

Proposals to Ban Hunting Wild Mammals with Dogs

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

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Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 58 Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are agreed by Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

NB: The Ulster Angling Federation and the Woodland Trust have opted not to participate in this consultation response.

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1. Do you agree with the proposal to introduce a ban on hunting wild mammals with dogs in Northern Ireland?

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) agrees that hunting wild mammals with dogs should be banned in Northern Ireland.

2. Do you believe that drag hunting is a suitable alternative to hunting live mammals?

NIEL believes drag hunting is a suitable alternative as it enables people who have been historically involved in hunting with dogs to continue this practice. It provides the thrill of the chase, reduces risks to dogs, horses and riders and negates animal welfare issues associated with chasing live prey.

- Dogs would not need to be destroyed as they could be retrained to follow the scent of the drag and rewarded with meat and treats for their efforts. It is worth noting that several thousand dogs are currently slaughtered every year to make way for the next generation.
- Jobs could actually be created during the transition to drag hunting as more people would likely participate in the equestrian activities if animal cruelty was removed. Also, drag hunting guarantees a good day's sport as there are no lengthy delays.
- The difficulty level and duration of the drag hunt could be varied to suit the experience level of the participants.
- The course would be safer for both the animals and riders as transport routes and blind jumps could be avoided. Also, farmers can be pre-warned of hunts taking place on their land and the course can be designed to finish near the start point.

3. Are there any other offences which you feel should be included?

The proposed offences would bring Northern Ireland on to a level footing with other parts of the United Kingdom as they mirror those found in the Hunting Act 2004 in England and Wales and the Protection of Wild Mammals Act 2002 in Scotland.

4. What are your views on the penalties proposed?

NIEL believes the penalties need to be sufficiently large to deter people from getting involved in the hunting of wild mammals with dogs. The maximum fine of £20,000 and/or maximum imprisonment term of 51 weeks compares favourably with those in place in Great Britain (£5,000 and 6 months).

5. Which body should be responsible for the seizure of dogs which have been used in illegal activities related to hunting?

NIEL believes that the Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI), local councils, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA) would need to work in a co-ordinated fashion to enforce the legislation and seize any dogs used for hunting purposes.

6. Are there any other measures which you feel could be taken to improve enforcement of the proposed legislation?

There needs to be an increase in the number of wildlife crime officers as well as a dedicated hotline for the public to report any offences. The legislation should also be well-promoted as this would aid with compliance.

7. What is your view of the exemptions proposed?

The proposed legislation would bring Northern Ireland in line with other parts of the United Kingdom; the Hunting Act 2004 in England and Wales and the Protection of Wild Mammals Act 2002 in Scotland.

8. Is there anything within these proposals which you think should be omitted?

NIEL opposes the destruction of any non-pest wild animal for the purposes of protecting 'livestock; game birds or wild birds; food for livestock; crops; growing timber; fisheries; other property; or the biological diversity of an area' if it could instead be relocated to an appropriate area.

9. Is there anything else that you think should be included in these proposals?

NIEL believes stronger penalties should be put in place for repeat offenders or individual cases of extreme animal welfare offences.

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) thank you for the opportunity to make these comments and hope you find them helpful. If you would like to discuss them further, please contact us.