

The Way Forward – A Facilitated Discussion

At the Regional Meeting there was a facilitated discussion chaired by Chris Gleed-Owen who posed the question:

“What do we need to do to ensure the conservation of Adders into the future?”

The following are notes taken from the discussion that followed:

Ray Cranfield – Essex ARG

“Natural England comes into this. SSSI sites are managed blindly for what SSSI status is given – no thought for the other animals. It’s tunnel vision, heathland is lost, therefore animals are lost. “

Chris Gleed-Owen

“So Adders should be included in management plans, which they rarely are”.

Lindsay Wayman – Hadlow College

“The key issue we should look at is education – not just for students but for councils and organisations to explain why they are important to conserve. Everyone needs to get together”.

Mary Barnard – Kent RAG

“Could they be given more protection, have their protection reviewed?”

Chris Gleed-Owen

“Possibly, if enough people push for it, but it’d be very difficult.”

Nigel Hand – Herefordshire ART

“Hibernacula should be protected – protection is most important.”

Chris Gleed-Owen

“Yes, hibernacula are the most important issue. Other species have their resting places protected – why shouldn’t Adder?”

Chris Rose – London ARG

“Local Development Framework (LDF) – site specific allocation – councils could include herpetological points of interest into their management plans – if there were enough records”.

Chris Gleed-Owen

“How about a database/GIS system of hibernacula, accessible online to legitimate users? Alert-mapping would be useful to flag up important sites and habitats in the planning process too. All planning in Dorset requires a Biodiversity checklist too”.

Lee Brady – Kent RAG

“How do we describe a hibernaculum in law? Can we pinpoint an animal to a hibernaculum? No. So we need a definition of what we are protecting so that it can be found on the ground”.

Steve Langham – Surrey ARG

“GCNs have lots of protection but it is still often ignored”.

Mike Phillips – Kent RAG

“If you do have legal protection, Natural England has to take it into account when agreeing management plans”.

Sivi Sivanesen – London ARG

“I agree with protection, but we need to be careful of a media backlash”.

Chris Gleed-Owen

“Negative PR is a problem. Bad publicity about mitigation, especially GCNs, puts people’s backs up. The application of the law is too inflexible, sometimes forcing developers to spend disproportionate amounts rescuing individuals, rather than intelligent strategic goals. The system needs to change.

Brett Lewis – Durrell Institute for Conservation and Ecology (DICE)

“Adder use rabbit warrens. If you protect hibernacula, you could also be protecting features that are used by other species, e.g. you could encourage rabbit populations”.

“We need to get the public on side; it’s about public perception”.

David Willis – Hertfordshire ARG

"Do we know what the single biggest threat to Adders is? From this discussion it does not seem to be the general public, but the mismanagement of those areas in which adders are known to occur (mechanised scrub clearance/mowing etc). Would changes to the legislation necessarily help this?"

John Baker – Suffolk ARG

"Adders are already legally protected. The next step is not to have more legal protection, but to prosecute more."

Angie Julian – ARG UK

"Could we run training courses in habitat management in a more joined-up way, i.e. pull together?"

Brett Lewis, DICE

"Land managers working at ground level can be sympathetic towards adder conservation, but often the people higher up the command change ignore advice given by practitioners .

Wildlife Trusts often work from a top-down perspective when considering species conservation, and are governed by EU funding that is more targeted towards habitat management that is less favourable for adder conservation."

Paul Furnborough, Froglife

"There is not a culture of awareness outside ARGs of the issues, therefore training days outside that audience would be good".

Chris Gleed-Owen

"You can tell National Trust, Wildlife Trusts etc that they need to preserve scrub, but they are told by NE that they won't be funded unless they restore it to heather, and graze the land."

Unknown

"If people don't know the value of scrub, they won't manage for it."

"The Reptile Management Handbook [ARC] is good because you can put those points across and hammer them home."

Unknown

"There are lots of birds and lots of animals in scrub. Scrub is important."

Chris Gleed-Owen

“Hedgerows are important too, as well as scrub, woodland edge – they’re all important and need promoting.”

Steve Songhurst – Kent RAG

“Why should we conserve Adders? If Natural England and Wildlife Trusts don’t understand why, then how can the public?”

Steve Langham – Surrey ARG

“We can’t show to a third party that the Adder is in decline. Until then we are on a sticky wicket.”

Chris Gleed-Owen

“We should come away with some proposals for HWM 2012, to keep the momentum. One approach is to get the public interested in Adders culturally, e.g. the information contained in the Add an Adder website www.adder.org.uk. There is some interesting background there, including Shakespeare, the Druids, Arthurian legend etc.

Unknown

“Adders are interesting and a good tool to get youngsters interested.”

Chris Gleed-Owen

“So to summarise, we need positive public relations, education and better land managers. Any other ideas?”

Pam Worrall

“What about technology. We should use the media more, now that people have iPhones etc. These are important and can be used for PR”.

What about habitat going back to heathland, creating hibernacula? Adders could be introduced into new areas”.

Chris Gleed-Owen

“Reintroductions are a tricky PR issue, but should definitely be on the table, especially with adders extinct from whole counties like Nottinghamshire and Warwickshire.”

The discussion closed with a motion from the chair that: ‘Adders are the reptile species in most urgent need of additional conservation action in Britain’. A vote overwhelmingly (almost unanimously) carried the motion.

Comments Received After the Regional Meeting

Angela Julian – ARG UK

1. Raise the profile of the adder, and particularly its threatened status - through on-going media campaign – maybe work with BBC Springwatch, so there is something a bit more on-going and in-depth so the public get a clearer understanding of how things really are with adders. I should add that you've made a great start. We have loads of media contacts between us – so should be do-able.
2. A programme of 1 day training courses for land managers – including forestry commission, water boards, local councils, wildlife trusts, National Trust, RSPB (etc), and private land managers on managing habitat sympathetically for adders – to include a better awareness of their life cycle and habitat needs. These could be carefully targeted to areas where adders live (but national), and if we could agree on a standard training methodology could be delivered by local experts. I think we could get (Esmee Fairburn?) Funding for this. Also raise their awareness of who to contact if there is an enquiry.
3. On-going research – along the lines of the existing programme(s) – but perhaps have a central group or forum, where the ARGs could share ideas, and experiences, and would provide a point of contact for people like young James Stroud, with his MSc study and our European partners. I feel we could really move forward then – I know lots of information is shared between you all informally, but I like the idea of a community working together – and it means that some of the interested but perhaps less active (or smaller) ARGs are kept informed. A dedicated national adder web-site would be a good way forward – but lots of people would need access to post stuff on it.
4. I suggested that the umbrella for this could be ARGUK – to be honest I had no idea (at that point), of all the issues (so naïve). I still think it could be a way forward – but it has to be driven by group consensus – not by a few individuals. David Orchard also wanted to involve ARC and NE. My personal view is that it be an ARG group and should contain representatives from all of the ARGs with an adder interest (and as many as fancied so not 1 per ARG), and be co-ordinated by a relatively neutral and respected party. If the group was set up, then they could decide on who they wanted.

Jo Richards – Kent RAG

I would like to propose that pressure be put on IEEM and NE to make submitting records of ALL herps compulsory for consultants. Both where animals have been recorded and where they have been moved to.

How else can we possibly keep track of what's where if the information isn't collated?! It's scandalous that they don't submit records and that MUST be addressed. It's something I feel very strongly about.

Tony Harwood – Kent RAG

Recommendation: That an awareness campaign is produced providing simple steps to good grassland management for adders, reptiles and other wildlife. Essentially, incorporating the principles of achieving a mosaic of grassland sward lengths, including sufficient areas left uncut for several years, and ensuring that when cuts are carried-out that they avoid sensitive times of year (the optimum period being November on a “high cut”).

A sad irony is that many adders, and a wide range of other wildlife, die as a result of well-meaning management interventions on sites maintained solely or partly for nature conservation. This is a particular problem on local authority and Government agency maintained sites, such as highway verges and parks.

Areas of longer grass and other herbage, supposedly maintained for nature conservation purposes, are too-often mechanically mown or strimmed over their entire area in early spring and again in late summer or early autumn. Such an approach has sterilised local sites of their adder populations within a year or two of this maintenance regime commencing. Indeed, it is difficult to come up with a more effective means of killing-off grassland and scrub fauna than that now widely practised on many conservation sites.

The rationale behind this approach is usually claimed to relate to a desire to increase floristic diversity, however, a certain aesthetic imperative is the real driver in my experience. In fact, on most soil types such intensive grassland management interventions are also deleterious to plant communities.

John Baker – Suffolk ARG

Sure, we should be promoting a focus on hibernacula, but the actual records are best dealt with locally through whatever system is already in operation. And, as the current failures are at the very local level (e.g. somewhere between the site manager and the contractor), then local expertise needs to be better at working with contractors - locally. I really don't see how a register of adder hibernacula would have made any difference to the example of site damage that Chris and I referred to, that took place early this year. I spend a lot of time working with Forestry Commission re adder hibernation sites. They want my records for their database - it is hard enough to get them to work with this, let alone another system!

The conference certainly revealed a lot of interest in, and enthusiasm for, adder conservation. The question for me is more of how this can be harnessed to good effect. Documenting feedback and relaying to participants is certainly a useful thing to do, but there is the opportunity to do more. Not sure precisely what, yet, but I reckon we need a steering group. I am really not a big fan of steering groups and I would hate to see anything set up to become as irrelevant as the GCN SAP SG, for example, but in this case I think we do need one to plan the next steps for adder conservation. This could cover what we wish to promote via ARGs in 2012. It may, or may not, decide that a SG should be ongoing - but at very least I think we need it to coordinate adder work in 2012. Clearly there are several projects that will go ahead anyway. At best a SG could synchronise initiatives. At very least it could simply keep the different projects informed of each other's plans to ensure we don't hinder each other too much. e.g. If there were to be a national press release in spring 2012, local projects might want to know that date either to ride on the PR - or get their own local press release out earlier to avoid being scooped.

I think it would still be worth trying to set up a group to link things like Adders in Decline, Make the Adder Count, Steve Langham, ARG UK, ARC and possibly IoZ.

Chris Gleed-Owen – Dorset ARN

My own thought for an adder conservation priority is: getting land managers to give adders a high priority. This will be a PR challenge, and will need a system to alert land managers about adder presence (esp. hibernacula). A secure online register is one way I recommend.

Martin Newcombe – Kent RAG

The main priorities for adder conservation appear to me to be (not necessarily in order of importance):

- Safeguarding of good sites.
- Research at same to determine ecology etc. further.
- Greater education in all sorts of ways but especially landowner education.

I also think that, since I know of at least two landowners who have had adders but, due to reasons beyond their control, have lost them, perhaps there ought to be some thought to translocation research. I know that it hasn't been successful in the past, but it might need looking at again.

Andrea Griffiths – Kent RAG

Projects required to work on known Adder site connectivity and

Legal status for and identification of hibernacula

In addition - off the back of other projects - working towards a better public understanding of and PR for Adder (as discussed on facebook)

Bonnie Holloway – Surrey ARG

1. To protect hibernacula/habitat, although there is difficulty identifying these sites and protection can be easily ignored, at least it can give strength to known hibernacula. Heathland has protection but other habitats should be given consideration.

2. Education, there is a real need to make our natural world more of a part of the curriculum in schools. I feel Adders are important because they often have a negative reaction, from going into my son's school and talking about wildlife, with the Adder there tends to be a fascination, fear or even hatred towards them. I have no doubt the fear and hatred is probably passed down from the parents views. Therefore educating adults is equally important. I think that there could be more information on sites regarding Adders, aimed at dog walkers possibly. e.g. The dangers they are facing, that is the Adders not the people or dogs, about how to avoid them, and if dogs are kept under control they are very unlikely going to be bitten by an Adder and intern this may reduce disturbance on ground nesting birds. Also would advise for an Adder bite be a good idea? For instance my dog got bitten a few years ago on a Sunday when the emergency vets was only available which would have cost about £500 pounds for the anti-venom, however she was ok and after phoning various vets I received some conflicting advise. Could possibly encourage members

of public to report sightings would be really beneficial. My only worry to draw attention to Adder whereabouts would be that it could attract negative attention? Hopefully it would reduce the very little chance there is to get bitten by an Adder? Possibly advise would worry the public and produce negative results, I'm unsure.

Matthew Dowse – ARC Trust

Firstly, from a species status point of view: I think there needs to be accurate, robust data on UK wide adder presence and status, presented in a concise, easily digestible and usable format. I'm thinking along the lines of the bird atlases and butterfly atlases produced by the BTO and Butterfly Conservation respectively.

Secondly, as land manager, I would find it incredibly useful if there was a single, comprehensive and authoritative document on how to manage sites to conserve and enhance adders. I think this would be best in the form of something like an Adder Conservation Handbook - similar to the Sand Lizard Conservation Handbook or Great Crested Newt Conservation Handbook. Thereby it should cover all aspects of adder ecology and conservation on a range of habitat. Recognising that conservationists do not, and often can not manage solely in the interest of one species (and knowing how under-represented reptiles have been in general conservation - illustrated on Kent chalk grasslands) this should also highlight explicitly, recommendations which benefit adders and other wildlife. For example, managing wide woodland rides with scalloped edges provide basking sites for adders as well being hugely beneficial for butterflies.

I think it's also worth mentioning that if adder conservation is going to be championed, public perception and understanding among the general public needs to be addressed. Whilst I don't consider this to be as immediately important as the above two points, the 'human dimension of wildlife management' is a critical and often overlooked aspect.