



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

Natural England and the RSPB are proposing to reintroduce white-tailed eagles to East Anglia at a cost of hundreds of thousands of pounds.

But we can't afford to protect the wildlife that's already here. Indeed, the probability that the UK government will fulfil its commitment to stopping the loss of biodiversity before 2010 is almost zero. So what on Earth are we doing spending that kind of money on yet another reintroduction?

Reintroductions are all the rage. Large blue butterflies, red kites, great bustards, European beavers and others are already back, while everything from dark-bordered beauty moths to wolves and lynx are on the wishlist.

I'm certainly not against this valuable conservation tool, but I do worry that science isn't driving every proposal. Some reintroductions appear to be little more than high-profile publicity stunts, or they're just plain meddling.

Under European legislation, member states are obliged to consider reintroducing species that were made extinct by human activity.

But perhaps we should be a little more selective of which ones we choose.

One measure might be international conservation priorities. This would preclude the white-tailed eagle because it's doing fine across most of its extremely large range outside the UK.

Another might be to consider how long each contender has been absent. Red kites were always strong candidates

because they never went extinct here, but others have been absent for so long that they wouldn't recognise our impoverished land. The lynx, for example, hasn't roamed wild in Britain for more than 1,000 years. Would it be wise to bring it back and can it be considered a conservation priority?

The good news is that at least we do it properly. Conservation groups have to wade through a bureaucratic quagmire before they can bring anything back, which does reduce the chances of an ecological disaster. It's better than in some parts of Europe, where animals have been reintroduced by chucking them out of the back of a van.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist and tv presenter. Watch out for our feature on his new series about the Natural History Museum in April.



Flying into trouble: does Britain need another eagle reintroduction?

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