

Knowledge Fair Workshop Session - Mariella Marzano and Mike Dunn, Forest Research

A workshop involving round table discussions was carried out with the event's participants circulating between four discussion groups, spending 15 minutes at each. Discussions centred on:

1. Community Engagement

Engaging with youths emerged as an important consideration as these people represent the future of squirrel conservation. It was also suggested that the interest and activities of children can be taken on by parents and other relatives (snowballing interest and participation in conservation). Examples of how this is (or could be) achieved included; hanging feeders in or close to school grounds or involving existing youth groups such as the scouts. It was also suggested that some form of certification could be used as a hook to encourage youths to get involved (e.g. a scout badge or certification from the Wildlife Trust).

Engagement of women (for example the Women's Institute) had also led to subsequent recruitment of male volunteers as the women's husbands began to take an interest, allowing couples to share an activity or goal.

Community success was noted to be heavily reliant on a local champion – one enthusiastic individual with infectious passion and capable leadership. This applied not just to volunteer groups but also to the individuals within organisations such as the Woodland Trust or Local Authority – notably there were some starkly contrasting accounts of how much support such organisations had provided in different localities.

Engaging with landowners (such as the Forestry Commission) had proved to be a frustration to some groups, and was felt to be undermining their work. Absent landowners (i.e. residing elsewhere) were also noted as being difficult to track down, and thus engage. The fact that large areas of land could go uncontrolled because of lack of successful engagement was seen as a real threat to the wider goal of squirrel conservation in some areas.

Methods of engagement ranged from websites, newsletters (paper and electronic), twitter, email lists etc. – their use being suited to reaching different demographics. The value of piggy-backing on other organisation's events also emerged as a potential engagement strategy. This could be useful when the volunteers/Wildlife Trust felt unable to commit a full day to community engagement, and may work be most effective where an audience likely to be interested were already assembled (e.g. RSBP meeting).

2. Volunteer recruitment and motivation

Involvement in a red squirrel resurgence was a clear motivating factor for many existing volunteers.

Some people prefer to work alone, whereas others are more interested in the social benefits that volunteering can bring and are thus motivated by the prospect of group work which promotes interaction. For the latter, events such as the Knowledge Fair are also considered important as a means of facilitating learning and connections with others sharing the same vision.

In terms of scale and wider impact, some volunteers are very much focussed on their own patch, but most do take a real interest in the national picture. Regardless of this focus, the vast majority of those volunteers involved in monitoring or control are interested in receiving feedback about the data they collect, over time and/or space (i.e. through figures and maps). This helps to demonstrate that the volunteers are having an impact and serves to justify all of their efforts.

The challenge for volunteers is sourcing funding for the grass-roots level work. Owing to this they can become reliant on the likes of Red Squirrel United for resources and communication.

3. Control measure – what works where

Discussion focussed primarily on the use of trapping versus the use of shooting (the two most commonly applied control methods for grey squirrel control). It was noted that both of these methods have their own unique set of strengths and weaknesses. For example, trapping is found to be time consuming, leads to missed opportunities, and the guidance to check traps twice a day can be insufficient at certain times (such as breeding season). In terms of success, trapping near holly was said to be particularly effective, while the use of aniseed and peanut butter were claimed to attract squirrels into an area allowing more fruitful trapping. Shooting on the other hand was associated with a degree of risk to human health. Ultimately, the preference of the landowner whose land the control occurs on was said to be the biggest factor in the decision to use a particular technique.

Although urban environments are often considered to be a particular challenge when attempting to implement control, the use of the owl box structure in parks and gardens has reportedly led to some successful efforts in these settings. More generally, participants also expressed support for kill traps (noted as being largely unacceptable with the public at large in the national attitudes survey) but only in circumstances where it could be 100% selective, i.e. where other non-target species would not be impacted.

Finally, it was pointed out that there has historically been some difficulty in conservationists engaging and collaborating with the shooting fraternity, despite the possibility of a shared interest in grey squirrel control. It was posited that conservationists may be perceived as overly liberal with potential links to animal rights activists – something which the shooting community would likely be fearful of.

4. Squirrel biology and monitoring

The reasons put forward for monitoring included looking at presence/absence of different squirrels, and to establish a picture of squirrel health (e.g. disease within populations).

The methods employed to monitor and exactly what is being monitored varied with the individual volunteers and with region (or volunteer area of operation). Some noted that there are too many different methods of monitoring; for those volunteers who work with different groups they are often having to alter their method to match the respective group's standard, rather than apply the same method all of the time. However, certain means of data collection are considered unsuitable for particular localities and circumstances. For those managing the data this poses a challenge, especially when there are calls for datasets to be collated or compared.

The discussion about how data is (and should be) collected and submitted largely came down to how the data would be used (volunteer patch versus at the project scale feeding into national picture), but no real solution emerged. The discussion did bring to light the variation in participants' understanding about how data is used and accessed.

Ideally volunteers would like to see a relatively simple, standardised means of collecting and submitting data so that it is easily imported to a centralised (cross border) and easily accessible database. It was also seen as advantageous to have this database or app independent of a project's funding so that it could be maintained in the long-term.

Challenges for monitoring include a reliance on elderly volunteers who have more time, but may have physical limitations. Technological issues also pose a challenge in certain instances. For example, there is no signal to send/receive data in some areas.