



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

How can the Government justify spending £312,000 on rounding up and relocating a colony of 15 great crested newts that happened to be living in the path of a road improvement scheme near Chester?

The Highways Agency was issued with a special licence to move the newts – which was a legal requirement – and had to follow the letter of the law in the process. First, 25km of plastic fencing costing £153,000 was erected close to the construction site. Then 3,060 traps costing £52,000 were placed along its length. And, finally, the traps were checked every day for two months at a cost of £107,000.

The entire operation cost £20,800 per newt. I'd have done it myself, for free, with a jam jar.

The Highways Agency defended the cost by declaring that it was “a very small portion of the overall project budget of £51.41 million”, but that says more about the ridiculous cost of building roads than it does about newt conservation – and it also misses the point.

No one in their right mind could argue that it was money well spent. We don't even know if the relocated amphibians are going to survive. Just imagine what organisations such as Froglife or the Herpetological Conserva-

tion Trust could have done with £312,000. I'm sure they could have saved a few more than 15 newts if a windfall of that size landed in their laps.

It's not as if this was a one-off. The Highways Agency frequently has to remove great crested newts from the paths of bulldozers on a variety of development projects. A couple of years ago, for example, the builder of 22 retirement homes in Northampton was forced to spend £50,000 rehousing a single newt.

We do need strict legislation to protect great crested newts and other declining species from development. But wouldn't it be better to allow developers to compensate for the damage they cause not by translocating individual animals, but by funding high priority conservation work?

Just imagine what a conservation group could have done with £312,000.