

GB Non-Native Species Pathway Action Plan: Pets

Background to action planning

Reducing the risk posed by pathways of introduction and spread is a key way of tackling invasive non-native species (INNS), also sometimes referred to as Invasive Alien Species. The GB INNS Strategy calls for the development of Pathway Action Plans (PAPs) which are also a requirement under domestic legislation.

This Pathway Action Plan is one of a series of plans intended to address pathways of introduction or spread of non-native species in Great Britain. The plan outlines the general policy and approaches as well as deliverables by the pet industry, government, and pet owners in relation to this issue.

Scope

This plan covers non-native animals from all environments (terrestrial, freshwater and marine) kept as pets, that are, or may become, invasive, with the following exceptions:

- Dogs, cats, and horses
- Animals kept other than for companionship e.g., birds of prey or ferrets used in hunting, rabbits for meat or fur, waterfowl and game birds in sport hunting, ornamental carp varieties, or live bait.

It is aimed at those involved in the pet sector as well as pet owners. The geographical scope of the PAP is GB.

This plan was prepared by a working group (the GB Pet PAP Working Group) reporting to the UK Non-native Species Programme Board (see Annex 1 for membership).

Rationale

There are over 2,000 non-native species established in GB, of which about 200 cause negative impacts and are considered invasive non-native species.

Animals make up approximately 60% of the invasive species in GB and are proportionately far more likely to cause negative impacts than plants. Some of these, such as alpine newt, ring necked parakeet and monk parakeet, have established because of release or escape from a domestic setting. Five of the top 30 horizon scanning species that pose a threat to GB could also be introduced in this way: raccoon dog, raccoon, alexandrine parakeet, marbled crayfish and the Siberian chipmunk. It is therefore critical that we address the pet pathway by developing and implementing a pathway action plan.

Pet Pathway Action Plan

The variety of different pet species has increased in the UK since the 1950sⁱ, with more households now possessing a wider range of animals than the more traditionally kept pets such as dog, cat and rabbit. In 2023, 3% of households kept indoor birds, 1.6% a tortoise or turtle, 1.3% snakes, while 21% of households had an indoor fish tank and 13% an outdoor fish pondⁱⁱ.

Many of these are not native to the UK but if kept properly do not pose a threat. It is when some of these animals escape or are deliberately released that problems can occur. Worryingly, in a survey by GBNNSS, 2% of people admitted they would release a pet they could no longer look after into the wildⁱⁱⁱ.

Pets are obtained from a variety of sources including local pet shops, family and friends, breeders, aquatic shops, specialist hobby organisations and the internet. Many of these sources can help to educate new owners on responsible ownership (for example, promoting the 'no release' message).

There is a pet code of practice in the UK^{iv} and Europe^v, as well as legislation such as the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (in relation to England and Wales), which makes it an offence to allow the escape or release in to the wild of listed animal species or those that are not ordinarily resident in, or a regular visitor to GB. In Scotland, there is a general prohibition on releasing, allowing to escape from captivity, or otherwise causing an animal to be in a place outside its native range. The Invasive Alien Species Regulation lists 30 animal species that are banned from import, sale, keeping, breeding, and release etc in GB. There are additional restrictions on importing and keeping certain types of non-native freshwater fish and crayfish under the Import of Live Fish (England and Wales) Act 1980 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Keeping and Release and Notification Requirements) (Scotland) Order 2012. Northern Ireland is outside the scope of this PAP, but it is noted that Northern Ireland has different lists of regulated species.

Legislation alone is insufficient to lower the risk associated with introducing or spreading of INNS. It requires cooperation and collaboration from all concerned, each sector is part of the solution and plays an important role in INNS prevention. This plan sets out actions to help minimise the risk posed by non-native species associated with the pet trade.

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of the PAP is to protect the environment through a series of measures to reduce the risk of introduction, spread and impact in the wild of non-native animals kept as pets that are, or may become, invasive.

Specific objectives are to:

1. Ensure that animals which are listed as [species of special concern](#)^{vi} are not kept, sold, exchanged, bred, etc. by all routes, including online.
2. Raise awareness among the pet trade and pet owners of the law regarding the keeping, sale, exchange, transport, breeding, release, and escape of non-native animals.
3. Help identify high-risk species in the pet trade that require specific guidance and / or attention and provide guidance on these.
4. Raise awareness among pet owners of the need to:
 - know what they are buying and ensure pets can be kept for their entire life
 - ensure animals, waste materials, eggs, and live pet food are never released or allowed to escape
 - carry out other responsible keeping practices, including micro-chipping and neutering of animals, where appropriate.
5. Provide guidance for pet owners about what to do with pets they can no longer look after and encourage the reporting and recapture, by owners, of escaped pets, as well as wider reporting of non-native pets detected in the wild.

Actions

Each action is linked to one or more objectives of the PAP, as indicated in square brackets after each action.

Action 1

NNS Inspectorate, working with other agencies as appropriate, to proactively attempt to detect the sale of banned species (including via online), respond to reports from industry and others, and to take forward appropriate enforcement action. [Objective 1].

Action 2

GB Governments and the pet sector to work together to raise awareness within the sector about listed species and relevant responsibilities. [Objectives 1 and 2].

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Action 3

The GBNNSS Training Coordination Group to work with the pet sector and training providers to identify key training for importers, retailers, wholesalers and breeders. [Objective 2].

Action 4

GBNNSS to establish a subgroup including representatives from the pet sector, key keeping organisations and government bodies [Objectives 3 and 5], to:

- identify high-risk species in the pet trade that have the potential to become invasive
- develop guidance for pet owners on these high-risk species
- develop guidance on what to do with pets that people can no longer look after, and
- develop guidance for pet owners on how and where to report lost pets, particularly high-risk species.

Action 5

GB Governments and stakeholders to propose further species for listing as species of special concern, as set out in [the listing process](#)^{vii}. All proposals will be prioritised then put forward for risk assessment and consultation before final ministerial consideration. [Objective 3].

Action 6

GBNNSS and GB Governments to sustain and promote a suitable awareness raising campaign and update it as necessary [Objective 4]. This should highlight that:

- members of the public should never deliberately release pets,
- releasing pets is often cruel, and
- encourage responsible keeping of non-native pets, including, where appropriate, the use of secure enclosures, micro-chipping and neutering.

Action 7

The pet sector to encourage their members to assist with awareness raising around invasive non-native animals, including by promoting the awareness raising campaign developed under Action 6, and responsible keeping of non-native pets. [Objective 4].

Action 8

GB Governments and the pet sector to promote reporting of, and rapid response to, escaped or released pet species seen in the wild. [Objective 5].

Monitoring and updating

The GB Pet PAP Working Group will be re-convened at least annually to assess progress with achieving the actions.

For assessing overall progress with delivery of the PAP the group will consider all relevant information including the following:

- Changes in the level of awareness of those involved in the pet sector as assessed by the public attitudes survey.
- Numbers of businesses selling banned species as measured by the Non-native Species Inspectorate (and other sources where relevant).

Ultimately the PAP should help to reduce the number of new invasive non-native animals establishing and spreading in the wild. High level indicators, such as the JNCC B6 indicator^{viii} and Defra's 'abatement' indicator^{ix} will be considered to try to assess this; however, it may be difficult to detect the specific impact of the PAP at this level.

Annex 1: Working Group members.

The following organisations are represented on the Pet PAP working group:

Welsh Government (Chair)

GBNNSS (Secretary)

Companion Animal Sector Council

The Pet Charity

Defra NNS Policy

Environment Agency

Natural England

Natural Resources Wales

NatureScot

OATA

Pet Advertising Advisory Group

REPTA

RSPCA

Scottish Government

Scottish SPCA

SEPA

Sustainable Users Network

Corresponding members:

DAERA – Northern Ireland

End Notes

- i <https://www.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494939/7712578/The+Exotic+Pet-demic%3A+UK%27s+ticking+timebomb+exposed.pdf/075754a7-fa68-f9bf-66b4-ccb0d559db28?t=1631617196174>
- ii <https://www.ukpetfood.org/information-centre/statistics/uk-pet-population.html>
- iii https://www.nonnativespecies.org/assets/Document-repository/2018_Survey_of_Attitudes_Knowledge_and_Behaviour_in_Relation_to_Non-native_Species-7.pdf
- iv <https://ornamentalfish.org/wp-content/uploads/Pet-Code-of-Practice.pdf>
- v https://easin.jrc.ec.europa.eu/easin/Document/EuropeanCodeofConduct/Publication_Code_of_conduct_pets_IAS_2016_web.pdf
- vi <https://www.nonnativespecies.org/legislation/species-of-special-concern/>
- vii <https://www.nonnativespecies.org/legislation/species-of-special-concern/#Listing-process>
- viii <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/ukbi-b6-invasive-species/>
- ix <https://oifdata.defra.gov.uk/themes/biosecurity-chemical-and-noise/H1/>