

BRIEFING NOTE: DISEASE AND HEALTH IN LYNX REINTRODUCTION



It is important to ensure that any reintroduced lynx are healthy and disease-free. This is essential for both the welfare of the lynx and for ensuring that the reintroduction of these animals to our shores does not spread harmful diseases to our existing wildlife, domestic animals, or people.

Any application to reintroduce lynx would need to be accompanied by a thorough 'disease risk assessment' that meets required standards, and a practical plan showing the measures that would be put in place to ensure that the reintroduction would maximise the health of the lynx and would not spread disease.

Assessing disease risk

The movement of a species from one location to another must be planned carefully to avoid spreading disease. The first step is to assess the risk of disease associated with the species and source and destination locations in question. There is a standard procedure for doing this, known as 'disease risk assessment'. This procedure identifies what the disease risks are and how they must be managed to ensure that diseases are not spread.

The disease risk assessment is carried out early in the planning of a species reintroduction to help design the practical steps that would be required for disease management (e.g. what animal hygiene, quarantine, and other biosecurity measures must be implemented to prevent disease transmission and what ongoing disease surveillance will be done after the species is released into its new environment). The disease risk assessment can also advise whether it is safe to reintroduce the species at all (that is, are there any serious diseases associated with moving the species that cannot be managed such that the only option is not to pursue the reintroduction).

Disease risk in lynx

We have commissioned a disease risk assessment to be done for lynx reintroduction to Britain. This is currently being prepared by a team of experts in

wildlife disease risk assessment at the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, who have recently completed a similar assessment for wildcats in Scotland. There is also already an extensive body of information available on the occurrence of disease and the appropriate veterinary care for lynx because of a continent-wide conservation and research programme for the species in Europe.

The results of the lynx disease risk assessment that we have commissioned will be available in due course and will help us to understand what the disease risk is, and what disease management measures would be required for lynx reintroduction. It will also advise whether, from a disease risk perspective, lynx reintroduction would be feasible. This disease risk assessment and its recommendations would also need to be included as part of any application to reintroduce lynx made to the statutory authority.

Healthy lynx

There are legal duties (e.g. in England the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and in Scotland the Animal Health and Welfare Scotland Act 2006) to ensure the welfare of lynx are maintained while they are in captivity (including throughout capture, transport, quarantine, and release). It is also imperative for the success of the reintroduction that healthy animals are used and that sources of unnatural mortality (such as road traffic or train collisions or illegal persecution) are minimised to give the new population the best chance of surviving.

The reintroduction must be planned thoroughly, with details of the design for all housing facilities and capture and handling methods submitted with any licence application to reintroduce the species. Fortunately there is already a good level of understanding of these aspects from zoos and other captive collections holding lynx, and from the numerous lynx reintroductions and movement projects that have been carried out over recent decades in Europe.

The extensive learning from all these lynx projects as well as the relevant zoo experience has allowed the best methods of handling and monitoring lynx to be identified. These best practice methods are currently being published so that future lynx projects can benefit. We are collaborating with these organisations to ensure that best practice can be implemented in a UK reintroduction which will support the best outcome for lynx health.

Other health issues to consider

Besides ensuring that the lynx being used for reintroduction are free of harmful diseases, a lynx reintroduction project must also ensure that the animals are physically healthy so that they have the best chance of surviving in their new



environment. The main physical health issues to manage include reducing stress and the risk of injury during capture and transport and ensuring that the lynx are genetically healthy and free of harmful inherited traits such as heart defects. This is the task of qualified and suitably experienced veterinarians who would carry out the physical checks of the lynx at key points during their translocation journey, using, for example, ultrasound and blood and other clinical samples.