence methods, should be commissioned by rewilding, agricultural and other organisations to address this information gap. These should also recognise the socio-economic distinctions between lynx and wolf coexistence approaches.
- 4) More research should be conducted into the creation and implementation of innovative financial tools that could be used to ensure the costs of coexisting with carnivores are rebalanced towards those who desire their return, including conservation easements/investments and a fund for payments to encourage coexistence [8].
- 5) Additional research to address the primary gap in this study's analysis – technological factors and spatial zoning – should be conducted to assess the feasibility

of utilising technological tools to zone landscapes more effectively.

- 6) Consideration by all stakeholders should be given to the organisational structures and capacity, whether within established or new organisations, required to effectively manage and govern coexistence between large carnivores and livestock farming. A particular focus should be on organisations that effectively combine research and practice in this area, including Agridea and KORA in Switzerland, the Wyoming Game & Fish Department and Colorado State University's Centre for Human–Carnivore Coexistence.
- 7) Especially in locations where large carnivore reintroductions have been, are or will be considered, independently-facilitated governance forums should be created or expanded to build trust between all stakeholders through, for example, multi-stakeholder study visits to countries with experience of large carnivore recovery, such as Switzerland, the Netherlands and the USA.
- 8) Technical advisory groups for potential reintroduction projects should greatly expand the representation of experts in the social sciences and humanities to complement expertise in the natural sciences.

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Fig. 3. Highland cattle in the Southern Uplands of Scotland, one of the areas proposed for reintroduction of lynx to the UK. (Photo: Robin Rigg).