

# **A Response from The Vincent Wildlife Trust**

**By Johnny Birks and John Messenger**

**to**

***‘Return of the Pine Marten to England’***

**PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

**By The People’s Trust for Endangered Species**

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## Summary

1. The Vincent Wildlife Trust (the VWT) has been involved in work on pine marten conservation in Britain intermittently for twenty years. Since 1995 it has been recording, with others, the presence of pine martens in England and Wales.
2. The VWT has serious concerns about the way in which the current proposal to reintroduce pine martens to England has been promoted. It does not support the proposal for the reasons explained in this response.
3. The PTES consultation document is highly selective in the information that it presents. It avoids all reference to evidence that might lead consultees to question the need for, or the wisdom of, a reintroduction of pine martens to England in the near future. As a result, the document is not objective and is bound to mislead readers who are not well informed about pine martens in Britain. Against this background, the findings of this consultation exercise can have little credibility.
4. The PTES consultation document creates the false impression that pine martens are currently absent from England and Wales. Thereby it avoids addressing several crucial questions that should be resolved prior to a reintroduction.
5. By promoting the impression that pine martens are extinct in England and Wales, the current reintroduction project has hindered, rather than helped, the cause of pine marten conservation.
6. Other critical questions about the establishment of reintroduced pine martens, and their impacts upon other species, have not been adequately addressed in the PTES consultation document. As a result, we are not convinced that reintroduction will lead to the establishment of a successful new population.
7. The current reintroduction proposal fails to conform fully to the IUCN/SSC Guidelines on reintroductions.

## Introduction

The VWT believes that reintroductions could, one day, play a part in pine marten conservation in Britain. However, we believe that such projects should not be undertaken lightly or hastily; they should be based upon sound information, carry no risk to other vulnerable wildlife, conform to international guidelines and enjoy the widest possible agreement among all those with a justifiable interest. Regrettably, there has been disagreement over the past six years about the status of pine martens in England and Wales, and about priorities for conservation action. Organisations and individuals promoting the reintroduction project have argued that no viable populations remain, and that the species is effectively extinct south of the Scottish border in the UK (e.g. Bright & Harris, 1994; McDonald *et al.*, 1994); others argue that there is convincing evidence of the long-term survival of sparse and elusive populations that are probably ‘struggling’ but viable (Messenger *et al.*, 1997). The VWT holds this latter view. This question about whether or not viable pine marten populations survive in England and Wales is central to any decisions about reintroduction in the future.

The VWT has been active in publicising evidence of the survival of pine martens in England and Wales. Such evidence has generally been ignored in public statements by those focusing on reintroduction. Nevertheless, we hope that this response to the consultation document will encourage fresh thinking at this late stage. We also trust that our response will assist other consultees, many of whom have contacted us for advice and information, in constructing their own comments on the consultation document.

## The VWT’s involvement in pine marten conservation

The VWT has been involved in conservation-directed research and survey work on pine martens intermittently for twenty years. Notably, it undertook the first systematic survey of pine martens in Great Britain (Velandar, 1983), funded important research work on pine marten ecology in Scotland (Balharry, 1993) and developed ways of reducing conflicts between pine marten predation and game- and poultry-rearing systems (Balharry, 1998). In 1995, following collation by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) of convincing evidence suggesting long-term survival of four or five marten populations in England and Wales (Strachan & Jefferies, 1996), the VWT launched a new project designed to record and collate all evidence of these populations from 1990 onwards.

Having run for over five years, the VWT pine marten recording scheme has generated continuing evidence of the presence of pine martens in the 1990s and beyond, mainly in those parts of England and Wales where naturalists had reported them in previous decades (e.g. Velandar, 1983; Morgan, 1992; Strachan & Jefferies, 1996). The persistence of martens in certain areas suggests that viable populations remain. However, their apparent failure to recover suggests that all is not well. This evidence is highly relevant to the debate about reintroducing pine martens to England. The People’s Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), English Nature (EN) and their contractors are fully aware of this evidence via a number of private and public meetings, conversations and correspondence. It has been publicised widely in the popular naturalists’ press (e.g. Messenger *et al.*, 1997), and scientific papers are both published and in preparation (e.g. Messenger & Birks, 2000). **The consultation document does not refer to the results of the JNCC pine marten survey of England and Wales, nor to the findings of subsequent recording work by the VWT and others. Why does it ignore such highly relevant information?**

## Have pine martens really gone from England and Wales?

The authors of the consultation document acknowledge (p.7) evidence of “pine martens possibly persisting in northern England and north Wales”. Despite this significant statement, through the use of careful wording the consultation document subsequently creates the overwhelming impression that pine martens are truly and finally lost from England and Wales, and that reintroduction is the only sensible way forward. For example, it is implied (p.8) that recent sightings and corpses of martens from northern England originate from escapes from captivity or translocations from Scotland. This explanation is unsupportable, given the decades-long history of clusters of evidence of pine martens - not referred to in the consultation document - from several areas of northern England.

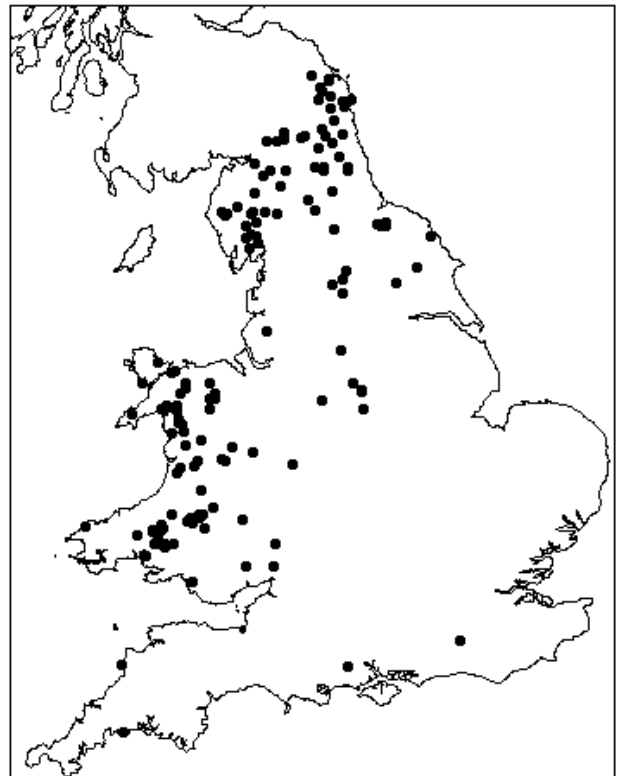
We note the statement that “there is no scientifically credible evidence that pine martens have recolonised parts of England and Wales, and no scientific papers have been published to substantiate the presence of martens” (p.8). The authors’ careful choice of words implies that there **is** evidence of martens in England and Wales, but that in the context of the consultation it should be ignored because it is either not credible scientifically or not yet published in scientific papers. Since so much significance is attached to scientific credibility, we must point out that none of the five reports (all largely written by the main author of the consultation document, and listed under “Further reading” on p.19) that substantially underpin the reintroduction proposal is a published, peer-reviewed scientific paper. These reports include pessimistic assessments of marten status in England and Wales based on a scat survey technique that has never been validated and shown to be reliable other than where martens are relatively common. We are not surprised, therefore, that “surveys of 860km of tracks.... found no convincing evidence of pine martens” (p.7). However, this is not scientifically credible evidence that pine martens are effectively extinct in England and Wales; it may simply suggest that the animals are scarce and that the survey technique fails under such circumstances. Our own work (Birks *et al.*, in prep.), due to be published soon in a reputable scientific journal, demonstrates that it is unsafe to rely on scat surveys to detect sparse marten populations. Notwithstanding our work, recent independent recommendations on UK mammal monitoring have already recognised that the scat survey technique may fail at low pine marten population densities (Macdonald *et al.*, 1998; Toms *et al.*, 1999). **The consultation document’s assessment of pine marten status is flawed because it is based on an unreliable technique and ignores other essential evidence.**

We would further point out that the authors of the consultation document recommend under ‘*Other sources of recent information*’ (p.19) Balharry’s (1992) article on Pine martens in Scotland in the journal *British Wildlife*; yet they avoid any reference to our more recent and more relevant article on the status of pine martens in England and Wales in the same journal (Messenger *et al.*, 1997). Similarly, the authors recommend one leaflet by the VWT on the exclusion of pine martens from game and poultry pens in a Scottish context (Balharry, 1998; which, incidentally, includes a map indicating the presence of martens in England and Wales), yet they fail to mention another (arguably more relevant) VWT leaflet on pine martens in England and Wales (Anon., 1995). **We suggest that the consultation document is highly selective in the information it presents to readers.**

Figure 7 in the consultation document shows a map titled “Confirmed sightings of pine martens in Great Britain”. It is not clear what is meant by the term “confirmed sightings”, nor what time period is referred to; nevertheless the figure gives the clear impression that no pine martens exist in Britain south of the Scottish border. **This figure is highly misleading.**

The VWT recording scheme has received 570 reports of pine marten sightings made in England and Wales since 1990. Not all of these can be accepted with certainty, of course, because many people are unfamiliar with pine martens and may misidentify other species as such. Therefore, we interviewed people carefully about their sightings and assigned each record a confidence score on a scale of 1-10 (with a higher score reflecting greater confidence that the sighting was of a pine marten). Two thirds of sightings scored more than 5 on our confidence scale, and we regard these as more reliable records. 154 of these (the ‘best’ 27% - shown in the adjacent map) scored 8 or more because they were made by experienced naturalists familiar with martens, or because they were supported by unusually good descriptions of animals that could scarcely have been anything else. Many such sightings were of long, brown animals the size of small domestic cats, up trees, with creamy-white chests, prominent ears and long bushy tails.

High confidence sightings / corpses of pine martens from 1990 onwards



This map (which excludes Scottish data) reveals a very different situation from that shown in Figure 7 in the consultation document. It indicates several clusters of high confidence marten records in parts of northern England and Wales, with a handful of records from the south and south-west of England that might be explained by escapes from captivity. A few of the records from northern England relate to fresh corpses examined by experienced naturalists (e.g. Jefferies & Critchley, 1994; Birks *et al.*, 1997); most are sightings of live animals and many of these were reported by extremely reliable observers who are most unlikely to have been mistaken. Analysis of landscapes in which these sightings were made suggests strong associations with particular habitat types, such as woodland, that one would expect from genuine marten records (Gough *et al.*, in prep.). Also, the pattern of records from the 1990s is very similar to that of independent records of pine martens from earlier decades, suggesting the persistence of populations in the same areas. **There is too much reliable evidence of pine martens in England and Wales for one to regard them as extinct. The consultation document entirely misrepresents their current status.**

## **Why ignore the continuing existence of pine martens in England and Wales?**

Why might the consultation document set out to create the impression that pine martens no longer exist south of the Scottish border? We make the following suggestions:

### **The case for reintroduction is much stronger if pine martens are widely perceived as being absent from England and adjoining areas.**

It is clearly easier to raise political support and funding from the public, landowners and organisations if it is widely accepted that no wild populations remain. In the apparent absence of relict populations, a reintroduction project can be promoted vigorously with claims of ‘returning the pine marten to England’.

### **The presence of sparse and possibly struggling pine marten populations raises awkward questions for those promoting reintroduction.**

Relict populations must be seen as a significant complication for those focusing on reintroduction rather than on wider conservation objectives. They raise many questions that might jeopardise a reintroduction project. By promoting the view that no marten populations remain, such questions may conveniently be avoided. For example:

1. If pine marten populations survive in parts of England and Wales, should not securing their future and promoting their natural recovery be the top priority for conservation action, rather than promotion of a reintroduction project?
2. If the surviving marten populations in England and Wales are struggling to thrive, what are the critical factors that are limiting them and preventing natural recovery? If we don't know what those factors are, and if we cannot show that they no longer act as a constraint, is reintroduction a responsible step to take? Might a reintroduced population also stagnate for the same reasons?
3. What are the genetic characteristics of relict populations? If they differ from those of reintroduced stock, might reintroduced pine martens permanently alter the unique characteristics of the original English or Welsh stock through interbreeding?
4. Does the reintroduction fully conform to IUCN/SSC Guidelines on reintroductions (these presume, amongst other things, that species to be reintroduced have become extinct, and that critical limiting factors have been identified and resolved)?

## **What are the consequences of ignoring existing marten populations?**

Where conservation organisations actively promote the false impression that pine martens are extinct in England and Wales, this is unlikely to assist the conservation of surviving populations; indeed it is bound to hinder it in various ways. Of all our doubts about the reintroduction proposal this gives us the greatest cause for concern. We envisage (and in some cases have already encountered) the following adverse effects:

1. Conservationists' attention, effort and resources (including the Biodiversity Action Planning process) are diverted away from what should, arguably, be the top priority: namely, securing the future of relict pine marten populations and promoting their natural recovery if possible.
2. Influential land managers and policy makers receive the message that relict pine marten populations are no longer worth bothering with. As a result, potentially beneficial land use changes and other conservation initiatives cannot be implemented and partnerships founder.
3. Land managers involved in predator control are given the false impression that they need take no special measures to avoid the accidental killing of pine martens (most of the recent marten corpses from northern England were acquired as a result of predator control operations). Public statements that the species is extinct are helpful in the defence of those people intent on illegally killing or taking pine martens.
4. Attempts to assess the distribution and status of pine martens in England and Wales are hindered because people are reluctant to report animals that are repeatedly described in media coverage as extinct.
5. Maverick individuals receive the 'green light' to attempt private and informal reintroductions of martens of unknown origin in current population strongholds, in the mistaken belief that none exist in the wild (we have recent evidence of such intentions in Wales).

## **Other questions to be addressed**

In addition to the crucial questions arising from the continuing presence of marten populations in England and Wales, we raise the following points that do not appear to have been adequately addressed in the consultation document:

1. **Has the document predicted accurately how reintroduced pine martens might behave?** Most of the information on pine marten 'Natural History' presented in the consultation document (pages 3 - 5) seems to be drawn from recent studies in the Scottish Highlands. This is not a reliable way of predicting how martens might behave in southern England where conditions are very different. Had the consultation document drawn upon information from lowland woodland habitats elsewhere in Europe, it might have painted a more accurate picture. For example, pine marten population densities in such places may be considerably greater than those quoted in the consultation document.
2. **Will a reintroduction result in a new self-sustaining population?** There seems little point in carrying out an expensive reintroduction programme if one cannot demonstrate with some confidence that a strong and viable new population will be established as a result. This question is important because, although release sites with relatively high woodland cover have been selected, in most cases they are not extensive and are surrounded by countryside with low woodland cover and some potentially threatening land uses (urban areas and busy roads, for example) where pine martens cannot be expected to thrive (at 10% woodland cover, Britain is one of the least wooded countries in

Europe). Are the well-wooded areas selected for reintroductions really big enough to support thriving populations? IUCN/SSC Guidelines on reintroductions require that “the build-up of the released population should be modelled” in order to predict the establishment of a viable population. Whilst some modelling work may have been done, this is not apparent in the consultation document. Sophisticated modelling should be carried out to predict the performance of reintroduced marten populations at each release site, taking full account of local prey availability, mortality factors and variations in the extent and quality of available habitat. A reintroduction should not proceed until it can be demonstrated that a successful new population is very likely to be established.

3. **Is the prey base adequate to support reintroduced pine martens?** Pine martens must compete for food with a number of other predators, notably the red fox, that feed on a similar range of prey. Recent research suggests that there is an imbalance in Britain’s mammal community structure, with too many predators competing for an inadequate prey base (Harris *et al.*, 2000). If, as the authors suggest, low prey availability is the reason why some of Britain’s carnivores are rare, is it wise to proceed with a reintroduction of pine martens before such an imbalance is corrected? Could poor prey availability explain why some existing marten populations are struggling? The authors of this paper refer specifically to the reintroduction of the pine marten, suggesting that it could proceed “once species such as the field vole are more abundant”. They imply, thereby, that conditions in Britain are not currently suitable for such a reintroduction.
4. **Have pine marten impacts upon other species of conservation significance been adequately addressed?** On pages 8 and 9 the consultation document seeks to allay concerns about the likely effects of pine martens upon rare wildlife or game birds. The assessment is confined to considering effects upon birds and ignores all other groups. No consideration is given to possible adverse effects upon rare mammals and reptiles that may be highly vulnerable to predation by pine martens. Certain rare bats, for example, gather in colonies in tree holes, caves or old buildings. Reptiles often hibernate communally in disused rabbit burrows. Such aggregations make populations vulnerable to attack by a predator within a roost or hibernaculum. Pine martens are known to use burrows, tree holes, caves and the roofs of old buildings as den sites, and there is anecdotal evidence of marten damage to bats in Ireland. Pine martens are known to eat reptiles. The consultation document identifies possible reintroduction sites in the south and south-west of England, within the range of the rarest and most vulnerable bats in Britain. One of the sites (Wareham) is in a core area for two of Britain’s rarest reptiles: the smooth snake and the sand lizard. The consultation document’s failure to assess possible effects of pine martens upon rare bats and reptiles is a serious omission.
5. **Have predation pressures upon reintroduced pine martens been adequately assessed?** The consultation document acknowledges (p. 4) that foxes catch and kill pine martens. Recent research in Scandinavia suggests strongly that predation by foxes has a limiting effect upon pine marten populations (Lindström *et al.*, 1995). This effect has also been recognised by British naturalists (e.g. Macpherson, 1892; Webster, in press). The consultation document does not consider the impact that fox predation may have upon the success of the proposed reintroduction. Foxes are probably more abundant now in southern Britain than they have ever been, and the limited escape opportunities for martens in areas of low woodland cover must exacerbate any predation effects. We ask whether it is wise to reintroduce

martens into areas supporting amongst the highest fox populations in Europe without assessing the likely impact of fox predation? Such an assessment should be included in Population Viability Analyses and modelling exercises, as required under the IUCN/SSC Guidelines on reintroductions.

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