

Agenda Item

Executive Board

19 October 2005

CP



River Axe Water Vole Recovery Project

Summary

An opportunity exists for a partnership project led by EDDC's Countryside Service to restore water vole populations to the River Axe. The project hosted by EDDC would draw funds principally from the Environment Agency and would require a Project Officer to co-ordinate habitat improvement and mink control work throughout the Axe catchment for a period of one year. The water voles are one of only four priority species for action in the draft East Devon DC Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), they are also included in Devon's BAP which is in turn driven by actions required to deliver the UK BAP. The water vole was once common throughout the river systems of East Devon, formerly common (and affectionately known as "ratty" from the Wind in the Willows) but their decline has been catastrophic during the latter years of the twentieth century and it has shown little signs of stopping. Therefore we have a significant and important role to play in helping the recovery of water vole in our district.

Recommendation

That SMT notes the project proposal and recommends that EDDC act as host authority for the temporary one year Project Officer.

a) Reasons for Recommendation

That EDDC takes forward a priority species recovery programme from the Local BAP and also enables partnership working with the other key funding stakeholders. The success of the work on the River Axe will provide an essential stronghold for local populations of water vole.

b) Alternative Options

To not act as host authority and so the opportunity for the delivery of the initiative to be lost.

c) Risk Considerations

There are no financial risks associated with the project as the funding has been sourced and is in place, as the employing body there are the standard risks associated with taking on a member of staff.

d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations

The project conforms to the Corporate Goal for the Environment to protect and enhance the natural environment. The funding for the project is in place with EDDC's contributions being met from the existing Nature Reserves budget for 2005/06.

e) Date for Review of Decision

N/A

1 Background

- 1.1 Water Voles are one of the UK's most threatened mammals and require a concerted conservation effort to restore them to their traditional sites in the South West. The water vole population in the SW has declined dramatically from 15% positive sites in the 1989/90 national survey to 1.9% in the 1996-98 survey. This decline is due to loss of habitat as a result of agricultural intensification and predation by American mink (an invasive non-native species).
- 1.2 Recent work by the Wildlife Conservation and Research Unit at Oxford University and others has provided a firm foundation on which to build a Species Recovery programme for the water vole in Britain. We now have a good understanding of the ecological and biological requirements of the species, as well as detailed knowledge about the threats it faces across the range in the country.
- 1.3 This project will address 2 factors that are essential to ensure the recovery of the water vole on the River Axe; habitat enhancement and mink removal.
- 1.4 The South West Riparian Mammals Forum (SWRMF) has recently produced a 'Strategy for the Conservation of Water Voles in South West England' which has been endorsed by the UK BAP Steering Group. The Strategy identifies the areas linking the Axe/Isle/Parret catchments and the Axe/Char/Brit/Bride catchments as a priority for water vole conservation in the South West. Actions to conserve water voles on the River Axe are therefore a fundamental part of a wider regional strategy.

2. The Project

- 2.1 East Devon DC will host the River Axe Water Vole Recovery Project within its Countryside Service. The Countryside Service will liaise closely with the Environment Agency (the major funding partner) over the implementation of the project. DEFRA and English Nature will also be members of a Steering Group overseeing the project. In addition project work will be delivered in partnership with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and the two AONB Partnerships.
- 2.2 The aim of the Project is to restore the River Axe to a condition suitable for water voles and thereby allow natural re-colonisation from existing populations in neighbouring catchments in South Somerset and West Dorset.
- 2.3 This will be achieved by using partnership approach to carry out :
 - Landscape scale habitat assessments and improvement plans for water voles;
 - Co-ordinated mink control project;
 - Raised awareness of water vole conservation among landowners and land managers;
 - Habitat improvement through uptake of the Higher level Scheme of the Environmental Stewardship
- 2.4 The Project will demonstrate best practice for sustainable farming and biodiversity enhancement, where land managers and practitioners can experience sympathetic management first hand. The project will draw on the experience of other successful projects such as the Green Shoots Project on the Somerset Levels and Moors and the Chichester Coastal Plain Sustainable Farming Partnership. It will also link with the work being undertaken as part of the EC funded Axe/Char Cycleau Project.

3. Project Outputs

- 3.1 Habitat assessment. An external consultant will carry out a desk based habitat assessment across the target area, using aerial photography and habitat survey data from EA, English Nature and the County Records Centre, followed up by ground-truthing where necessary.
- 3.2 Water Vole surveys. An external consultant will carry out water vole surveys in South Somerset and West Dorset to establish the current population ranges and the most likely routes for re-colonisation into the Axe catchment. Together with the results of the habitat assessment work, this will provide priority areas for subsequent mink control and habitat enhancement work.
- 3.3 Project Officer. In order to maximise uptake of mink control and habitat enhancement by landowners a Project Officer will be employed, hopefully hosted by EDDC and line managed by the Countryside Service. The Project Officer will work closely with the relevant partner organisations and report to the Steering Group.
- 3.4 Mink control. The Project Officer will be responsible for running a series of workshops for landowners, BASC members and Angling Associations across the target area, which will address mink control. Mink control will be carried out by a network of volunteers using established best practice (Game Conservancy Trust mink rafts) and the Project Officer will be responsible for co-ordinating and supervising this work and recording results.
- 3.5 Habitat enhancement. Recent changes to the funding arrangements for agri-environmental schemes, in particular the Higher Level Scheme of Environmental Stewardship, and the addition of water voles to DEFRA's targeting statement for East Devon, mean that funding will be available through this route for habitat enhancement. The Project Officer will follow up the workshops by visiting landowners in the priority areas identified by surveys and habitat assessment, and discussing management recommendations. They will then work closely with DEFRA Rural Development Service Officers to facilitate Environmental Stewardship applications. These habitat enhancements will benefit water voles and also have wider biodiversity benefits and contribute to reducing diffuse agricultural pollution.

4. Project costs

4.1 Income streams :

• Environment Agency	£18,000
• EDDC (funds already banked from EA)	£ 7,000
• EDDC (contribution from Nature Reserve budget)	£ 2,000
• Blackdown Hills/East Devon AONB Partnerships	£ 2,000

Total **£29,000**

4.2 Project Activity costs :

• F/T 12 month Project Officer (Scale 5)	£19,656
• On costs @ 18%	£ 3,538
• Public liability insurance	£ 358
• Project costs	£ 5,450

Total **£29,002**

Legal Implications

No legal implications to report

Financial Implications

The costs of funding this temporary officer will be fully offset by contributions from third parties.

Consultation on Reports to the Executive

N/A

Background Papers

- Project Activity breakdown costs

Charlie Plowden, extn 2068
Countryside Manager

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