

European Squirrel Initiative the Pine Marten – a position?

The European Squirrel Initiative (ESI) has been actively involved in the potential role of the pine marten to control grey squirrels for a number of years. It was one of the early funders of Emma Sheehy's work and it has watched the developments within Ireland and Scotland with interest.

ESI is a broad church with the common aim of controlling grey squirrels in order to protect our trees, parks, forests and woodland ecosystems from one of the world's worst *alien invasive species* (IUCN). This will benefit many species but, notably, will stop the local extinctions of our native red squirrel and allow the reds to recolonise their range in Britain.

ESI supporters include foresters, landowners, conservationists, tree lovers and scientists. Within ESI there is a spread of opinion as to the potential benefits of the reintroduction of pine martens for the purpose of reducing grey squirrel numbers. ESI has always taken the view that its position will be guided by evidence and science and to that end it organised a symposium on the 14th June 2016 in London at which a range of scientists presented their views.

The views and current research presented by those scientists varied and was not conclusive. There is evidence which does suggest that grey squirrel populations are affected by pine marten. However, there was no definitive indication as to why this should happen. Whilst there is evidence that pine marten eat grey squirrels (and red squirrels), there is no evidence that they are large predators of the grey or that their presence scares the grey squirrels from colonising or breeding. Nevertheless, evidence shows that grey numbers do decline when pine marten populations reach a certain level. In addition, it was recognised that pine martens may have an impact in certain circumstances based on local conditions or as carriers of disease. It was also recognised that pine martens may have a negative impact on other flora and fauna such as wild birds, poultry or game.

There was also some concern that as pine martens are heavily protected there must be mechanisms in place to control populations should they get out of control or if there is a "problem animal" that is causing significant collateral damage. The mechanism must be simple to apply and quickly invoked.

Therefore, the current position within ESI is that there is enthusiasm for the potential role of pine martens to reduce grey squirrel numbers. However, this is tempered with a view that at the moment there is insufficient scientific evidence to show why grey squirrel numbers are reduced and that there is the possibility of collateral damage and other consequences from widespread release of pine martens.



It became clear from the symposium that pine martens will not be suitable in all circumstances, particularly where environmental conditions are unsuitable for pine marten survival.

However, ESI would support further releases of pine marten on a local and specifically targeted basis providing adequate protocols and controls are in place to enable the researchers and landowners to control problem animals