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# Could the Wildcat Work for Wales?

Assessing the social feasibility  
of restoring wildcats to Wales.

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and Jenny MacPherson

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# Crynodeb gweithredol

Diflannodd cathod gwyllt Ewropeaidd *Felis silvestris*, a oedd ar un pryd yn byw ledled gwledydd Prydain, o dir Cymru a Lloegr erbyn yr 17eg ganrif o ganlyniad i golli cynefin ac erledigaeth gan bobl. Bellach, mae'r unig boblogaeth wyllt yn Yr Alban yn wynebu bygythiad difrifol o ganlyniad i hybrideiddio gyda chathod dof a chathod lled-wyllt. I rwystro difodiant y gath wyllt yng ngwledydd Prydain, mae astudiaethau dichonoldeb yn archwilio cyfleoedd ailgyflwyno mewn lleoliadau eraill yn y DU.

Mae gorllewin Cymru - yn benodol yr ardal sy'n cynnwys coedwigoedd Tywi a Brechfa - wedi ei nodi fel safle ailgyflwyno posibl o ganlyniad i'r boblogaeth isel o bobl a llai o risg ar ffyrdd (MacPherson et al., 2019). Wrth drefnu ymdrechion ailgyflwyno, fodd bynnag, mae'n rhaid ystyried deinamig cymdeithasol, diwylliannol, ac economaidd cymhleth y rhanbarth, yn enwedig o ystyried tensiynau hanesyddol a chyfredol parthed defnydd tir a bywoliaethau gwledig yng Nghymru. Mae angen asesiad dichonoldeb cymdeithasol ar Ganllawiau Grŵp Cadwraeth Trawsleoli Arbenigol IUCN hefyd fel rhan o gynllunio ailgyflwyno, i sicrhau cefnogaeth leol ac i leihau gwrthdaro.

Roedd yr astudiaeth hon yn cynnwys cynnal cyfweiliadau wedi eu rhannol-strwythuro a gweithdai ymarferol i gofnodi a dadansoddi barn grwpiau rhanddalwyr yng ngorllewin Cymru, yn cynnwys ffermwyr, cadwraethwyr, eiriolwyr lles cathod, a pherchnogion busnesau hela yn y maes. Amcan yr astudiaeth oedd darparu asesiad o ddichonoldeb cymdeithasol yn seiliedig ar farn pobl am ailgyflwyno cathod gwyllt, y risgiau a'r buddion posibl, ac adnabod cyfleoedd dros gydweithio.

## Darganfyddiadau Allweddol

- **Barn am gathod gwyllt** Amrywiol oedd barn pobl am gathod gwyllt a'u gwybodaeth am y rhywogaeth. Nododd rhai fu'n cymryd rhan wahaniaeth amlwg rhwng cathod gwyllt a chathod dof, y cyntaf yn cynrychioli gwerth esthetig neu symbolaidd fel 'rhywogaeth wyllt'; cysylltwyd y gath wyllt gydag adfer bioamrywiaeth ac 'ecosystemau coll'. Roedd eraill yn mynegi amheuaeth ynglŷn â'u rôl yn nhirlun cyfoes Cymru. Serch hynny, mae ein canlyniadau, drwyddo draw, yn awgrymu bod y gath wyllt yn cael ei hystyried ar hyn o bryd fel anifail dymunol o'i chymharu ag ysglyfaethwyr eraill.
- **Cymhariaeth gyda chathod dof** Cysylltir hyn yn bennaf â theimlad o bryder, o ganlyniad i effaith y gath ddof ar fywyd gwyllt, a phryderon lles presennol yn ymwneud â chathod lled-wyllt.
- **Pryderon am fywyd gwyllt arall** Mynegwyd pryder parthed cathod gwyllt yn ysglyfaethu ar adar sy'n nythu ar y ddaear a bywyd gwyllt arall. Fodd bynnag, crybwyllodd eraill fuddion potensial cathod gwyllt wrth helpu i reoli poblogaethau o gnofilod a mesoysglyfaethwyr eraill fel llwynogod.
- **Lles cathod** Adnabuwyd problemau gan raddalwyr sy'n gweithio gyda chathod parthed poblogaethau uchel o gathod lled-wyllt a chathod fferm yn y rhanbarth a fyddai'n peri risg i brojectau ailgyflwyno drwy hybrideiddio a throsglwyddo heintiau. Nodwyd bod rheolaeth effeithiol a chydweithredu gyda grwpiau lles anifeiliaid yn hanfodol er mwyn mynd i'r afael â'r materion hyn pe bai unrhyw ailgyflwyno'n mynd i ddigwydd. Ystyriwyd bod gwell ymwybyddiaeth o les cathod, ysbaddu, a rhaglenni brechu fel rhan o botensial ailgyflwyno cathod gwyllt yn gyd-fuddion posibl, gan wella amodau i gathod dof a lled-wyllt.

- **Ffermio defaid** Cafwyd ymateb cymysg gan ffermwyr defaid. Er nad oedd fawr o farn gan rai, roedd eraill yn poeni y byddai cathod gwyllt yn ymosod ar wŷn. Pwysleisiodd y ffermwyr hyn yr angen am strategaethau rheoli cadarn, cynlluniau iawndal a chynllunio tymor hir. Roedd llawer yn mynegi pryder parthed ysglyfaethu ar wŷn a nodwyd bod hwn yn fater canolig a fyddai angen lliniaru gofalus. Rydym yn argymhell bod ffermwyr defaid yn cael eu cynnwys yn uniongyrchol mewn unrhyw drafodaethau parthed rheoli risg ac yn cael eu cyflenwi gydag arfau a strategaethau priodol i warchod stoc rhag ysglyfaethu. Nodwyd bod posibilrwydd y byddai cymryd rhan mewn cynlluniau llywodraethol fel y Cynllun Ffermio Cynaliadwy yn gallu cynnwys ysgogiadau ariannol i ffermwyr ar gyfer rheoli tir mewn ffyrdd sy'n cynnal cynefin cathod gwyllt.

- **Dofednod ac adar hela** Er nad oedd cathod gwyllt yn cael eu hystyried yn fygythiad newydd i ddofednod ac adar hela oherwydd presenoldeb ysglyfaethwyr eraill eisoes, roedd yn bosib eu hystyried fel pwysau ychwanegol ar y sawl sy'n cadw dofednod. Fel gyda ffermwyr defaid, rydym yn argymhell bod trafodaethau parhaol yn cael eu cynnal gyda ffermwyr dofednod a chiperiad adar hela er mwyn sicrhau gwarchodaeth anifeiliaid a bywoliaethau.

- **Risg o heintiau** Amlygodd y sawl fu'n cymryd rhan yr angen am asesiad risg trwyadl, yn enwedig o ystyried presenoldeb heintiau fel Tocsoplasmosis, diciâu buchol, a chasgliad o afiechydon heintus cathod eisoes yn y rhanbarth.

## Canlyniad

Cafwyd ystod eang o farn, o frwdfrydedd i bryder, yn ystod yr astudiaeth am ailgyflwyno cathod gwyllt. Er bod heriau'n bodoli, yn enwedig parthed hybrideiddio, heintiau a gwarchod da byw, mynegodd llawer a gymrodd ran eu bod yn agored i'r syniad pe bai'n cael ei roi ar waith mewn modd meddylgar a chydweithredol. Rydym yn dod i'r casgliad felly y gallai ailgyflwyno cathod gwyllt yng ngorllewin Cymru fod yn ddichonadwy yn y dyfodol agos, ond byddai angen sicrhau rhan rhanddalwyr ar raddfa eang, datblygu ymddiriedaeth a chynllunio gyda chymryd rhan mewn golwg. Bydd sefydlu rhwydwaith gadarn ar gyfer cyfathrebu tymor hir ar draws sectorau; datblygu strategaethau datrys gwrthdrawiadau clir; ac archwilio buddion rhanedig yn hanfodol ar gyfer llwyddiant y project ac ar gyfer creu amgylchedd sefydlog ar gyfer dychwelyd y gath wyllt i Gymru.



# Executive summary

European wildcats *Felis silvestris*, once widespread across Britain, became extinct in Wales and England by the 17th century due to habitat loss and human persecution. Today, the only remaining wild population in Scotland faces a significant threat from hybridisation with domestic and feral cats. To prevent the extinction of wildcat in Britain, feasibility studies are exploring reintroduction opportunities elsewhere in the UK.

West Wales – specifically the area including the Tywi and Brechfa forests – has been identified as a potentially suitable reintroduction site due to its low human population and reduced risk from roads (MacPherson *et al.*, 2019). Reintroduction efforts must however consider the complex social, cultural, and economic dynamics of the region, especially given historical and current tensions over land use and rural livelihoods in Wales. The IUCN Conservation Translocation Specialist Group Guidelines also require a social feasibility assessment as part of reintroduction planning, to ensure local support and to minimise conflict.

This study comprised conducting semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops to record and analyse the views of stakeholder groups in West Wales, including farmers, conservationists, cat welfare advocates, and field sports business owners. The aim of the study was to provide an assessment of social feasibility based on perceptions of wildcat reintroduction, potential risks and benefits, and identify opportunities for collaboration.

## Key Findings

- **Perceptions of wildcats** Views on wildcats and familiarity with the species were varied. Some participants made clear distinctions between wildcats and domestic cats, the former holding aesthetic or symbolic value as a ‘wild species’ and associated the wildcat with restoring biodiversity and ‘lost ecosystems’. Others expressed scepticism about their role in the modern Welsh landscape. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that, overall, the wildcat is currently viewed as a desirable animal relative to other predators.
- **Comparison to domestic cats** This was largely linked to a sense of concern, owing to the discourse around the domestic cat’s impact on wildlife, and existing welfare concerns around feral cats.
- **Concerns for other wildlife** Concerns were raised about wildcats preying on ground-nesting birds and other wildlife. However, some noted potential benefits of wildcats as helping manage populations of rodents and other mesopredators such as foxes.
- **Cat welfare** Stakeholders working with cats highlighted issues with large populations of feral and farm cats in the region, posing risks to reintroduction projects through hybridisation and disease transmission. Effective management and collaboration with animal welfare groups were seen as essential to address these issues if any reintroduction were set to take place. Increased awareness of cat welfare, neutering, and vaccination programs as part of a potential wildcat reintroduction were viewed as potential co-benefits, improving conditions for domestic and feral cats.
- **Sheep farming** Reactions from sheep farmers were mixed. While some were indifferent, others feared potential attacks on lambs. These farmers stressed the need for robust management strategies, compensation plans and long-term planning. Concerns around lamb predation were echoed widely and identified as a central issue needing careful mitigation.

We recommend that sheep farmers be included directly in any discussions of risk management and equipped with suitable tools and strategies to protect stock from predation. It was noted that inclusion in government schemes like the Sustainable Farming Scheme could offer financial incentives to farmers for managing land in ways that support wildcat habitat.

- **Poultry and game birds** Although wildcats were not seen as a new threat to poultry and game due to the existing presence of other predators, they could be viewed as an additional pressure for poultry keepers. As with sheep farmers, we recommend that ongoing conversations are held with poultry and game bird keepers to ensure protection of animals and livelihoods.

- **Disease risk** Participants highlighted the need for a thorough disease risk assessment, especially due to the prevalence of diseases like Toxoplasmosis, Bovine TB, and a suite of infectious feline diseases present in the region.

## Conclusion

The study found a wide range of views on wildcat reintroduction from enthusiasm to concern. While challenges exist, especially around hybridisation, disease and livestock protection, many participants expressed openness to the idea if implemented thoughtfully and collaboratively. We conclude that wildcat reintroduction in West Wales could be feasible in the near future, but would require extensive stakeholder involvement, trust-building and participatory planning. Establishing a robust network for long-term, cross-sectoral communication; developing clear conflict-resolution strategies; and exploring shared benefits will be crucial for the project's success and for creating a stable environment for the wildcat's return to Wales.

# Introduction

## Wildcats — their UK status and history

European wildcats *Felis silvestris*, once found across Britain, became extinct in Wales and England around the 17th century, largely due to persecution and habitat loss or fragmentation (Langley and Yalden 1977; Breitenmoser *et al.* 2019).

As a result of past declines, the remaining wildcat population in Scotland is now subject to high levels of hybridisation with feral and domestic cats – higher than any other known population across the species' range (Senn *et al.* 2019; Tiesmayer *et al.* 2020), with the possible exception of Hungary. In a report on the Wildcat and its status in Scotland, Breitenmoser *et al.* (2019) concluded that 'it is too late to conserve the wildcat in Scotland as a stand-alone population' and that it is unlikely that there still exists 'a nucleus of pure wildcats' in the wild not subject to significant hybridisation. On the basis of this conclusion, recommendations were to conserve what remains of the Scottish wildcat gene pool through reinforcement with captive-bred or wild caught individuals in order for the population to retain any alleles that could be locally adaptive (Breitenmoser *et al.* 2019). Population reinforcements with captive-bred animals are underway in Scotland to prevent the local extinction of the European wildcat (Saving Wildcats 2023) and there is also growing interest in reintroduction of wildcats to suitable areas elsewhere in Britain (Auster *et al.* 2024; Gow and Cooper 2018).

Gow and Cooper (2018) state that 'reintroductions into optimal habitat in hybrid-free zones on a national scale will be required' to prevent the loss of wildcats from Britain, and feasibility studies are being carried out to explore the potential for reintroduction in other areas across the UK (Auster *et al.* 2024). MacPherson *et al.* (2019) conducted a preliminary feasibility assessment for reintroduction of the wildcat in England and/or Wales, including a detailed assessment of habitat suitability and risk factors that could impact the success of future reintroductions. The study identified three areas of interest that might warrant further investigation, owing to their low human (and domestic cat) densities and relatively low risk from roads and traffic (MacPherson *et al.* 2019). These included one area of West Wales, encompassing the Tywi and Brechfa forests and surrounding areas.

Investigating the feasibility of wildcat reintroduction also links with wider aims to reverse biodiversity losses; restoring native species composition and community structure; and potentially reducing populations of invasive, non-native species (Gorman 2007; Roemer *et al.* 2009). As native mesopredators, wildcats play an important role in maintaining the balance of ecosystems by preying upon rabbits, voles, and other small mammals (Roemer *et al.* 2009).

## Wildcats in culture

Cultural narratives, old and new, also contribute to motivations, values, and expectations around wildlife conservation projects (Consorte-McCrea *et al.* 2022). Stories and perceptions are often heterogenous throughout history and can also vary within a given area, linked to factors such as language, socio-economic class, and geographic separation. The wildcat appears in British mythology and is associated with cultures of place, clan identities and local folklore of Scotland as well as Wales (Wrigley 2020). In the Highlands, the wildcat frequently features on local media, including in literature promoting the conservation of the species, advertising eco-tourism experiences, or creating a regional brand for locally made products. As the



UK's last extant native felid, the species has strong potential as a flagship species for conservation efforts and already features in popular media such as nature writing and national news headlines.

Wrigley (2020) also discussed the species' symbolic and representative power within our contemporary stories about British wildlife conservation; particularly its appeal to a 'zeitgeist' within conservation narratives of saving species which embody a sense of 'wildness'. She argues that the wildcat in particular may be subject to projections of guilt related to anthropogenic biodiversity loss, its loss (or return) linked to that of an idealised human relationship with 'the wild'. She cautions that this valorisation of wildness and subsequent 'othering' of certain forms of nature has been linked in the past with erasures of human influence within the landscape, such as that of crofters in the Highlands (Wrigley 2020). Cultural perceptions of wildcats in Wales are not yet known but will be integral to the development of an effective, place-based strategy for exploring reintroduction (Consorte-Macrea *et al.* 2022). However, in light of past colonialism and current political tension surrounding rural landscapes and livelihoods, it is important to consider how the project might sit within the existing social, cultural, and economic landscape of Wales before steps are taken towards reintroducing the wildcat – whether as a species in the landscape or a symbol in culture.

## Approaches

Interdisciplinary approaches are becoming increasingly adopted by conservation practitioners to address challenges relating to the human dimensions of large-scale conservation projects, such as relationships between humans and other-than-humans, socioeconomic trends and cultural characteristics. This increasing inclusion of human dimensions within conservation projects constitutes a philosophical paradigm shift in conservation science: moving away from the notion of largely separate social and ecological issues and solutions, towards a focus on interconnected, socio-ecological systems (Mace *et al.* 2014). Large-scale conservation projects such as wildlife translocations take place within networks of human communities and institutions, and therefore require significant consideration of human dimensions alongside ecological considerations (Consorte-Macrea *et al.* 2022).

Use of social science methods for public and stakeholder engagement is now commonplace amongst wildlife conservation projects (Moon and Blackman, 2014; Mace 2014; Sterling *et al.* 2017; Bavin *et al.* 2021). The importance of stakeholder engagement in the conservation sector is often framed in terms of democracy and equity – such as reducing marginalisation of under-represented groups within decision making processes and incorporating a diverse range of values and viewpoints (Sterling *et al.* 2017). Analyses of stakeholder groups can also reveal useful information for conservation practitioners, such as stakeholder motivations for actions with positive or negative impacts on a species or landscape (Hovardas *et al.* 2018). Sterling *et al.* (2017) define stakeholders as people who directly impact or are impacted by conservation projects. Individual stakeholders and stakeholder groups have different needs and expectations which project teams should seek to understand and address throughout all stages of a conservation project (Consorte-Macrea *et al.* 2022). Successful engagement programmes work to identify 'key' stakeholders (as defined by practitioners and by stakeholders themselves), engage these groups early on, and maintain consistent engagement throughout the project timeline (Sterling *et al.* 2017). However, the degree of project involvement this entails can vary considerably depending on the specifics of the approach. In Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder' framework, the distribution of power is a defining feature of stakeholder engagement approaches, with the most highly participatory ('bottom up') approaches placing power in the hands of citizens, and the least participatory ('top down') approaches placing power solely in the hands of practitioners.

Pound (2015) describes the range of possible stakeholder engagement approaches based on the extent to which they can be deliberative (allowing for shared dialogue, decision making and responsibilities) and inclusive (including multiple voices for broadening range of perspective, knowledge, and experience). At the most basic level, external engagement can take the form of education and information programmes, facilitating a flow of information from project practitioners to stakeholders or the wider public. Such processes can be highly inclusive (including potentially thousands of people), but with the least scope for deliberation (Pound 2015). 'Information gathering' and 'Consultation' processes take engagement a step further, informing project proposals by way of integrating perspectives and knowledge from stakeholders and/or wider sources. These methods are variable in their level of inclusion and deliberation (Pound 2015).

More participatory projects involve stakeholders directly with project design and delivery, and may include some transfer of power in the form of shared decision making. At this point, there may be an upper limit to inclusion (approx. 60 in the core deliberative process group), but there is vastly increased opportunity for deliberation. It is still common for environmental projects to focus more on consultation and education than on more in-depth involvement of the public, with a focus on getting the community ‘on the side’ of a pre-determined project proposal without any transfer of power with which to shape the proposal itself (Sanborn and Jung 2021; Campbell and Vainio-Mattila 2003; Berkes 2004; Waylen *et al.* 2010).

Highly participatory methods of stakeholder engagement are associated with diverse socio-ecological benefits, such as the possibility that diverse groups of decision makers may lead to higher-quality decisions; that increased local ownership leads to more sustainable project outcomes and greater chance of success; and that development of trust, common ground, and higher social capital help to mitigate conflicts and related challenges among stakeholders (Pound 2015; Sterling *et al.* 2017). Though study of human dimensions of wildlife conservation projects often focuses solely or primarily on negative interactions and human-wildlife-conflict, value should also be placed in practices that promote socio-ecological resilience and to build trust in the conservation sector, encourage innovation through collaboration, and promote cohesive relationships throughout stakeholder networks that also serve to support projects in the long term (Ban *et al.* 2013; Folke *et al.* 2016; Consorte-Macrea *et al.* 2022). Design of participatory projects is critical to their success, and poorly designed or executed projects can lead to disempowerment or disengagement (Pound 2015).

Wildlife translocation projects require local public and government support, and a strong consideration of risks and benefits to local people and stakeholders (IUCN 2013). Such projects often have the potential for wide-reaching socio-economic impacts and, in many cases, spread amongst a large variety of people with diverse backgrounds and interests. They, therefore, benefit from rigorous stakeholder engagement from the outset and throughout all stages of their development and implementation, beginning with an initial assessment of feasibility (Sterling *et al.* 2017). In Wales, the importance of participatory design has been recently brought to light through the development and implementation of Tir Canol (formerly Summit to Sea), a multi-partner, multi-stakeholder project aimed at developing a plan for collaborative management of land and seas in the Dyfi estuary of Mid Wales (Tir Canol 2025).

Originally badged as a ‘rewilding’ project, the initial vision was to implement a plan developed by environmental professionals and conservationists that would achieve large-scale ecological restoration by changing land-use practices in a large area from the summit of Pumlumon to the waters of Bae Ceredigion (Tir Canol 2025). Launched in 2018, this original proposal was met with widespread criticism amongst members of the local community on the basis that it was deemed to threaten their local economy and way of life (Tir Canol 2025). This ultimately led to the exit of some organisations from the project partnership. In June 2020, the project was re-launched with a new focus: to carry out a rigorous co-design process, including input from some previously opposing parties, to facilitate shared learning and reflection (Tir Canol 2025).

This two year co-design process lacked pre-determined goals, relying instead on a process of shared experimentation to reach an appropriate outcome (Tir Canol 2025). A ‘blueprint’ plan for large-scale ecological restoration was produced as a result of this collaborative process (Tir Canol 2025). In 2022, a new partnership was formed, which is now working to implement the practical actions outlined in this blueprint, such as voluntary diversification of farming practices in the area; increased tree cover through natural regeneration and planting, including the restoration of farmland features such as ffridd and hedgerows; and changing management of waterways by removing barriers to fish passage and increasing riparian buffer zones (Tir Canol 2025). The improved project blueprint also includes a strong focus on Welsh language and culture, as well as celebrating local nature and natural heritage through eco-cultural activities (Tir Canol 2025).

The importance of participatory stakeholder engagement is linked with the real and perceived risks associated with the target species and the social context (cultural and economic) of the proposed release area. Social feasibility assessments – an assessment of current socio-economic factors with the potential

to influence project outcomes – are an essential first step in understanding these contextual aspects and determining whether a project should be proposed in a given area. They are also a requirement for reintroduction projects following IUCN guidelines for wildlife translocations (Dando *et al.* 2022; IUCN 2013).

### Statement of aims

The study used semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops to explore stakeholder views towards the idea of wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) reintroduction. It served as a platform for stakeholders in a region identified as having potentially suitable habitat for a putative wildcat reintroduction (MacPherson *et al.* 2019) to discuss their perspectives on how (and whether) such a project might fit within the context of their local area.

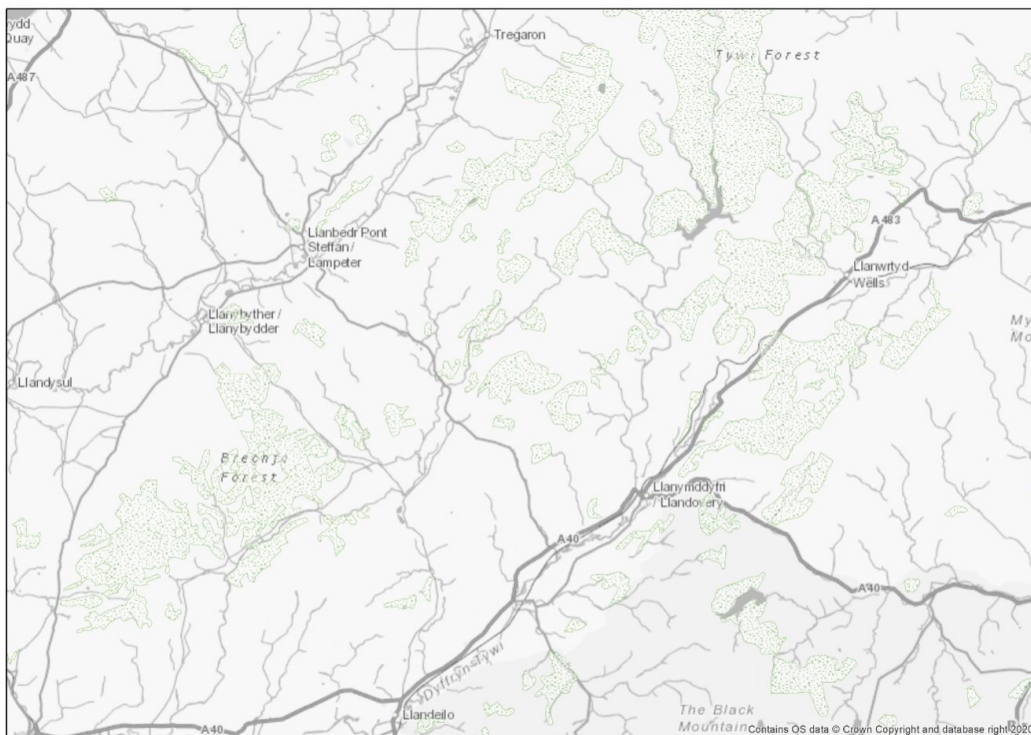
The outcomes of the study will inform efforts to conserve the wildcat by providing a basis of knowledge regarding the social and cultural context of wildcat in West Wales, and how this may influence the area’s suitability for a future reintroduction. It also provides an opportunity for meaningful dialogue between conservation practitioners (the project team) and a range of stakeholder groups in West Wales, including the local farming community, field sports practitioners, and cat welfare advocates. This work serves to increase potential for cross-sectoral collaboration in the future by highlighting the priorities, motivations, and challenges influencing conservation efforts across the UK, contributing to greater socio-ecological resilience.



Fig 1 Recording the views of local communities.

# Methods

A habitat suitability map based on model predictions from a preliminary ecological feasibility study by MacPherson *et al.* (2019) was used to identify an initial study area for stakeholder mapping (Figure 2; MacPherson *et al.* 2019). The MaxEnt model included habitat at the 10 km<sup>2</sup> resolution, alongside factors known to influence wildcat population density, hybridisation and mortality, such as proximity to major roads and human population density estimates (as a proxy for domestic cat densities). The landscape throughout the study area includes some of the Tywi and Cothi river catchments and can be described as a mosaic of pasture and woodland. The area encompasses enclosed farmland, large coniferous or mixed forestry plantations, and patches of native deciduous woodland, including some areas of ancient, semi-natural woodland. It is bordered by upland areas to the East and Northeast into Powys, and predominantly farmed lowland to the North and West, as well as more populated areas such as the town of Carmarthen and the major A40 road to the South. Farms in the region primarily raise lambs and cattle and can be characterised as predominantly improved or semi-improved grassland enclosed by native hedgerows. The village of Brechfa was treated as a central hub for stakeholder engagement, owing to its proximity to large regions of potentially suitable wildcat habitat.



**Fig 2** Map of area with predicted suitable wildcat habitat based on MaxEnt model predictions.

A stakeholder mapping process was carried out in November 2023 by the project team, which consisted of two primary researchers and one project advisor local to the project area. This process entailed identifying all local communities of interest (COIs) related to carnivore conservation that comprise people living or operating within and adjacent to the study area. A list of COIs included in this study is outlined in Table 1. Participants were identified through purposive sampling (Robinson 2014), with the aim of including one or more voices from all key COIs listed in Table 1. ‘Snowball sampling’ (Goodman 1961) was then used to identify additional COIs not listed in the initial stakeholder mapping process or stakeholders beyond the boundary of the study area.

**Table 1** Key communities of interest and example stakeholders identified during stakeholder mapping process and numbers of participants interviewed as part of the study. In cases where notes from other conversations were used in analysis, these additional households/businesses are included in brackets. Total = 32

\*NB Some participants belonged to more than one community of interest.

Community of Interest	Example Stakeholders	Participants*
Farming	Commercial farmers (sheep, cattle, mixed), farm employees, retired farmers	5 (11)
Poultry	Smallholders or farmers with poultry (fenced, caged, or free range), Commercial poultry farms	5
Field Sports	Shooting estate owners/managers, gamekeepers, marksmen involved with predator control, trail hunters, wildfowlers	2 (3)
Conservation	Staff involved with local conservation projects, nature reserve staff, conservation volunteers	3
Pet Welfare	Local pet welfare organisations (staff and/or volunteers), local vets	4

Semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops were conducted with project stakeholders to collect qualitative data for this study (Adams 2015). Prompt questions (Table 2) were used to guide interview conversations in cases where participants did not identify topics of initial interest, but participants were free to discuss topics of their choosing throughout interviews.

**Table 2** Prompt questions used in semi-structured interviews, and associated questions adapted for participatory workshops.

Question (Interview prompt)	Question (Workshop)
What do you think about wildcats?	What are wildcats to you?
What do you think of the idea of re-introducing captive-bred wildcats to Wales?	Without knowing more, to what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statement ‘Wildcats should be re-introduced to West Wales’
Tell me about any negative impacts you think such a project might have.	Tell us about any negative impacts you think a wildcat reintroduction project could deliver (or concerns you might have)
Tell me about anything positive you think such a project could deliver.	Tell us about any positive impacts or benefits you think a wildcat reintroduction project could deliver.

An initial, informal conversation was offered beforehand to discuss the wildcat social feasibility project and answer basic questions about the biology and ecology of the species. Whilst acknowledging potential personal biases as conservation professionals, impartiality was actively maintained at all times during the stakeholder engagement process. Participants were briefed to notify the project officer if they felt impartiality had not been maintained successfully during their interactions. Notes were taken during these conversations with verbal consent to be used in the study. In some cases where participants were unable to take part in an in-depth interview, these notes were used to supplement our analysis.

Prior to the start of the interview interviewees were provided with a participant information sheet containing full details about the study in order that they could confirm their informed consent as study participants. We used inductive methods to analyse the data, therefore interview questions were designed to be as broad as possible to encourage wider discussion.

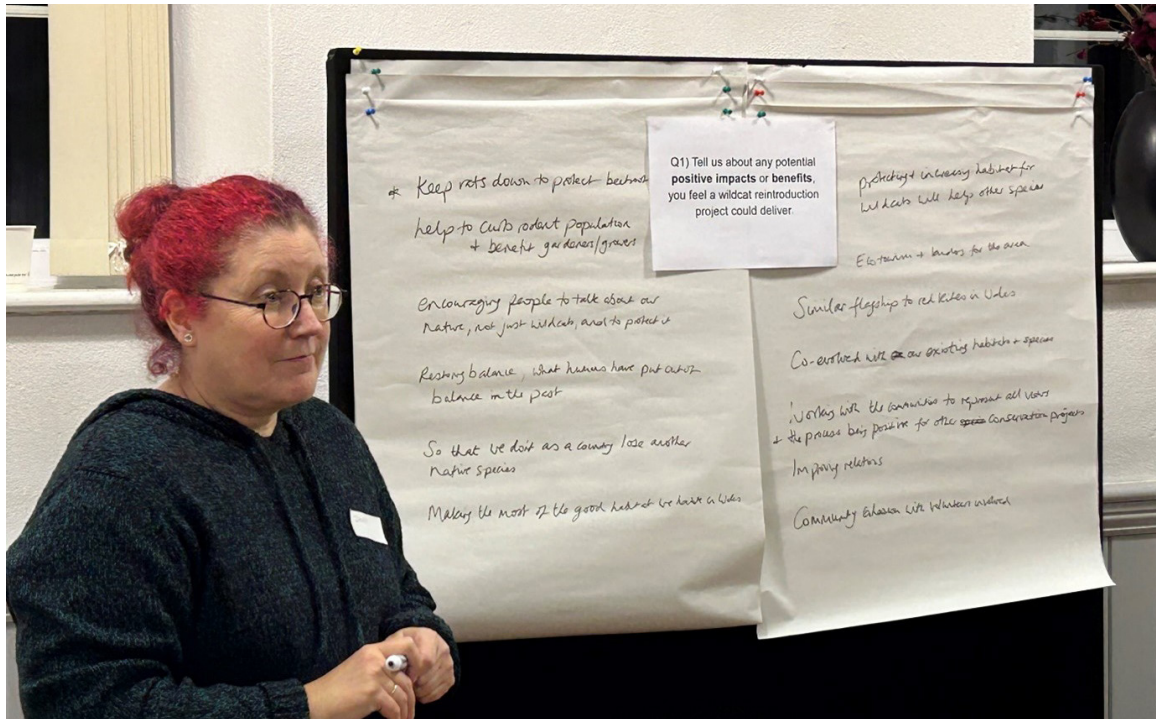


Fig 3 Recording responses to set questions during a workshop.

In workshop sessions, participants were asked questions covering the same topics as in interviews (Table 2), but following a modified structure better suited to a workshop format and designed to maximise cooperative behaviour (Pound 2015). Workshops were conducted by a trained facilitator (MH) with support from local advisor (HD) and principal investigator/trained facilitator (JM) following Pound’s (2015) process for facilitating participatory stakeholder workshops. These workshops were aimed at extending the discussion to the ‘wider’ community, including those not belonging to the key communities of interest identified during stakeholder mapping (Table 1). The main purpose of this workshop step was to provide feedback on the progress of the study and offer an additional window for input if participants felt there were important aspects of the discourse that had not yet been covered.



Fig 4 Workshop at Pumsaint Village Hall.

# Results

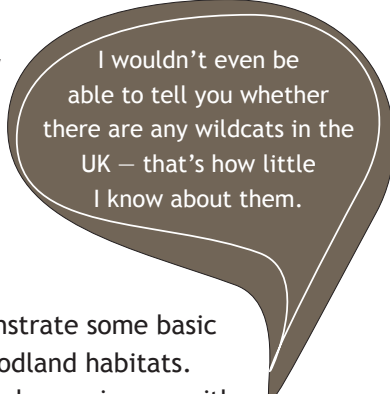


During the study, we spoke with 150 people across a range of stakeholder groups, through direct consultation, project talks, workshops, and interviews.

For data collection purposes, we conducted audio recorded semi-structured interviews with a total of 18 participants between 01/05/24 and 01/01/25 – 17 in person at a place of the participant's choosing, and one online via Microsoft Teams – and conducted participatory workshops with a total of 15 participants in local communities Brechfa and Pumsaint. The pools of interview and workshop participants were largely separate, with the exception of two participants who took part in both sections of the process. We also used notes taken during conversations in person with an additional 14 participants as supplementary material for analysis with participants' consent, where no formal interview was carried out. The total number of participants who contributed directly to the study was 45.


## Perspectives on wildcats

Participants' overall familiarity with the species was varied. Some indicated that they had little or no knowledge of the wildcat prior to engaging with the interview. *"I wouldn't even be able to tell you whether there are any wildcats in the UK – that's how little I know about them."* Others stated that their knowledge was limited, eg, *"I know a little bit."*, *"I don't know much about them other than what they look like."*



I wouldn't even be able to tell you whether there are any wildcats in the UK – that's how little I know about them.

In some cases, participants who described their knowledge as being limited did demonstrate some basic factual knowledge, particularly the association of wildcats with Scotland and with woodland habitats. Some participants had a high degree of familiarity including – in some cases – personal experiences with the animal, having seen them in zoos such as Highland Wildlife Park and Folly Farm, or abroad in Spain. Some of the most common associations with wildcats, appearing across both interviews and workshop sessions, included 'Forest', 'Wild', and 'Scotland'. In some cases, words like 'native' and 'extinct' were used to describe the wildcat, indicating some knowledge of their conservation status and or history in the UK. One participant stated that she believed that there weren't many wildcats remaining due to hybridisation. *"I didn't think there were many to be honest, because I thought they'd interbred with all the tame pet cats. So I was under the impression that there weren't any; that they were indistinguishable from the pet tabby cats. And how could you tell if it was a wildcat or just a feral house cat?"*

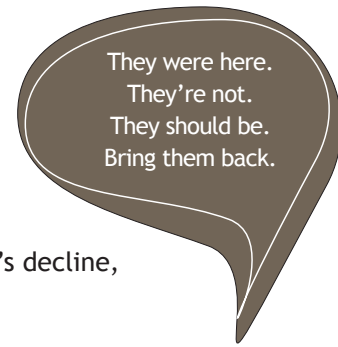


I don't know much about them other than what they look like.

In both interviews and workshop sessions, there were some participants who described the wildcat in terms of its place in an ecosystem or historic landscape. In some cases, this was also linked to concepts of biodiversity loss or restoration, a perception of the wildcat 'belonging here', or a moral imperative to return the animal to areas of its former range. *"Britain is so nature depleted. It's crazy! I think the reason most of the people who are into nature in this country are into birding is because it's all we've got left! You can't really be 'Oh I'm really into mammals.' – you can, but bloody hell it's difficult! Then you go to the continent, and there's just life. It feels alive, and it doesn't really feel like that here. We've lost so much of the character of wild places. And I'm in conservation because I'd like to try and bring some of that back. So that's the kind of emotional level response. The benefit would be that they're back, and they should be here, so that's just a win. You don't have to add anything to that. They were here. They're not. They should be. Bring them back."* Some participants contrasted the wildcat with domestic cats by invoking a sense of belonging, stating that the domestic cat *"... is not meant to be here."*

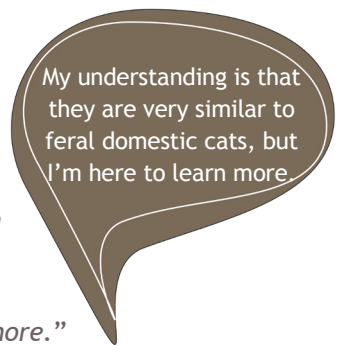
A smallholder asked questions about the species' functional role in the ecosystem, past and present, noting the absence of apex predators that would predate wildcats themselves. She also indicated that the landscape had changed drastically since wildcats were last present

including a decline in potential prey species. *“Also what part do they play in the chain of other things? They're a predator I guess but there's nobody a predator of them, so they predate on whatever they do – mice and small birds, things like that – but they've been declining over the years anyway.”* She went on to ask about the reasons for the wildcat's decline, questioning whether this was a result of human influence, such as habitat loss.



From these questions and the above, we interpret that she may have been unsure about whether the wildcat could adapt to find a place in a modern Welsh landscape, and what changes might follow if it were to return. *“Why is that? Is that just man's fault or was that just happening anyway, because you do in history – long term – things die out or are assumed to have died out without any influence from man at all. But I'm sure that our agriculture and our towns and our cities are probably destroying habitat, and they can't adapt to that, perhaps. Whereas foxes go and live in the middle of London and are quite happy, and some birds of the birds of prey nesting in St Paul's [Cathedral] or wherever they're nesting now. They adapt. Can the wildcat adapt?”*

Similarity between wildcats and domestic cats was acknowledged by some participants, even whilst also acknowledging the potential differences between the species from a conservation perspective. *“They look like a big tabby. You can see where somebody who's not very versed in conservation might say 'They're like a big tabby why do we need more of them?’”*

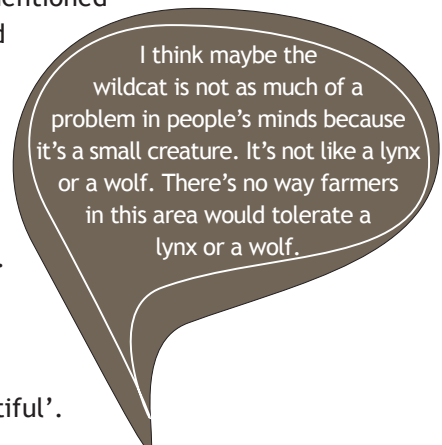


*“My understanding is that they are very similar to feral domestic cats, but I'm here to learn more.”*

It's possible that views of wildcats as a 'killer', a 'prolific hunter', or a 'threat to wildlife', which appeared during workshop sessions in particular, may have been influenced by the wider discourse around domestic cats and their associated ecological pressures. This may indicate that a wildcat is 'just another cat' in some individuals' eyes, leading to questions around the purpose of reintroduction, and how it may affect wildlife. In one case, a participant expressed that they were less interested in restoring a wildcat than other native species because 'we don't miss what we haven't had'. She compared this to other native species absent from the area, such as the skylark, noting that a greater interest in the skylark may be due to a greater sense of cultural value, in that 'songs have been written about them, but you don't hear them anymore'.

The wildcat was viewed as an unwanted threat to lambs and other livestock by some participants from the farming community – 'Not an animal that I want on my land to kill my lambs'. Though others believed that it would not be a threat to healthy lambs due to its small size – 'It's only a small thing at the end of the day'.

In a few cases, comparisons were drawn to other predators. In every such case we encountered, the wildcat was viewed as being more favourable or a lesser threat than other species mentioned – which included the wolf and the lynx, which both arose regularly in interviews and discussions. *“I think maybe the wildcat is not as much of a problem in people's minds because it's a small creature. It's not like a lynx or a wolf. There's no way farmers in this area would tolerate a lynx or a wolf.”* Comparisons were also drawn between the wildcat and other big cats, referring to the 'Brechfa beast' – a local name given to a reported panther sighted in the area. In these cases, the key difference appeared to be that the wildcat was not perceived as a threat to humans.

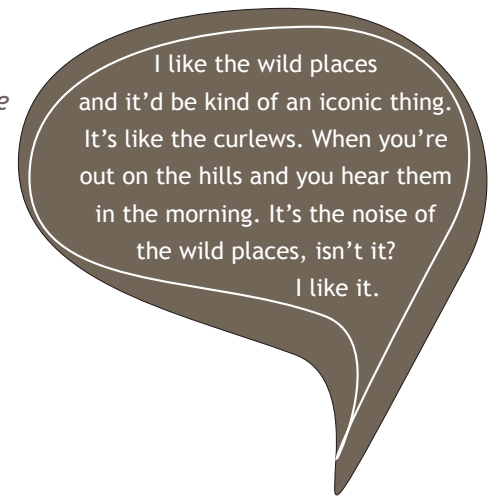


Aesthetic value was ascribed to the wildcat, which in some cases appeared a direct response to viewing photographs provided as part of project posters and leaflets.

In some cases, aesthetic values focused on physical appearance – 'gorgeous', 'beautiful'.

Several participants mentioned that they would be pleased to see wildcats in the wild, eg, 'be nice to see them'. Others described positive feelings about the idea of it being present, whether seen or unseen, in the landscape. Symbolic value also appeared to be ascribed

to the wildcat by some participants. In one such case, a trail hunter and ex-gamekeeper likened the wildcat to the curlew as a symbol of the wild places. *“Me personally, I think it would be nice to see. I like the wild places and it’d be kind of an iconic thing. It’s like the curlews. When you’re out on the hills and you hear them in the morning. It’s the noise of the wild places, isn’t it? I like it.”* The term ‘wild places’ was also used separately by another participant, who also considered the wildcats to be a symbol of ‘lost ecosystems’.



## Perspectives on wildcat reintroduction

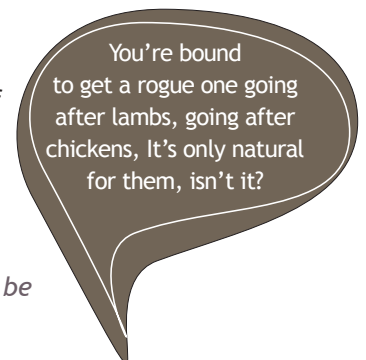
### Impacts and Interactions

#### Human activities – Commercial Farming

We identified risk to lambs and other livestock on commercial farms as being of central concern, appearing in many conversations across the range of stakeholder groups interviewed during the study. The categories of risk to livestock we identified were through predation and disease transmission. Across all stakeholder groups, there was significant debate around whether wildcats would pose an issue to sheep farmers. One farmer perceived that some instances of lamb predation were likely to occur, and that this behaviour could be passed on once learned by one ‘rogue’ individual. *“You’re bound to get a rogue one going after lambs, going after chickens. It’s only natural for them, isn’t it?”*

The use of the word ‘rogue’ as a descriptor may imply that this participant’s views lamb predation as an abnormal behaviour for wildcats, though still a potential threat if passed on. On the basis of this perception, the participant stated that individual wildcats engaged in lamb predation must be removed from the area to prevent behavioural transmission.

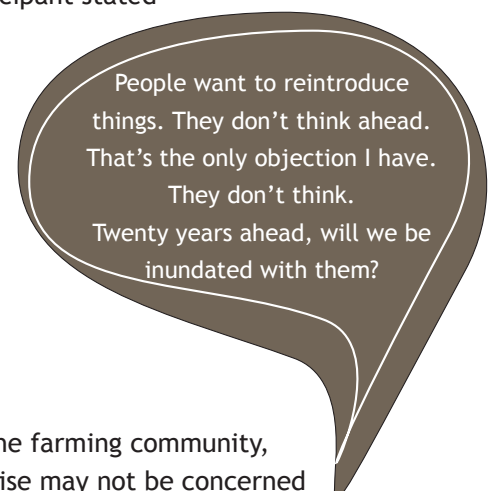
*“If there’s a rogue one, it’s got to go. The others will start to do it then, they’ll learn off that one.”* His recommendation was that – in such cases – a cull would be the best course of action, noting that this could be difficult to carry out due to public outcry. This concern was linked to a perception that wildcat numbers could increase dramatically in the long term (10-20 years). *“People want to reintroduce things, they don’t think ahead. That’s the only objection I have. They don’t think. Twenty years ahead, will we be inundated with them? And then they have to cull them again? And you can’t cull them because people will be saying no. If there are any problems with these, they should be culled. No messing.”*



When asked “Any issues from a farming perspective?”, other farmers stated that they did not have any specific concerns about the wildcat.

However, it was noted by the research team that questions about lambs and lambing were common throughout all stages of the consultation, including conversations with farmers that did not lead to interview and information gathering workshops. During a workshop, one participant stated that a wildcat was, ‘Not an animal that I want on my land to kill my lambs’. Related questions and concerns raised by sheep and mixed farmers during initial discussions included the following:

- Whether wildcats would kill healthy lambs, weak lambs, or lambs in the first days of life on farms that lamb outdoors
- Whether wildcats would be drawn to farms by scents such as lamb faeces or afterbirth
- Whether they would become a nuisance for farmers
- Whether farms would be compensated for any losses



Risk of lamb predation was also referenced by other participants outside of the farming community, who also suggested that it was a main concern for some farmers, who otherwise may not be concerned

about the idea of wildcat reintroduction. *“I was talking to <name> the farmer the other day and I said, ‘What do you think about it then <name>?’ ‘As long as they don’t touch my sheep, I don’t care.’ he said. That’s all he’s concerned about.”*

Compensation for damage was mentioned by one interviewee as an important mitigation strategy for farmers, though the participant spoke generally about ‘damages’ without specific reference to losses of lambs. It was stated that any claims process should be straightforward and easy to use in order to be successful, and this point was linked to a requirement for presence and accountability – in that somebody has to ‘be there’ in case there are any issues. *“It’s no good pushing things on people and then saying, ‘Oh we’ll leave it now.’ You’ve got to be there. And any damage or any losses, people should be compensated for it. And no hassle about asking this and that; got to have a vet certificate... They know what it is. If the experts are any good, they should know by the teeth marks what it is. Without a lot of red tape.”*



This farmer also raised a concern around the presence of too many researchers on his land, either as a nuisance or impediment to farm work. He cited that communication between researchers and landowners would be important to mitigate against any issues if access was needed by wildcat researchers. *“Too many researchers going around the place, coming from everywhere! As long as they tell us what they’re doing, you know. They might come up here to see what you’re doing. It’s the only thing I can think of. And any damage or anything – we’d get paid for it.”*

One potential concern listed during a participatory workshop, alluded to potential negative emotional or social impacts of a wildcat reintroduction for farmers. *“Some parts of the farming community already feel under attack – this could be another pressure.”*

Disease transmission risk – and whether wildcats would contribute to an increase in cases of livestock exposure to infectious disease – was a concern raised by members of the farming community during preliminary conversations and public workshops. Toxoplasmosis and Bovine Tuberculosis were the two diseases identified during these discussions. One farmer asked whether the cats would have ‘vet certificates’ during an interview, and others asked questions about the chance wildcats could be reservoirs for tuberculosis or toxoplasmosis during workshop sessions.

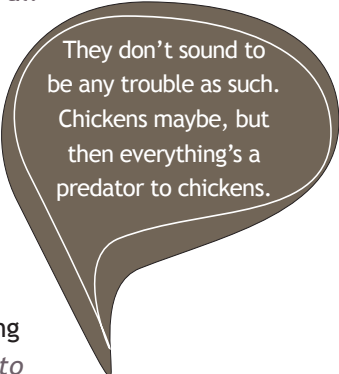
A cat welfare charity board member believed that there were opportunities for co-benefits in this area that could help her charity achieve higher cat welfare standards for feral/farm cats through neutering, whilst in turn limiting toxoplasmosis spread amongst farms. However, she noted that some farmers had been reluctant to have cats neutered despite the potential benefits. This may indicate that there are different perspectives on the potential for neutering of farm cats to reduce toxoplasmosis spread, or that further evidence gathering and/or awareness raising is needed to communicate this as a potential benefit. *“One issue we did fall upon – well the farmers have lambs – saying about the toxoplasmosis, we can’t understand why they don’t get the cats neutered because the kittens carry toxoplasmosis. And that causes problems with lambing. Particularly when organisations are offering to do it for nothing. We’re literally saying we’ll come along and how many occasions have we had where they just won’t get them done?”*



Some participants expressed interest in financial benefits for farmers in return for managing grassland and woodland mosaic for wildcat habitat. The policy landscape around farming subsidies in Wales is currently subject to change, but the most recent proposal (Welsh Government 2024) states, ‘at least 10% of each farm should be actively managed as habitat for the benefit of wildlife alongside the production of food’. If it could be ascertained whether managing habitat for wildcats would be recognised as a way to meet this requirement, this may make a reintroduction proposal more favourable to farmers.

## Human activities – Poultry

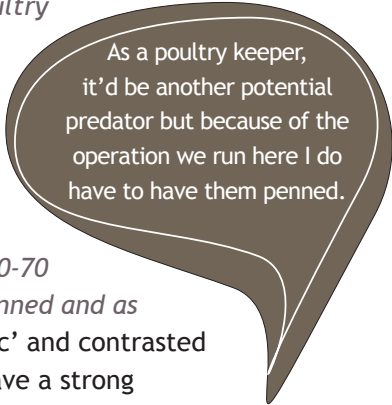
Another prominent theme of discussion was how and if wildcats might impact poultry keepers and the shooting community in the region. Participants described various experiences of poultry predation, indicating that such instances were a regular occurrence. Foxes were the species that appeared most often in these discussions, although potential instances of poultry predation by polecats, mink, badgers, goshawks, and buzzards were also described by poultry keepers. *“But we’ve had big losses on the ducks and the hens over the years. We’ve had losses to the goshawk, then buzzard attacks, several. Some fatal and some not. We’ve lost quite a few to the buzzard. Fox – we’ve lost a heck of a lot I suppose. Foxes take about half of them. When they’ve got cubs especially and they’re learning. So that can be quite hard. But then we’ve got things like the mink, which takes some of our young ducks and an older duck. And ate its way through our chicken wire and took a duck out, and we never saw it again.”*



They don't sound to be any trouble as such. Chickens maybe, but then everything's a predator to chickens.

There was no consensus among participants on whether wildcats would pose an additional threat. Several interviewees, including some present and past keepers, indicated that they did not feel the wildcat would be cause for additional concern, referring to the existing threat from predators already present in the landscape. *“They don't sound to be any trouble as such. Chickens maybe, but then everything's a predator to chickens.”*

One keeper of free-range poultry described several separate instances of successful or attempted poultry predation by a range of different species. She went on to say that keeping free range poultry can be a stressful experience due to predation pressure. She mentioned equipment maintenance and vigilance as being ongoing considerations, and a constant need to be 'ahead of the game'. *“So yes, it can be quite stressful. It's horrible when you lose one and think what could I have done, or what should I have done, maybe not paying attention – we didn't notice the wire was broken. Or it wasn't the wire was broken – the blessed things just ate their way in! Constantly thinking about what you can do to be ahead of the game, to stop the attacks.”* She stated that it can be difficult to allow poultry to free range in the area. *“So really, all in all, it's quite difficult to keep poultry and let them have a free-range lifestyle.”* And that free range poultry keeping has specific importance as part of her ethos, which is why she continues to keep birds in this way, as opposed to keeping birds indoors. *“So it's disappointing but it's a compromise and we're not one of those chicken keepers who have thousands in a big shed somewhere and rely on that for an income. That's not what we want.”* In this case, it seems that ability to allow birds to free range is integral to her decision to keep poultry. She also mentions that the quality of produce is superior as a result. *“... if we have to keep them caged then we might as well buy something from a supermarket that's been locked in some big unit! So it's important that they do go out and people say when they taste the eggs 'Your eggs are the best.' because of what the poultry graze and eat when they're about, the variety of their diet.”*



As a poultry keeper, it'd be another potential predator but because of the operation we run here I do have to have them penned.

One poultry keeper described his birds as 'safe as they can be', in spite of there being a potential additional predator in the landscape, due to them being penned. He also expressed that he would prefer to be able to let birds free range if it weren't for the threat of predation. *“As a poultry keeper, it'd be another potential predator but because of the operation we run here I do have to have them penned. I have around 60-70 chickens here. As much as I'd like to have them running about, my birds are in and penned and as safe as they can be. Touch wood.”* This participant described himself as 'quite realistic' and contrasted his approach from that of other poultry keepers, including a specific neighbour, who have a strong emotional attachment to certain birds. In his view, these keepers would be more likely to react strongly to instances of predation in a manner he described as 'waging full wars and vendettas'. In these cases, he said, 'heads have to roll', implying that a course of action may include lethal control of predators, eg, foxes. *“I'm quite realistic. A lot of people do have them and get very upset and want to wage full wars and vendettas if, say, some ten-year-old battery hen who has become a pet and family favourite that pecks out of the hand in the morning... if that gets snaffled, then they get very upset and heads have to roll then.”*

A free-range keeper used a similar metaphor in saying ‘It feels a bit like a battle sometimes’, referring to efforts to protect birds from predation. She and others suggested that, by their nature, poultry are easy targets for predation and therefore require constant protection. *“It feels a bit like a battle sometimes. They’re just targets aren’t they, when you think about it. Easy targets. A rabbit might not be such an easy target, more aware of foxes or predators up in the air. But our lot are not, so they’re vulnerable. We have to try and look after them the best we can. And keep them safe.”*

#### Human activities – Hunting and shooting

We identified three discrete themes of discussion related to the topic of hunting and shooting through analysis of interview transcripts and workshop outputs. One theme centred around potential impacts for shooting estates and small local shoots. During the initial stakeholder selection process and in participatory workshops, local shooting estates and small local shoots held on farms were identified as project stakeholders due to the risk of economic losses from predation of birds by wildcats. Predation of game birds was mentioned less often in interviews and workshop discussions than poultry, which may be due to the greater number of small poultry keepers in the study area, compared to the relatively small number of commercial shoots, or may reflect a deficiency in our data.

One interviewee, an ex-gamekeeper, mentioned the potential financial risks of predation for shooting estates. *“Everybody knows that the apex predator – whether it’s a hawk, stoat, rat, foxes. They do eat things. Like, a peregrine falcon – if it kills a grouse a day over the sum of a year. That is in effect a hundred and fifty brace day which is worth somewhere in the region of 15-18 thousand pounds to the estate.”* He noted that, while he was not aware of any ‘major pheasant shoots or grouse shoots or things like that’ in the study area, he suggested that they would be likely to have a ‘major issue’ in light of the risk of predation and association.

As part of the study, we spoke directly to owners and staff of a shooting estate in West Wales to hear their perspective. Notes were taken during this discussion, though no formal recorded interview was conducted due to time constraints. In their case, they stated that they were neither for nor against wildcat reintroduction but wanted to ensure that it was managed carefully.

They drew comparisons between wildcats and pine martens (recently re-introduced to the area), stating that there had been no issues related to the presence of martens to date. Some specific concerns were expressed by the estate team around predation of game birds. They stated that young birds would be particularly vulnerable, and could be dispersed by the presence of wildcats, impacting their survival as well as the success of subsequent shoots. Summer was identified as a critical time where the presence of wildcats in wooded areas could present a challenge by dispersal of young birds. They recommended that ongoing dialogue would be important to guide the creation of a detailed mitigation and



Wildcat ©Dave Butcher/Wildwood

management plan. They also indicated that they would be more supportive of the proposal if plans were put in place to first reduce the feral cat population in the surrounding area, to reduce net predation of wildlife and game birds.

A concern that, without population control, wildcats could become a nuisance was another key theme of discussions related to hunting and shooting. This concern, shared by most interviewees from the field sports and farming communities, was linked with a perception that predators will ‘take over’ in the absence of active management. *“You know, all life is valuable, [but] if you’re not on top of these predators and scavengers, they’re what take over. And that’s what somebody is paid to do. And it’s not something you take pleasure in, but it’s the only way to do it.”* Red kites were referred to in several cases as a negative example of mesopredator recovery. References included statements that the landscape was ‘overrun’ with kites, that they were ‘common as muck now’ and that they were an example of the impact of human interference or ‘meddling’ with the balance of the ecosystem.

A separate concern was raised by interviewees and workshop participants from outside of the hunting and shooting community that wildcats would be persecuted through shooting or trapping. Three potential motives for deliberate persecution of wildcats were described by participants, as follows:

- Sport – *“It might become another sport or whatever.”*
- Financial gain through the illegal wildlife trade – *“Yes, as I was saying earlier about people going in there hunting, you also will get people going looking for the kittens if they think they’re going to make a lot of money out of it.”*
- Direct protest action against the reintroduction of wildcats – *“I think getting people’s views and getting people on board with the project, because if they’re not I can see that people who might not agree might get gun happy or hunting happy.”*
- Protection of livestock – *“If they go near some farmers, are they going to be liable to be shot?”*

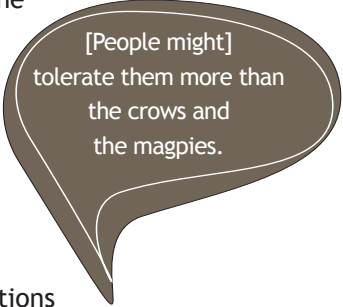
The perceived threat of deliberate persecution was presented in most cases as a concern in itself, as opposed to being linked to other concerns such as whether the project would be a success, although it was linked to wildcat welfare in at least one case. *“I have a little bit of concern for the wildcats themselves...”*, implying a concern for individual animal welfare.

At least three of the interview participants from the field sports and farming communities indicated that they are or have been involved in predator control, although this was not a specific question that was asked. Of these, one marksman indicated that he would be inclined to take action against anything that posed a threat to humans, using big cats as examples. *“You know, if I saw a puma on that land I would have shot it. But I’d have got into trouble then, because I’m only allowed to shoot foxes with my rifle! So my hands are tied anyway.”* He also expressed his opposition to the topic of wolf reintroduction on the basis of their potential threat to humans. In contrast, his views on the wildcat were highly positive. He stated that he ‘wouldn’t shoot anything like that’, describing it as a ‘beautiful creature’, and said, *“I’ve been a hunter all my life and I’ve never seen anything like that.”*

These sentiments align with a statement from a hunter and ex-gamekeeper who predicted that many from the hunting and shooting community ‘would rather see a wildcat, or some sign of it anyway’ as opposed to other predators.



Specifically, he suggested that people might ‘tolerate them more than the crows and the magpies’, on the basis of aesthetic value – ‘bit more interest, isn’t it?’. He stated that many hunters are deeply interested in the natural world and ‘wild places’ and commented on his own personal view of the wildcat using a comparison with the curlew as a symbol of the wild places, which highlights some of the potential aesthetic value of the wildcat, and suggests that it may be perceived differently to other predators currently present in the area.

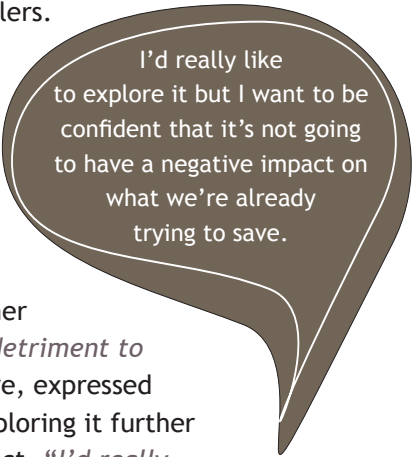


[People might] tolerate them more than the crows and the magpies.

## Ecology and Wildlife

Most conversations with interview and workshop participants touched upon the topic of how wildcats might interact with other native species that are present (or were historically present) in the landscape. There was a particular focus on would-be prey species, but interactions with other predators were also discussed. The topic arose in conversations across a broad range of communities of interest including farming, field sports, cat welfare, and particularly members of local conservation groups. The most prominent theme of discussion that we identified from these conversations centred on the impact that wildcats might have on native prey species in the area. Ground nesting birds (including curlew, wood warbler, lapwing, woodcock, and snipe) were the species most often mentioned, though red squirrels, woodland birds, wild grouse, hares, rabbits, and water voles also featured in stakeholder discussions.

Most interviewees expressed some degree of concern about the impacts a wildcat reintroduction could have on other wildlife in response to a question about potential negative impacts of a wildcat reintroduction. These concerns included questions or statements regarding wildcats’ prey. *“I suppose the birds as well, bird species. I’m guessing they’d predate them quite heavily? Would they take a hedgehog?”* There were also statements that drew attention to the current status of species in the area. *“Ground nesting birds seem to be seriously on the decline.”*, which can be taken – in the context of the question – as implicit that wildcats could exacerbate declines of species such as ground nesting birds. One interviewee, a local conservation professional, mentioned a few species of conservation concern in the area and shared a specific concern as to whether the local conservation status of these (and presumably other) species would be negatively impacted. His concern particularly was around priority woodland species, which would share woodland habitats with the wildcat if the project were to go ahead. *“I think it’s important for a whole suite of priority woodland species – pied flycatchers, redstarts, wood warblers. Wood warblers are ground nesting species – not sure if they’re red or amber listed but they’re species of conservation concern. And clearly species that will be potentially within the same areas as wildcats. So they’ll be on the potential prey list – certainly ground nesting species. So it’s understanding that the introduction of something like the wildcat will make the conservation status of these species, which are already causing concern, any worse.”*



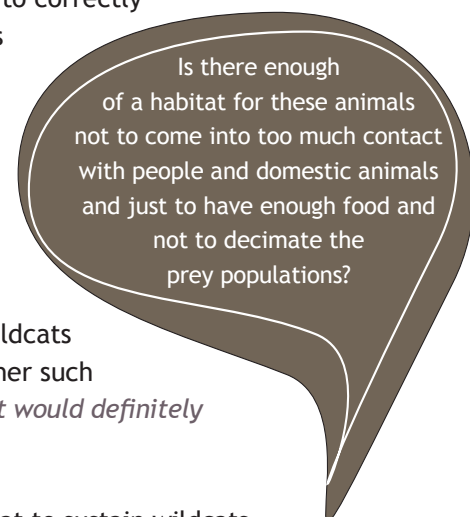
I’d really like to explore it but I want to be confident that it’s not going to have a negative impact on what we’re already trying to save.

Impact on wildlife appeared to be a condition for support expressed by members of other stakeholder groups, including a farmer, who stated: *“It’s a positive thing, if it’s not a detriment to other wildlife.”* Another conservation professional, who manages a local wildlife reserve, expressed support and enthusiasm for the idea on the whole, but indicated that his interest in exploring it further would require greater confidence that it wouldn’t impact the species he works to protect. *“I’d really like to explore it but I want to be confident that it’s not going to have a negative impact on what we’re already trying to save.”* He also referred specifically to the reserve as being *“... a bit of an island – we’re not really connected to a wider landscape of conservation landownership and good habitat.”* This implies that his current confidence level may not be sufficient to fully support the idea, and may be contingent on greater understanding of the potential impacts, or an improvement in habitat connectivity and conservation practices on neighbouring lands. He acknowledges that wildcats are a native species, but questions whether they would have a positive effect on ecosystem function in light of anthropogenic pressures present in the landscape.

We’ve generated pressures on populations of birds – my main sort of focus – across the ecosystem that didn’t exist when wildcats were last in this landscape. Does that mean that they will now add a

problem where previously it would have just been part of the mosaic? He went on to say that he would be concerned that wildcats could be treated as ‘scapegoats’ that limit our ability to correctly diagnose sources of avian decline, and thus indirectly impede conservation efforts for these species through complications in the landscape of stakeholder relations.

*“Another thing that I might be concerned about is that people would then be able to point to ‘Oh, you’ve got wildcats – of course you haven’t got any birds. It’s not because of what I’m doing on the uplands, it’s not because everything is grazed down to base and there’s no habitat... It’s because you’ve got wildcats, and you released them so it’s on you!’”* Other participants, including farmers and a smallholder, referred to changing land management practices and other anthropogenic pressures, and how they might have altered the landscape since wildcats were last present in Wales. A vet pointed to the presence of myxomatosis as another such pressure, stating, *“We have a lot of myxomatosis around here, it’s massive, and that would definitely affect their food source.”*



Several other participants questioned whether there would be enough food or habitat to sustain wildcats in the region, and how this factor might influence outcomes for other native species. *“Is there enough of a habitat for these animals not to come into too much contact with people and domestic animals and just to have enough food and not to decimate the prey populations?”* In some cases, they referred specifically to perceived prey species abundances in their local area. One smallholder, who highlighted having a strong personal connection to the wildlife on her land, described it as ‘an unknown’ whether impacts would be ‘beneficial’ for prey species or significantly negative. *“Would it be beneficial to the birds and the animals, the mammals and everything that’s living here currently or would they be wiped out? I don’t know. I mean it’s an unknown, isn’t it, really? But there’d be questions, if they are successful and then the rabbits decline and the birds and there’s nothing there to eat...”* She also questioned whether wildcats would remain in the area if there were declines in prey species in the future. *“They need a source of food, don’t they? So if the wildlife aren’t doing well, they’re going to starve, or go further afield, or be driven out.”*

‘Balance’ was another key theme that we identified, relating to wildcat interactions with existing local ecology. There were 27 cases of reference to ecological balance within interview discussions, including reference to the balance of prey species, predators and the ecosystem as a whole. Some referred to balance in the context of ecology – how species affect one another – whereas others seemingly held a more anthropocentric connotation of the term, relating it to ‘damage limitation’, particularly limiting livestock predation. Wildcats were seen by some participants in interviews and workshops as being likely to improve the overall balance of the ecosystem, eg, by reducing numbers of certain species such as foxes and rabbits. One farmer expressed that any potential for wildcats to ‘balance the foxes out’ would be a positive development. He continued to say that, in the absence of wildcats, maintaining this balance becomes a long-term task for land managers to carry out. *“We can balance the foxes and rabbits, but that becomes a permanent thing we’ve got to keep doing.”* He noted that management by humans has drawbacks, such as the risk of extirpating a species inadvertently from the area, or the risk of livestock predation occurring when predators are not controlled. *“You can go too far and wipe them all out, or don’t do enough and the lambs and chickens all... [get eaten].”* Another farmer thought that ‘nature should balance itself out’, referring in this case to wildcats as ‘nature’. This statement, and its context within discussion of positive impacts of a wildcat reintroduction, highlighted that in this case – though the species is not currently present – she viewed the wildcat as having potential to restore natural balance.



Four farmers and one conservation professional mentioned a potential benefit relating to suppression of small mammal populations that can be problematic for land managers. Examples included grey squirrels – ‘to give the reds a chance’, rabbits – ‘otherwise it’s in our hands to balance stuff out’, voles – ‘to reduce loss of tree saplings on a nature reserve’. Rats were also mentioned as a ‘pest’ species that wildcats could help to suppress, ‘help to keep the rats down, they would’. However, two participants expressed some doubts about the benefits of wildcats for rat suppression, given that the wildcats may not come in close proximity to farm buildings and human habitation, and that ‘it would be unrealistic to expect them to just eat rats’.

## Other Cats

### Cat Scape

During interviews, participants involved with cat welfare charities and some within the farming community referred to their experiences with feral, unowned and farm cats in the area. These experiences provide some insight into the nature of the current 'Catscape' (Bischof et al. 2022) of West Wales and how this may influence stakeholder views on the feasibility of wildcat reintroduction. A cat welfare charity volunteer who carries out trapping throughout the project area suggested that it is important for the project to consider the cats that are found on farms and smallholdings throughout the area, and that it is common for most to have at least some cats present on site. *"Most farms or smallholdings will have a number of cats. I think it's very unusual for there to be no cats at all. So that needs to be looked at."* A similar view was expressed by a local farmer in response to a question about nearby farms and farm cats. The participant then asked whether there was a possibility that the cats would interbreed, with a tone that we interpreted as one of concern.

Researcher: "I'd be interested if you know of any farms that have feral cats."

Farmer: "Most of them do. Do they interbreed?"

All of the participants we interviewed that were involved with cat welfare work mentioned the presence of farm cats within the context of their interview, which one participant described as a 'hidden problem.' Later in the interview, they went on to describe some of the reasoning behind this statement – that their understanding of cat densities in the countryside are based on anecdotal evidence and call outs by members of the community. *"It's usually call outs, word of mouth."*

This participant also described a sense of concern that true numbers are unknown, citing the presence of some large colonies, and the nature of their work as a 'spot check' as opposed to a coordinated survey of the area. *"I've just had a bit of a worry... We talked about the density, and I think that is just an unknown. We're horrified aren't we? How many people come and say 'We have 50 cats.' We've had colonies where there have been up to 50 cats there, and that's just one spot check – don't you think – in a rural area?"*



She also mentioned that she thought it unlikely that cats would be present in the forest itself. However, she acknowledged that her understanding of cat presence is based on callouts, making it difficult to piece together a full picture of cat presence or absence throughout the study area. *“I do have my doubts as to whether they would actually live in the middle of the forest and not have any contact with the outside. We can only base this on the calls we have, and obviously there’s not a lot of people who live in the middle of the forest who are going to call!”*

During an interview, two local farmers stated that, to their knowledge, most of their neighbours neutered their cats. They stated that it was common practice for farmers in the area to neuter their cats.

*“Most of the people I know have done it anyway, they neutered them.”*

*“It’s quite a common thing. Where I work, there’s feral cats and they’ve all been neutered.”*

Experiences from cat welfare charity volunteers are seemingly less encouraging, with large colonies of feral cats present on some farms. Several participants referred to colonies of 40 cats or more in extreme cases. One such participant recommended that a working partnership between organisations would be required to handle the volume of cats present in these extreme cases. *“You can get as many as 40 or 50 cats on a farm. That’s an extreme but we’ve had farms that have had more than that. No single organisation will be able to cope with that, so you have to try and get on board other organisations as well, to help you actually cope with that amount of cats.”*

A local vet described the presence of feral and domestic cats as a potential barrier to wildcat reintroduction, citing that they occupy the same ecological niche. She also indicated that she felt it might be possible to restore the ecological niche for wildcats by reducing the feral cat population in the area. *“I guess, you know, the domestic cat has taken some of those niches that the predator, like the wildcat, would be in. Could they give them back? Probably.”*

#### Existing Trap, Neuter, Release/Rehome (TNR) Work

Participants involved with cat welfare or veterinary medicine discussed their perceptions of a wildcat reintroduction within the context of existing work to control numbers of and improve welfare conditions for feral and farm cats through trap, neuter, release/rehome (TNR). During these discussions, a number of barriers to success were identified. A summary of these can be found in Table 3.

During the study we engaged with several local and national charities involved in TNR work. We interviewed three members of a local cat welfare charity, including one volunteer who carries out TNR work locally, as well as a local vet who had been involved with TNR work in the past. During these conversations, the term ‘feral’ was used to refer to ‘true’ feral cats that have little contact with humans, as well as cats living in large colonies around barns and other buildings on farms and smallholdings in the area. The landscape around cat welfare work in the region was described by one participant as ‘Higgledy piggledy’, with a lack of cohesion and consensus around responsibilities, action, as well as the absence of a national body to direct work and create a ‘stable foundation’. Participants also highlighted that there are few active organisations in the area working specifically with feral cats. The organisation in question was set up specifically to work with these animals, due to limited provision of care from other sources. *“We started our organisation more for ferals really than domestics, because there’s very few organisations who will actually deal with ferals.”*

It was reported that national charities – most notably Cats Protection – have been present in the area but are currently either inactive or occupied with other work, leaving TNR largely in the hands of small local charities. *“They [Cats Protection] just can’t seem to get off the ground here. I mean the Carmarthenshire branch they must have set up around 12 years ago and they don’t seem to be able to get anywhere. It’s non-operational again.”* As a result, the organisation in question raised concerns around any ‘additional burden’ caused by a wildcat reintroduction. Citing that this could be problematic in light of the current degree of pressure. *“Our organisation is already under so much pressure from what we’re already doing that any additional burden to that is not going to be easy. Again, that might be a bit of a problem for us.”* This participant went on to mention some specific, novel challenges that

could be faced by cat welfare charities if wildcats were to be reintroduced. One such hypothetical challenge was the matter of responding to wildcat-related callouts by the public. *“Are we going to be called out to deal with wildcats? Because we know nothing about how to deal with wildcats.”* Another was the potential for mistaken identity with wildcats being taken in and hand reared by volunteers or other members of the public if mistakenly identified as domestic kittens. *“They’re little tabbies. We’ll take them in our house and we’re going to hand feed them.”* And the other was around correct identification and accidental trapping *“How do we recognise them from a feral? And if we do trap one, what do we do with it?”*

Funding limitations were an issue mentioned by several participants in the cat welfare sector, particularly in light of the withdrawal of £10 neutering vouchers formerly offered to cat owners by Cats Protection. It was noted that this affects cat owners as well as the charities which deal with TNR work and who are responding to callouts. *“Funding is going to be an issue now majorly because they’ve withdrawn the £10 scheme for normal householders – not just for us charities.”* [Volunteer from a cat welfare charity] *“I think funding is the main issue here. Because it’s just dried up for the charities and they have to choose what they do with it.”* [Local vet]

*“I know Cats Protection used to do neutering vouchers, and they’ve recently stopped that. It’s on hold. Sadly, so it’s a combination of mostly financial decisions, not that the problem has disappeared.”* [Local vet]

Another issue raised was a shortage of vets willing to work with feral cats. This creates logistical challenges for charities and volunteers in arranging appointments at short notice, particularly when working to manage large colonies of farm cats, where it is critical that each animal is neutered. *“Vets actually are a problem at the moment. There’s a shortage of vets in this area. Before I could ring up and they’d give me any appointment, and often they’d say ‘If you get a cat, just bring it in.’ Now you have to book weeks ahead. We just can’t get appointments. So that has an impact.”*

TNR work was described as being resource intensive, with financial investment required particularly in volunteer mileage and trapping equipment. Volunteer time was also mentioned as a limiting factor, due to the antisocial dawn and dusk hours required for successful trapping. *“It’s not easy, it’s very hard to do. You need resources. You need people. You need time.”* [Volunteer from a cat welfare charity] *“She does go out at night and she’s up early in the morning. There’s not a lot of people you’d get to do that on a volunteer basis.”* [Volunteer from a cat welfare charity]

Awareness of the availability of help was another factor mentioned by charity volunteers. Being reliant on callouts from the community, the charity’s ability to access cats on private land is entirely dependent on tip offs from landowners, neighbours, or other members of the community. *“I’ll go out and often people say, ‘Oh we didn’t know the help was there to neuter.’, so they don’t even know about neutering.”* In light of this challenge, cooperation with landowners – farmers in particular – was highlighted as being of particular importance for the continuation and improvement of TNR work in the area. *“You can sort of look at areas to put in place a neutering programme for the ferals you have here, but if that’s going to shift you’re talking quite a big job. And the majority of it will be on farms – and again, you’ll have to get farmers on board.”*

Interviewees from the cat welfare sector described a ‘mixed’ level of cooperation from landowners in the past, including some specific cases of challenging or abusive interactions. While some landowners have been highly co-operative and willing to grant permission for volunteers to carry out TNR work on their land, others have denied access or refused help. *“You’ll have some who’ll be very willing to let you help get their cats neutered, and should other cats, should ferals, join that group, they’ll come back and ask you to neuter again. But some won’t let you near their farm, and we know they have lots and lots of cats there.”* Reasons suggested for lack of participation in neutering programmes included a lack of awareness that there is help available, a desire to maximise efficacy of pest control, and an overall desire for privacy. A programme of education and outreach work was highlighted as an area that could be built upon in the future, with potential co-benefits for wildcat and feral cat projects.

Table 3 Current barriers to successful feral cat management in West Wales, based on interviews with local cat welfare volunteers and veterinarians

Current Barriers	Solutions Suggested by Participants
Few organisations working with feral cats	More support from national cat welfare organisations
Funding shortage	Provide funding (directly to vets if possible) for neutering work, and to local charities for equipment and staffing costs
Shortage of vets	Block booking vets, hiring project vet(s)
Shortage of volunteers	Support from project volunteers or staff
Limited landowner cooperation	Education and outreach work

### Feline Disease

The presence of feline diseases in the current domestic and feral population was described as cause for concern by participants involved with pet welfare and veterinary medicine, as well as cat owners in public workshops. Feline diseases were described by a veterinary professional as existing primarily in the feral population, resulting in regular transmission to and from domestic cats.

*“They [feral cats] are the ones that are the biggest concern from the health point of view, that we see anyway. They are the hotspots for all the infectious diseases.”* Feline disease was viewed by some primarily as being a threat to translocated wildcats themselves. This view may arise out of concern for wildcat welfare, or concern that the project’s success would be impacted. *“I would probably worry about the wildcats getting diseases from feral cats. I think that would probably be a big one.”*

Others viewed wildcats as being a potential reservoir for feline diseases and expressed concern around the transmission of infectious diseases from wildcats to other cats in the area, including domestic cats. *“That would be a concern: if they would pass it on to the feral populations, the feral populations could easily pass it on to domestic populations, so that would be a little bit of a concern. They wouldn’t be carrying it to start with, but once they’re out there and mixing.”*

The following feline diseases were mentioned as being present in the area by one or more interview participants:

- Feline immunodeficiency virus
- Feline leukaemia virus
- Feline influenza
- Toxoplasmosis

‘Abscesses and infections’ were also described by one participant as having been commonly encountered in her veterinary practice, resulting from conflict between domestic and feral cats. A potential case of bovine tuberculosis (bTB) was mentioned by one participant while describing an experience working with a local farm, as part of the reason for the farmer wanting removal of cats from his land. *“What happened there, the farmer said he wanted all these cats removed because he reckoned he’d had the DEFRA vet round and she’d been saying that they were spreading TB. And I said what? We’ve never come across that before. We went to the vets in Carmarthen to get a second opinion and she said ‘Well, I can tell you in about five seconds that it’s probably about a 0.0000001% of the cats spreading TB.’”*

### Feral and Domestic Cat Welfare

Concerns around welfare implications for feral and domestic cats were raised by participants in interviews and in workshop sessions. As mentioned above, disease was one such category of concern – specifically whether wildcats would increase the risk of disease spread to feral and domestic cats, with a negative effect on cat welfare. Another concern surrounded the possibility of aggressive interactions between wildcats and domestic and feral cats in the area. *“Would there be aggression or other interactions?”* In this context ‘other interactions’ could refer to hybridisation or disease transmission. Though not directly related to wildcats themselves, there was some concern raised by members of the cat welfare sector in interviews as to whether lethal means of control would be used against feral or domestic cats as part of the project. It was implied by some participants that such an action would lead to a strong negative reaction on their part and negate any support they might have for the project

overall. “Well if the project were to go in the direction – and I’m not saying they would – but any sort of cull or anything like that, I would definitely be up there shouting ‘NO!’”.

#### Hybridisation

The potential for hybridisation was mentioned as a concern in conversations with a range of stakeholders from across all major communities of interest, but most notably from the conservation and cat welfare sectors. One wildlife conservation professional described the issue in terms of maintaining ‘genetic purity’ and that this might be difficult given his perception of the study area in Wales as having a greater population density than that of the area subject to reinforcement in the Cairngorms. He describes a ‘big question mark’ surrounding the relationship between domestic and wild cats, and how this would be managed to maintain the genetic integrity of a translocated wildcat population. *“You’ve got the issue of maintaining the genetic purity of the species. I may be wrong, but considering the areas wildcats are being reintroduced in Scotland, I think Wales is a much more densely populated area. A lot more people... a lot more domestic cats there. So I suppose the big question mark is how would you manage the relationship between domestic and wild cats.”* Also related to genetics, another participant asked, *“Would they be true wildcats or interbred with domestic cats?”*, which could be interpreted as uncertainty around the genetics of the current Scottish wildcat population. If this interpretation is correct, then it may indicate that people’s perceptions of and support for a potential reintroduction project could be related to the genetic ‘purity’ of the wildcats being introduced. The nature of concerns raised around hybridisation appeared to relate to project success, and whether the effect of progressive hybridisation – if it were to occur in Wales – would ‘undo’ the efforts to reintroduce the species.





# Discussion

Our research shows a range of stakeholder perspectives on European wildcats *Felis silvestris* and the potential for their reintroduction in West Wales. These findings indicate that some local knowledge and awareness of the species exists, likely owing to the recent media attention given to reinforcement efforts in Scotland. Unsurprisingly, given that the wildcat has been extinct in Wales for more than 150 years (Langley and Yalden 1977), stakeholder knowledge and experience of wildcats was based on sources outside of Wales (with the exception of one participant who reported having seen wildcats at Folly Farm, a Welsh zoo). Documentaries and other media were cited as a prominent source of information. Where personal experience with wildcats was reported, this had occurred either in captive, Scotland, or continental contexts. Where knowledge gaps existed, such as that pertaining to the wildcat's ecological 'role' (ie, impacts on other species), comparisons were drawn between wildcats and other species. Stakeholder experience and perceptions of other predators such as lynx also played a part in conceptualising how the wildcat might fit within the existing Welsh context through comparison. In some cases, such as comparisons to the lynx and other large carnivores, the wildcat was viewed as a relatively favourable candidate for reintroduction, posing less of a threat.

We noted that in some cases red kites were used as an example of a recent predator recovery programme. Typically, mention of kites was associated with discussion of potential negatives, and the perceived need for long-term management of recovering predator populations. However, kite recovery was mentioned by others as an example of good conservation work that wildcats could follow on from, and that they both could be similar 'flagship' species for conservation in the region. Pine martens – another predator that has recently recovered in the region – were spoken of only in positive or neutral terms. This difference in perception of recently recovered species amongst certain stakeholders may be linked to their visibility in the landscape with the relatively elusive marten being a rare sight compared to the red kite of which sightings are now common in the area. Our findings suggest that, at this stage, the wildcat is viewed as a desirable animal relative to other predators.

Comparison to domestic cats was largely linked to a sense of concern, owing to the discourse around the domestic cat's impact on wildlife, and existing welfare concerns around feral cats. Aesthetic value provided a basis for a clear distinction between the wildcat and domestic and feral cats in the eyes of some interview participants, some of whom described a symbolic association with 'wildness'. This association, though generally having positive connotations, appeared linked in some cases to questions of whether the wildcat could find a home in the modern Welsh countryside, which they viewed as being less 'wild', and more populous than Scotland. Though we found some knowledge of the species to be present in the area, and some instances of aesthetic value, this does not necessarily equate to a local cultural connection, which is a requirement outlined as part of the IUCN (2013) guidelines for species translocation projects. We did not encounter any evidence of a local connection to the wildcat, though two participants recommended that sources could be gathered from the Welsh literary archives, or new cultural materials created by local people to help inform education efforts. In one instance, a participant described her relationships with other species of wildlife with fondness, but, regarding the wildcat, stated 'we don't miss what we haven't had'. This quote succinctly highlights the importance of rekindling cultural memory of the wildcat in Wales. Given, however, that the pine marten had only been re-established in the area less than a decade prior, participants' highly positive association with this other species ('as long as they don't eat our lovely pine martens') serves as evidence that cultural connections can be re-forged over a relatively short period in cases of successful reintroduction.

Even where knowledge of the species and its connection to Wales was limited, many of the stakeholders we interviewed were enthusiastic about the prospect of returning another native species to the landscape. Perceptions of native species as ‘belonging’ in the landscape, and in some cases a degree of shame or regret concerning ‘other species we’ve hunted to extinction over the years’ were sources of support amongst some stakeholders, regardless of any questions or ‘unknowns’ identified through discussion. This viewpoint has apparent similarities with the ‘Nature Protectionist’ perspective identified by Bavin *et al.* (2020) during the pine marten social feasibility work. Despite acknowledgement of the wildcat as a native species, the potential for impacts on other native wildlife, particularly ground nesting birds and red squirrels, was among the most widespread and pressing concerns for stakeholders in the region. Concerns were linked to an overall perception of native wildlife being in decline, and questions as to whether wildcats would have a stable food source post reintroduction. Some participants asked how species’ interests would be prioritised if wildcats were found to have a negative impact on certain species already present within the landscape. Others were keen to know whether wildcats would ‘balance’ numbers of other predators – notably foxes. One stakeholder also noted that predators could in some cases be convenient ‘scapegoats’ to blame for declines of native species and advised that care should be taken to avoid the wildcat being implicated in the case of ongoing local declines of other threatened species.

The assumption of reciprocity between reintroduced predators and their prey, often related to discussions of apex predator recovery, is defined by Alston *et al.* (2019) as ‘the notion that large carnivore extirpation and reintroduction have symmetric, counterbalancing effects’. This assumption forms an important aspect of the present discourse around predator re-introductions, though there is some debate about whether it is supported by current evidence (Alston *et al.* 2019). Some evidence suggests that mesopredator guild restoration can have positive effects on prey species populations through intraguild interference interactions (Linnell *et al.* 2000) or increasing ecological resilience to the impacts of invasive species (Shippley 2025). The ‘mesopredator release hypothesis’ (MRH) predicts that ecological effects of mesopredators vary with apex predator presence or absence (Prugh *et al.* 2009; Terborgh & Estes 2013) adding an additional layer of complexity. Therefore, some questions remain around how reintroduced mesopredators might impact populations of prey species, and the net effect on biodiversity, which are reflected in the concerns of some stakeholders, particularly from within the conservation sector. We advocate that care must be taken to address stakeholder concerns around potentially negative



impacts on local populations of other species, including a thorough ecological risk assessment with input from experts and advocates for a range of taxa. Ideally, this work would include quantitative assessment of prey populations in the area and would be disseminated as part of public outreach work preceding a wildcat reintroduction to satisfy stakeholder concerns. Inclusion of the direct interests of ‘other-than-human’ animals is an emergent field within stakeholder theory, but one that could prove useful in exploring these facets in depth during the risk assessment and mitigation planning process, affording greater agency to both human and other-than-human stakeholders (Smart 2022; Kortetmäki *et al.* 2023). Strong associations of wildcats with ‘wild places’, with woodlands, and with Scotland – plus widespread concerns about a lack of food or the absence of a former niche in the landscape – paint a picture of a truly ‘wild’ cat. This image may stoke the imagination but may also contribute to doubts as to the ecological suitability of its return, given the managed nature of the Welsh landscape. This narrative, reflected in many stakeholder conversations during our study, could be enriched and diversified in light of ecological feasibility data which suggest West Wales as being the most suitable location for reintroduction across England and Wales (MacPherson 2019 *et al.*; Dando 2024), and habitat studies that highlight a mosaic of woodland and grassland as being highly suitable for wildcats (Silva *et al.* 2012). Efforts to restore a local connection to the species should seek to paint an accurate picture of the wildcat, based on the most current evidence from habitat and dietary studies, which may serve to highlight the suitability of the present-day Welsh landscape for the wildcat’s return.

Interactions between wildcats and other felids in the landscape were another key concern for many stakeholders, both as a threat to project success, and as a source of conflict for cat welfare charities who are already under-resourced to address existing issues related to cat welfare. As such, there exists some significant doubt amongst cat welfare specialists as to the suitability of the area for a potential wildcat reintroduction. It is our view that any potential wildcat reintroduction proposal could be strengthened by preliminary efforts to respond to these concerns, such as by extended consultation with these groups, and a census of free roaming and feral cat population. As a minimum, our findings indicate that any proposed project should include a thorough risk assessment and mitigation plan accounting for the needs of cat owners, cat welfare advocates, and cats themselves as key project stakeholders for wildcat reintroduction. It was suggested by some stakeholders in the animal welfare sector that working to improve cat welfare in the region through education, a targeted trap, neuter, vaccinate, release (TNVR) programme for feral cats, and resourcing of existing cat welfare groups in and around wildcat release areas could be mutually beneficial. It was also noted by stakeholders from the shooting, farming, and conservation sectors that reducing net predation through a widespread TNVR programme would create a niche for wildcats and help to protect livestock (eg, game birds) and wildlife. While acknowledging that cat welfare must be at the centre of these efforts, we feel this represents an important opportunity for cross-sectoral collaboration and trust building amongst stakeholder groups in the region. We recommend that any proposed project includes sufficient funding for the time and resource-intensive task of managing existing issues related to domestic felids in the region.

Many stakeholder conversations related to farming were based on the assumption that wildcats would not pose significant threat to lambs (given the results of dietary studies available in the literature, and a general lack of evidence that wildcats pose a threat to lambs elsewhere throughout their range). However, not all stakeholders were convinced that this threat would be so minimal. Moreover, it was acknowledged by some that even a perception of wildcats as a threat could have negative consequences for wildcat welfare, project success, and trust and cohesion amongst communities in the proposed project area. Moreover, several stakeholders highlighted the importance of buy-in from the local farming community if a reintroduction project were to go ahead. We recommend additional evidence gathering to improve confidence amongst farmers that the wildcat would not pose a direct threat to their livelihoods, such as by discussing lived experience of sheep farmers in wildcat-inhabited areas of Europe, and/or facilitating the continuation of farmer-led discussions on the topic as part of the risk assessment process. Risk assessments should be co-created by a cross-sectoral team of trusted voices from Communities of Interest (COIs), including commercial farming. Likewise, a detailed disease risk assessment should be carried out by an interdisciplinary team including experts in feline and livestock disease. Our findings indicate that the wildcat would not pose a novel threat to keepers of poultry and other livestock, due to the widespread presence of other mesopredators (particularly foxes) in the landscape. However, it may be considered as an

additional pressure in a landscape where farmers and poultry keepers are viewed as increasingly struggling. In the interest of reducing human-wildlife conflict and preserving free-range poultry as a viable option for future generations, we recommend that keepers of poultry and game birds be included directly in any discussions of risk management and equipped with suitable tools and strategies to protect birds from predation. Several participants enquired as to whether the wildcat would bring local benefits as well as risks and suggested that this could be an important element of future engagement work. Some potential co-benefits for local stakeholder groups were identified during workshop sessions and interviews, as follows:

- Inclusion in schemes such as Sustainable Farming Scheme – Financial incentives, such as government subsidies, could make a reintroduction proposal more favourable for farmers, in return for managing grassland/woodland mosaic for wildcat habitat;
- Awareness raising for neutering programme – Improving awareness, among cat owners, of help available for neutering and/or vaccination, to increase uptake and improve cat welfare in the region;
- Community cohesion – Positive emotional impacts of connecting people through community workshops and ongoing monitoring efforts;
- Balance/Pest control – The potential for wildcats to balance or control numbers of less desirable species for land managers was viewed as a potential co-benefit. Examples included other mesopredator species that pose a threat to livestock, rodents and invasive, non-native species.

The initial co-benefits identified throughout this study, though primarily concerned with the project's approach as opposed to the behaviour of wildcats themselves, could provide incentives for participation in continued discussions. If a wildcat project partnership were to proactively identify and investigate further co-benefits as part of the development process, this could provide opportunities to improve cohesion and promote collaboration amongst stakeholder groups with differing interests.

#### Limitations

During this study, we spoke to a sample of potential stakeholders from across a wide range of relevant Communities of Interest (COIs). This sample is not intended to encompass all relevant points from across the discourse, but rather to provide a starting point by identifying topics that warrant further exploration. Though it was made clear that engagement with the study did not equate to project support, we encountered disparities in willingness to engage with the study, with some groups declining communication from the outset. This presents an important challenge for any potential reintroduction project, which would need to improve the landscape of communication to facilitate ongoing collaboration and risk management. We recommend that future projects should invest time and resources to establishing cross-sectoral partnerships and building trust, particularly between the wildlife conservation sector and the farming and shooting communities in the region.



## Summary of findings

Table 4 Summary of recommendations as to how a wildcat reintroduction project should be tailored to meet each of the criteria outlined in the IUCN guidelines for species reintroductions and other translocations (2013; section 5.2).

Recommendation	Associated IUCN Guidelines
Keepers of livestock including lambs, poultry and game birds be included directly in any discussions of risk management and equipped with suitable tools and strategies to protect stock from predation.	2, 4, 6, 10
Detailed disease risk assessment carried out by an interdisciplinary team including experts in feline and livestock disease. Results disseminated as part of engagement work.	2, 4, 8, 10
Additional evidence gathering to improve confidence amongst farmers that the wildcat would not pose a direct threat to their livelihoods (such as by discussing lived experience of sheep farmers in wildcat-inhabited areas of Europe and facilitating the continuation of farmer-led discussions on the topic).	2, 4, 6, 8, 10
Sufficient funding for management of existing issues related to domestic felids in the region.	2, 4, 8, 10
A thorough risk assessment and mitigation plan accounting for the needs of all key stakeholder groups in the region and investigating the potential for co-benefits.	2, 4, 6, 8, 10
Efforts to restore a local connection to the species, based on the most current evidence from habitat and dietary studies alongside historic and cultural features.	5
Ecological risk assessment with input from experts and advocates for a range of taxa. Results disseminated as part of engagement work.	10
Identifying existing frameworks to facilitate participation and/or establishing cross-sectoral partnerships, particularly between the wildlife conservation, farming, and shooting communities in the region.	1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9



# Conclusions

Here we have identified a range of key stakeholder groups relevant to wildcat and carnivore conservation in West Wales and outlined some of the key initial concerns raised at this early stage. It should be noted that concerns will likely develop and change if a project were to progress, and so ongoing work should be undertaken to maintain lines of communication between these groups.

Based on these findings, it is our view that a reintroduction of wildcats in West Wales could be delivered in such a way as to avoid collateral harm to human and ‘other than human’ communities in the region, providing a stable future for the wildcat in Wales. However, this would require co-operation of a wide range of stakeholder groups in the region, primarily to establish the necessary collaborative networks to promote trust and facilitate effective mitigation planning, and to develop an effective strategy for reducing chance of interactions between wildcats and feral or domestic cats.

If such plans are to be implemented in the future, we recommend that highly participatory methods should be used throughout the project timeline, with a view to improving socio-ecological resilience in the area, while also moving towards the goal of reintroducing wildcats (Folke *et al.* 2016). Appropriate methods for public engagement, problem solving, and conflict management should be identified and agreed upon prior to project launch to build confidence, cohesion, and trust amongst stakeholder groups, and continued communication and relationship-building should be viewed as a priority for the project in the long term.

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