

White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction – Cumbria



Introduction

The Lifescape Project is seeking financial support of a total of £120-150k on behalf of itself and a broad partnership in Cumbria, including University of Cumbria, Cumbria Wildlife Trust and RSPB, to take the crucial next steps toward reintroduction of White-tailed eagles (WTEs) to Cumbria's coastline. The work will involve:

- (1) a social consultation and engagement process, to investigate whether there is local support for such a reintroduction;
- (2) further work to fully prove the ecological feasibility of a reintroduction, and to plan its implementation; and
- (3) a license application submission to Natural England for the release of WTEs in Cumbria.

Background & Rationale for the Proposed Work

[The Lifescape Project](#) is an ecosystem restoration and rewilding charity which wants to see a world where wild nature can coexist and thrive alongside humanity. Our vision includes the reintroduction of species which are missing from ecosystems due to anthropogenic reasons where that is appropriate and feasible.

White-Tailed Eagles (WTE) are the largest native bird of prey in the United Kingdom. Adults can have a wingspan of up to 2.5 meters. They are opportunistic predators and scavengers feeding predominantly on waterbirds, medium to large fish species, mammals such as lagomorphs and carrion. White-tailed Eagles were once widespread in Great Britain but declined in numbers due to agricultural changes and then became extinct in 1916 through human persecution. Legal changes and changes in the perception of raptors has led to an increase across the palearctic, but not yet in Great Britain, with all adult birds restricted to the Scottish mainland and offshore islands.

In support of a national plan being led by the [Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation](#) for the restoration of WTEs across their UK range, we have conducted an initial assessment of the feasibility of returning WTEs to the Cumbria Coast. The results of this initial assessment suggest that there is plentiful habitat available for WTEs in the proposed release areas and that such a project would be likely to be ecologically feasible. Cumbria is a location of strategic importance for WTEs, sitting between Scottish, Irish and Southern England populations which have already been reintroduced, and acting as a potential connection between each of them.

Over the past several months we have also formed a White-tailed Eagles Cumbria Working Group, with a shared interest in the potential for WTEs to be reintroduced in Cumbria. The group consists of the Lifescape Project, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, RSPB, the Solway Coast AONB, University of Cumbria, University of Leeds and Natural England. This Group will oversee the development of the proposed feasibility study and any subsequent post-release activities.

We are now ready to proceed with the final necessary steps up to seeking formal permission from Natural England, the relevant regulator, to release WTEs. We set out the detail of these steps below:

Social Consultation and Engagement

It is critical for any species reintroduction project to consider the level of social support it benefits from and to only proceed if there is no reason to believe that social factors will make the project unlikely to succeed. This is made clear in both [IUCN international guidelines](#) and [English-specific guidelines](#) for species reintroductions.

As a result, we intend to build on and adapt the successful WTE consultation approach used by the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation for the Isle of Wight and Norfolk feasibility studies which each resulted in licenses being approved for releases, reflecting recognised good practice alongside a focus on local needs and priorities. During the project we will: (i) map key stakeholders, (ii) engage in a series of different consultation and engagement activities to ensure we reach as many people as possible in the local area to proposed release sites, (iii) perform an analysis of the data collected through that process to ensure we have a strong understanding of the level of local support for reintroduction, and (iv) identify any points of conflict or concern that could subsequently be addressed.

We anticipate that this work will take 9-12 months from the date of the appointment of a project officer for the project. The results will then feed directly into the license application and proposals as to how a future

implementation project would continue to engage the local community, including ensuring that benefits resulting from the project are channeled to stakeholders.

Ecological Feasibility and Implementation Planning

To date initial modelling has given highly positive indications as to habitat suitability and suitable foraging sites for WTEs on the Cumbria coast. However, further sensitivity testing will investigate different reintroduction scenarios. We will also complete an assessment of the likely viable population based on the habitat available, in collaboration with Roy Dennis, as the UK's leading expert on WTE populations.

Regarding implementation, the work plan for this project will cover all practical and logistical aspects of a WTE reintroduction. This will enable us to illustrate to Natural England exactly what steps will be taken to bring WTEs to the UK for release, to house them, to release them and then to monitor released individuals, amongst other things. Doing this will also enable us to produce an accurate budget for the implementation of a reintroduction project, which will be crucial for fundraising for that next phase.

We anticipate that these two elements of the work will take 12 months from the date of the appointment of a project officer for the project.

Seeking a Licence for Release of White-Tailed Eagles

The final task within this work program will be compiling all evidence required by Natural England in order to seek and obtain a license to release WTEs in Cumbria, under section 14 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (WCA). As WTEs are listed under Schedule 9 of the WCA, it is a criminal offence to release them in the UK without a license issued by Natural England under section 14.

Throughout the process of completing the first two phases of the proposed work, we will continue to liaise with Natural England to ensure that we have all necessary evidence available at the time of license application submission. We anticipate that it will take several weeks to compile this information into a license application once the first two phases are complete, and then several weeks (up to months) for Natural England to take a decision as to issuing a license.

The end point of the project, if successful, will be that all necessary conditions would be in place for a WTE release to go ahead in summer 2024. We anticipate that an ongoing release program would be required for five years after the first release, to establish a permanent nesting population on the Cumbria Coast. The fundraising for such a release program would be carried out during the latter months of the project outlined above, at the stage where it becomes clear that it would indeed be feasible to proceed with releases and we conclude that we are likely to be granted a license to do so.

Time & Cost

We expect these three areas of work to take in total **18 months**, at a cost of **£120-150k**.

Contact information

Please contact Adam Eagle (CEO) (adam.eagle@lifescapeproject.org) and Deborah Brady (Lead Ecologist) (Deborah.brady@lifescapeproject.org) for further information on this project.