

Public Perceptions on the Reintroduction of White- tailed Eagles to the Isle of Wight and the Solent

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The Research Agency of the
Forestry Commission

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1 Background

1.1. Public perceptions research

The socioeconomic feasibility of reintroducing white-tailed eagles to the Isle of Wight was explored as part of a wider feasibility study in 2019, prior to their reintroduction. This study contained results of public consultations, both with key local stakeholders and the wider public. Consultation with the latter involved an online questionnaire which generated 1,962 responses, including 445 from Isle of Wight residents. Following the species' reintroduction, a follow-up survey was proposed to explore if and how public perceptions of the white-tailed eagles and the reintroduction project had changed.

As with the 2019 pre-reintroduction survey, the 2022 survey was conducted over a 3-month period (18th August to 15th November) using an online platform (in this instance, SmartSurvey). Responses were encouraged through promotion of the study and dissemination of the survey weblink by Forestry England and the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation. Response rates in respect of location, age bracket and sex were monitored throughout the data collection phase to allow for targeting of any underrepresented groups, relative to the demographics the 2019 survey respondents.

1.2. Sample characteristics

In total, 1,590 responses were received during the 2022 survey. Of these, 221 (14%) were submitted by Isle of Wight residents. Although this figure is proportionally lower than that achieved in the 2019 baseline survey (23%), the 2022 survey generated a greater proportion of responses from those residing in the neighbouring counties of Dorset, Hampshire and Sussex (36% vs. 19% in 2019). Thus, collectively, the proportion of responses from 'local' people were similar in both absolute count and proportion of the total samples (824 [42%] in 2019 vs. 788 [50%] in 2022). Representation across different age brackets were broadly

similar across the two surveys, though the 2022 follow-up survey had proportionally fewer respondents aged within the middle-age brackets (25-34 and 35-44 years old), and more older respondents (aged 55-64 and 65+). Responses from males and females were again broadly similar, with the 2022 survey closer to the proportions detailed in the latest Census data (Table 1).

Table 1 Survey Demographics

Respondent characteristic	2022 survey (n=1,590)	2019 survey (n=1,962)	England and Wales ONS / 2021 Census (n=59.6 mil)
Respondent location			
Isle of Wight	14%	23%	0.2%
Neighbouring counties (Dorset, Hampshire, E. & W. Sussex)	36%	19%	7%
Other locations	50%	58%	93%
Age bracket			
Under 18	1%	1%	23%
18-24	2%	4%	6%
25-34	7%	14%	14%
35-44	9%	14%	13%
45-54	22%	22%	13%
55-64	32%	26%	13%
65+	27%	20%	19%
Sex			
Male	59%	66%	49%
Female	40%	34%	51%
Other/prefer not to say	1%	N/a	N/a

As with the 2019 survey, response rates in the 2022 survey were skewed towards older age brackets, both for Isle of Wight residents and the wider survey population (Figure 1).

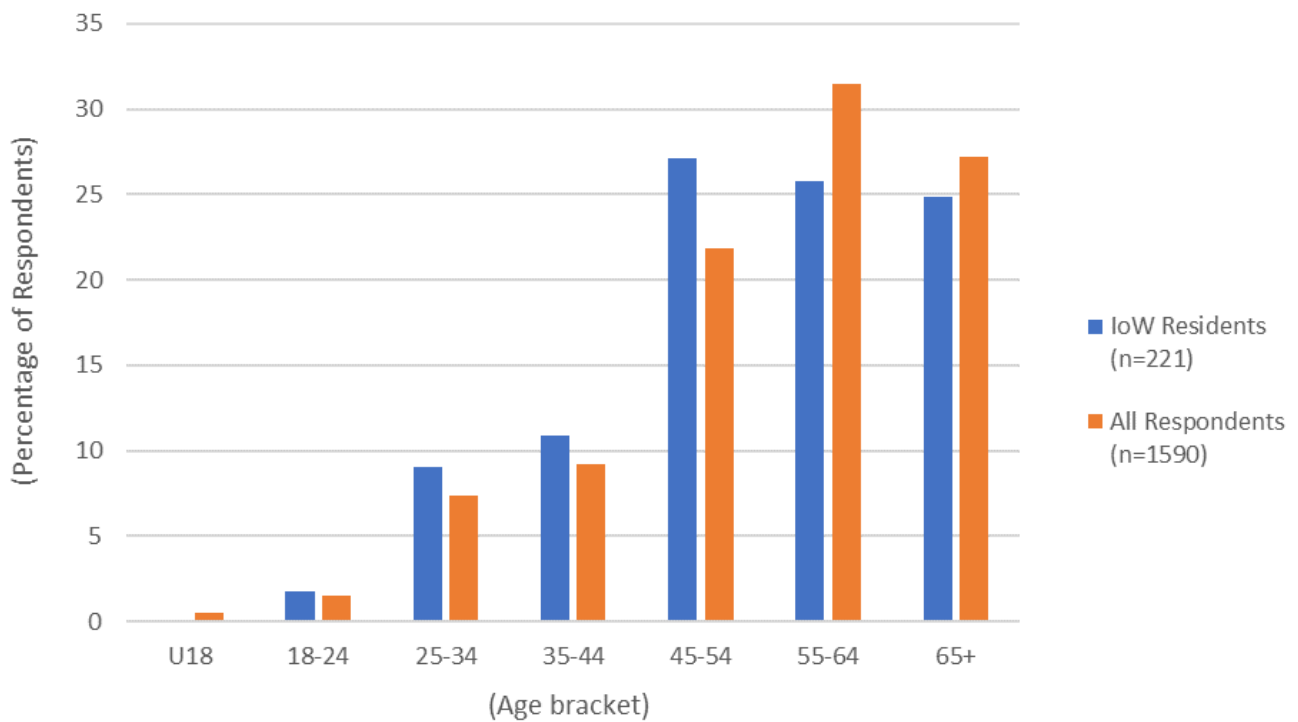


Figure 1. Age Categories of Respondents from the Isle of Wight and the Overall Sample.

Respondents reported to be interested in a variety of activities, with interest for the respective activities proving similar among Isle of Wight residents and the overall sample population. For the sample as a whole, birdwatching (89%) and walking/hiking (84%) emerged as the most popular activities. Comparatively few respondents expressed an interest in fishing (12%) or shooting (3%), which were previously highlighted as user groups predisposed to conflicts/opposition relating to white-tailed eagles.

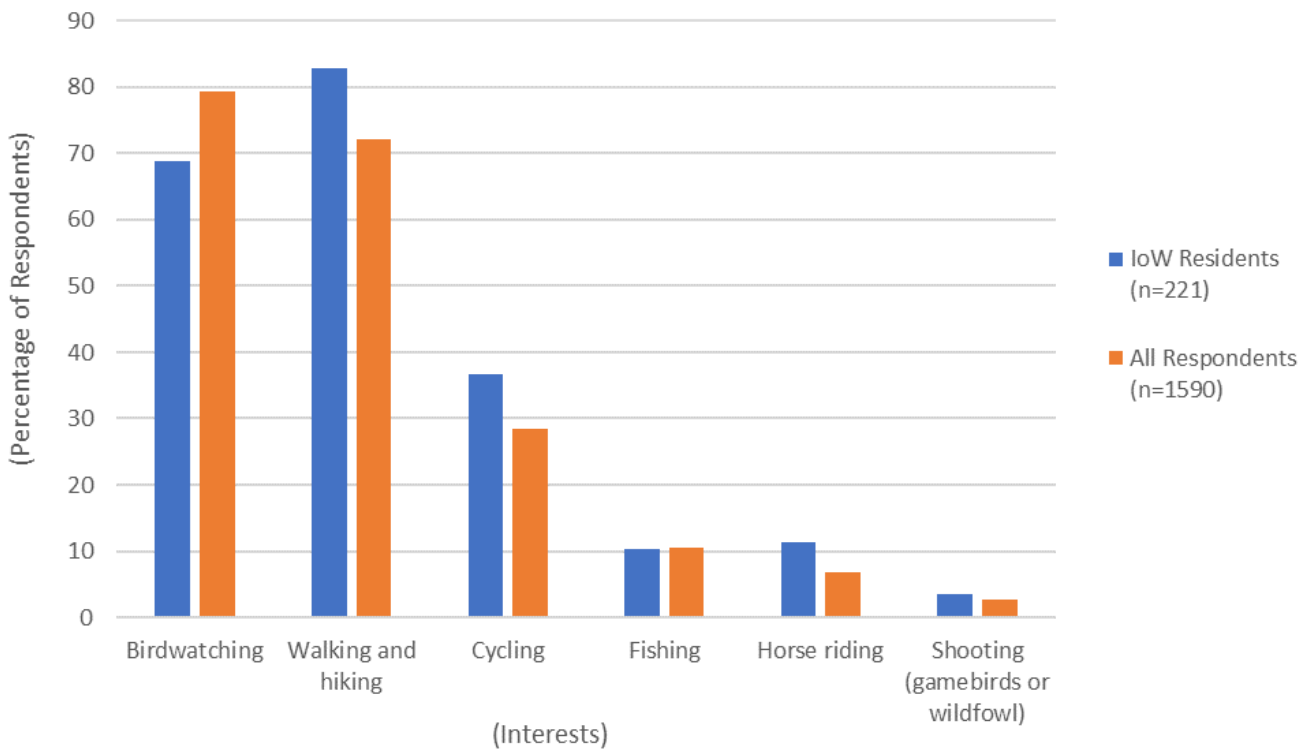


Figure 2. Interest in Activities Among Isle of Wight Residents and the Overall Sample.

The majority of respondents (84%) had some awareness of, or engagement with, the reintroduction project (Figure 3). This was most commonly a result of reading blogs, magazines or newspapers (71% of respondents), attempting to see white-tailed eagles first-hand (49%), and visiting the Forestry England and/or Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation webpages (41%).

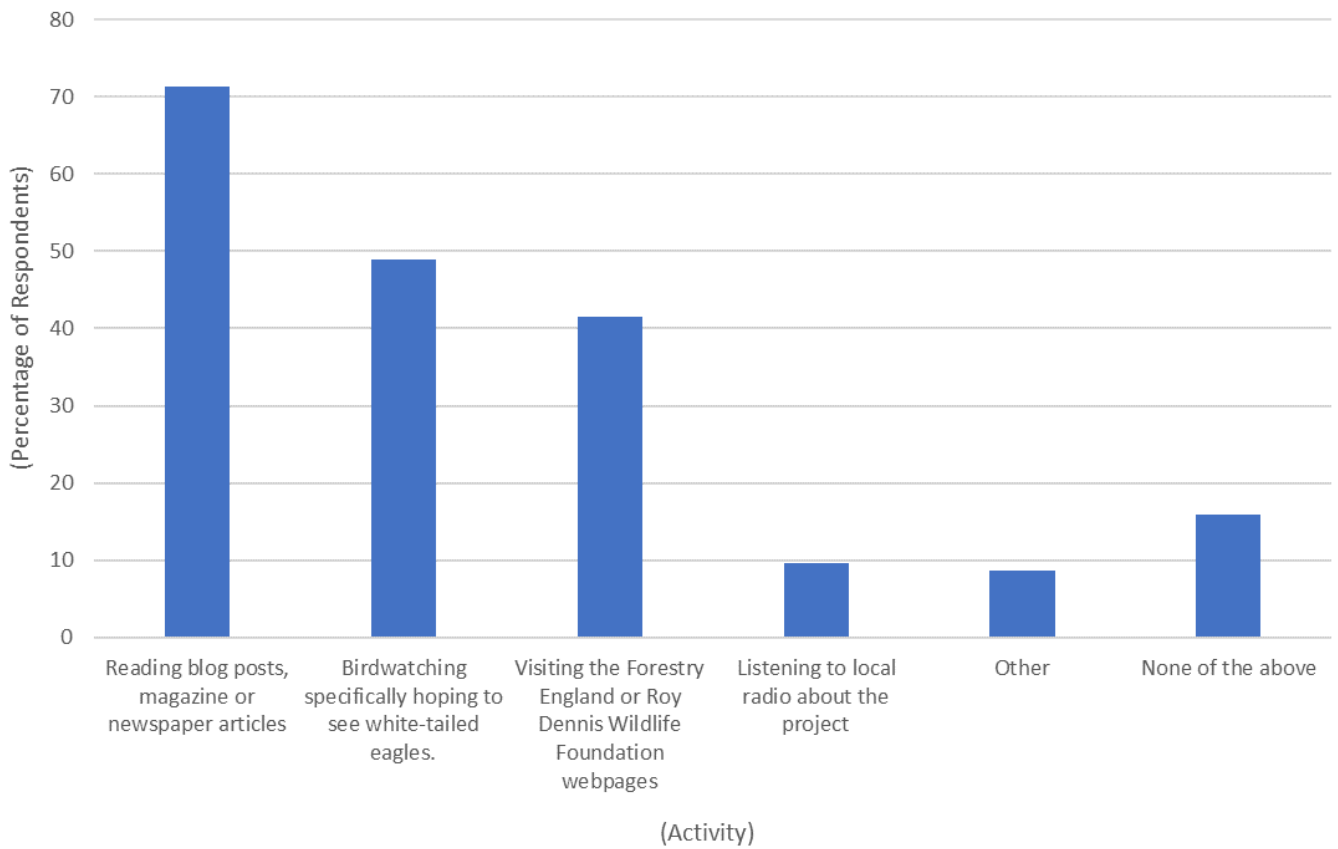


Figure 3. Sources of Awareness and Engagement with the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction Project.

2 Perception Results

2.1. Support for the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction

There appears to be exceptionally high support for the white-tailed eagle reintroduction on the Isle of Wight, with 93% of respondents stating that they are in favour of the project. Only 3% reported being opposed, while the remaining 4% were 'not sure'. This marks an increase in the level of support elicited in the 2019 baseline survey, in which 86% reported being in favour.

While support in the wider sample and the neighbouring counties has remained high, the most noticeable change observed stems from the Isle of Wight's residents. This cohort were originally somewhat polarised on the issue (62% in favour; 34% opposed), whereas they are now more supportive than those in neighbouring counties and the wider sample (Figure 4). Figure 5 further demonstrates the high levels of local support, in this instance, based on respondents' county. In fact, support was found to be $\geq 90\%$ across all UK regions with the exception of Scotland (83% in favour, 11% opposed).

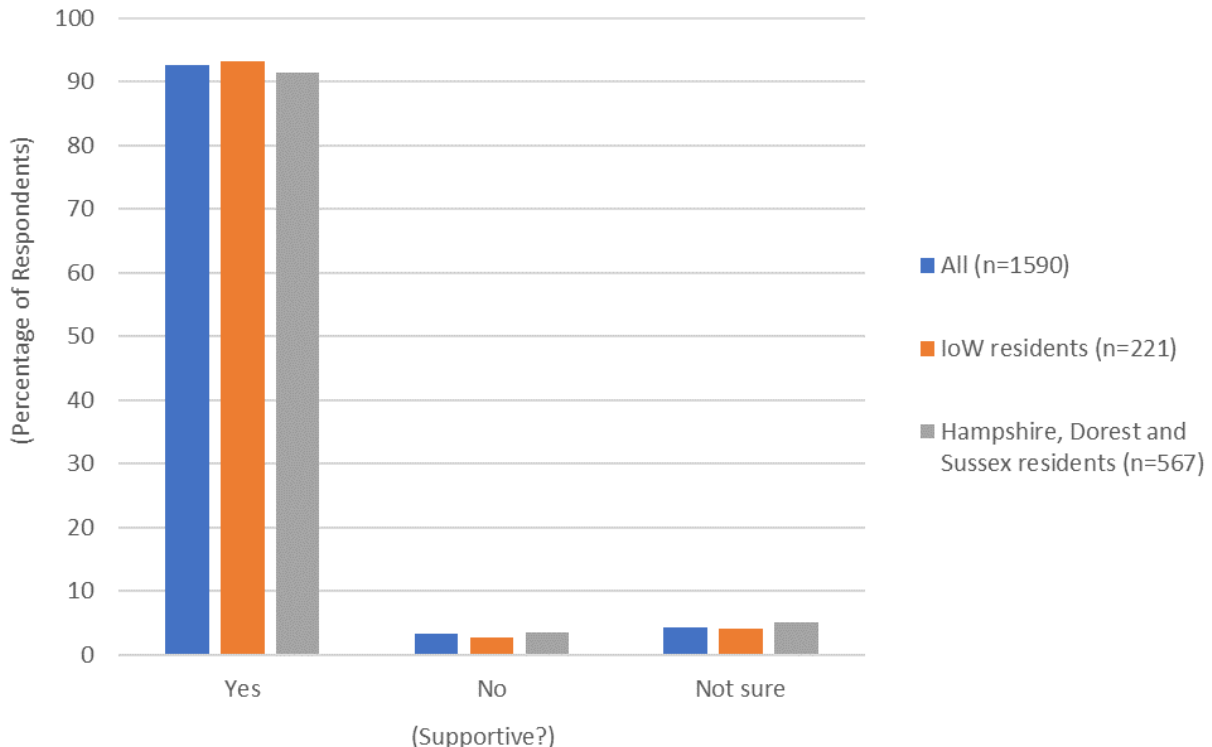


Figure 4. Favourability towards the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction with Breakdown for IoW Residents, Neighbouring Counties, and all Respondents.

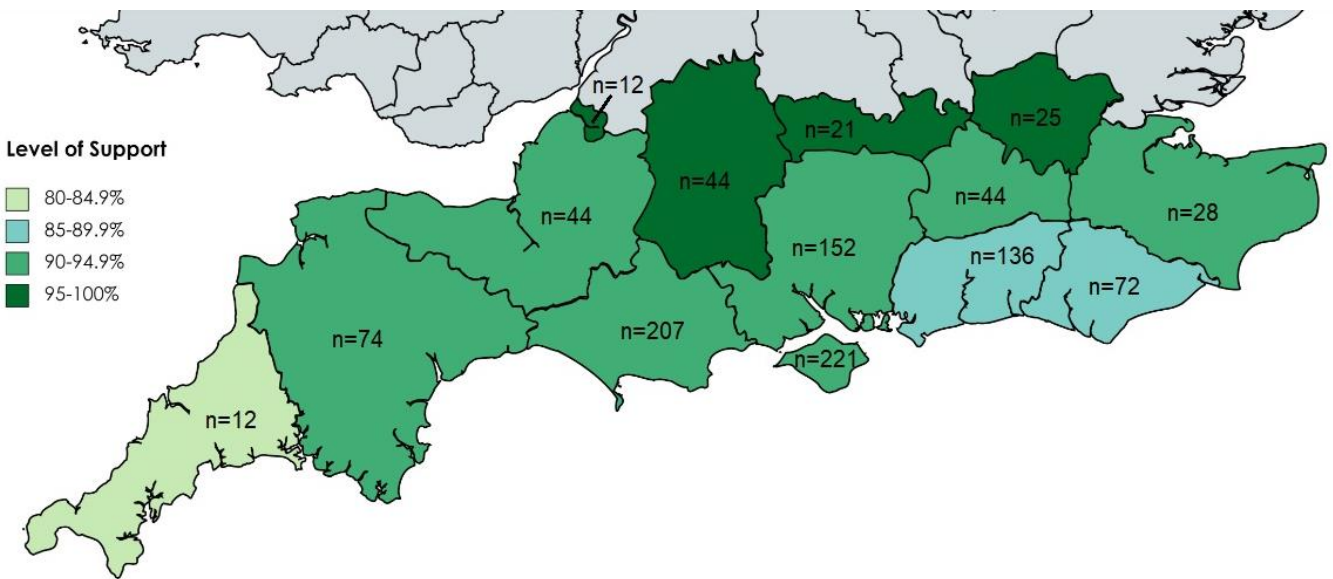


Figure 5. Favourability towards the White-Tailed Eagle Reintroduction in Southern Counties.

Support for the reintroduction was consistently high across all age brackets, with $\geq 92\%$ of each cohort expressing support. Similarly, support was found to be high and comparable across genders, with 92% of males and 94% of females being in favour.

Prior to the reintroduction, it was noted that those with interests in shooting and/or fishing may be among those most opposed to the project. Indeed, according to the 2019 baseline survey, 47% of those noting an interest in shooting originally opposed the project. When considering only Isle of Wight residents with an interest in shooting, the level of opposition was much higher (84%). In comparison, those with an interest in fishing had relatively low levels of opposition (13%), though this figure was again higher when considering only those residing on the Isle of Wight (32%). In contrast, the follow-up survey revealed widespread support for the reintroduction across all interest groups (Figure 6).

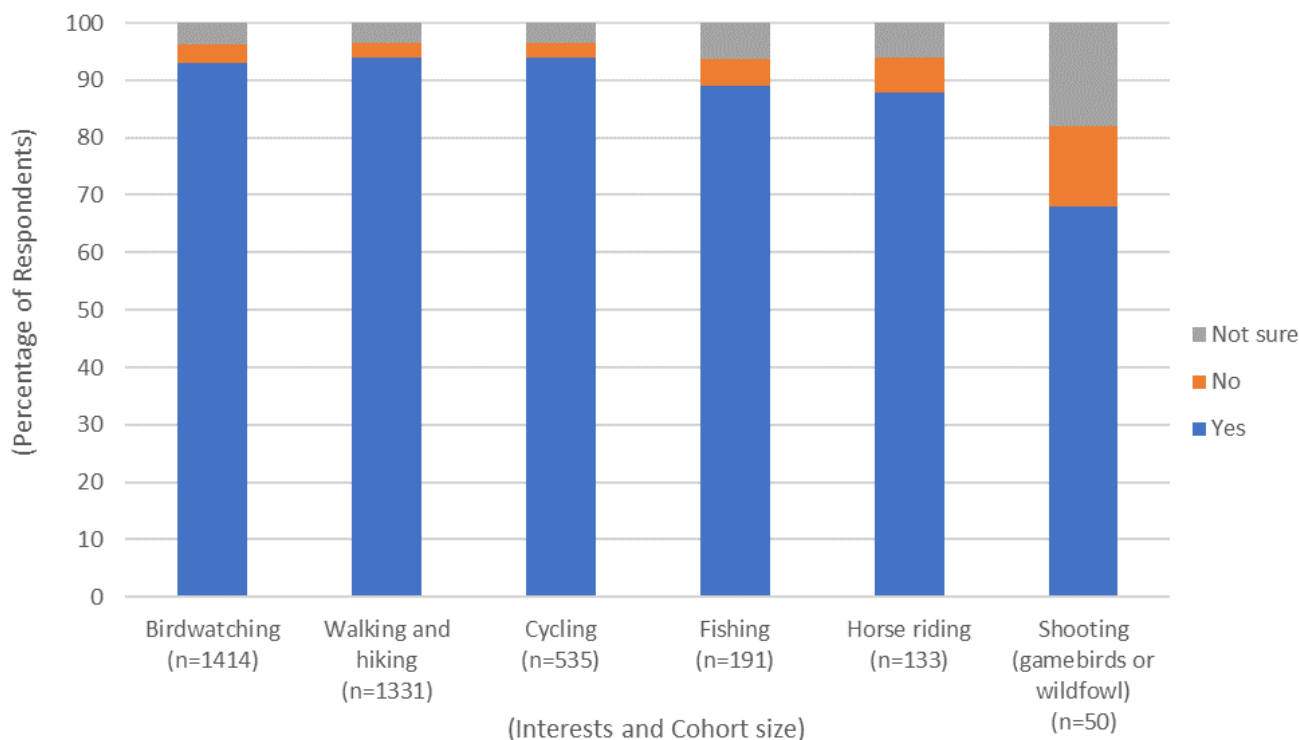


Figure 6 – Favourability towards the White-Tailed Eagle Reintroduction Among Different Interest Groups.

Although those with an interest in shooting remain the most opposed group, levels of opposition are significantly lower than originally observed (14%, down from 47%). Opposition among those residing on the Isle of Wight with an interest in shooting was also lower (25%, down from 84%). Similarly, opposition was observed to be lower among those with an interest in fishing, relative to the figures reported in the baseline survey (5% for the overall sample, and 4% for Isle of Wight residents). However, it should be noted that figures for those from the Isle of Wight with interests in shooting and fishing are derived from small sample sizes (n=8; n=23 respectively), which may reflect a lack of engagement with the survey by certain interest groups, particularly at the local scale.

Since there can be no guarantee that the 2019 and 2022 surveys attracted the same respondents, it must be accepted that the reported increases in support may simply be the result of different individuals having responded. However, the inclusion of a question exploring how support/opposition has changed for the 2022 survey respondents since the reintroduction occurred helps to affirm that support has genuinely increased. This enquiry revealed that although a majority of people (61%) have not changed their opinion about the reintroduction, 33% reported to have become more supportive or less opposed, in comparison with only 2% who have become less supportive or more opposed (Figure 7).

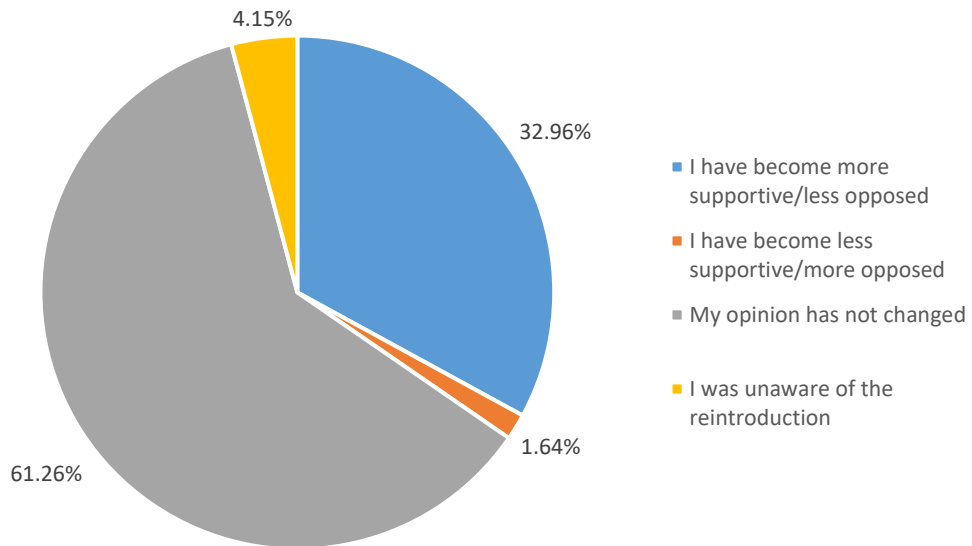


Figure 7. Change in Support/Opposition for the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction

No significant differences in likelihood of becoming more/less supportive/opposed were observed across the different age brackets or genders. There was however a markedly high number of those with an interest in shooting expressing reduced support/increased opposition relative to other interest groups. Despite this, all interests groups (including shooting and fishing) have become more supportive/less opposed on the whole (Figure 8).

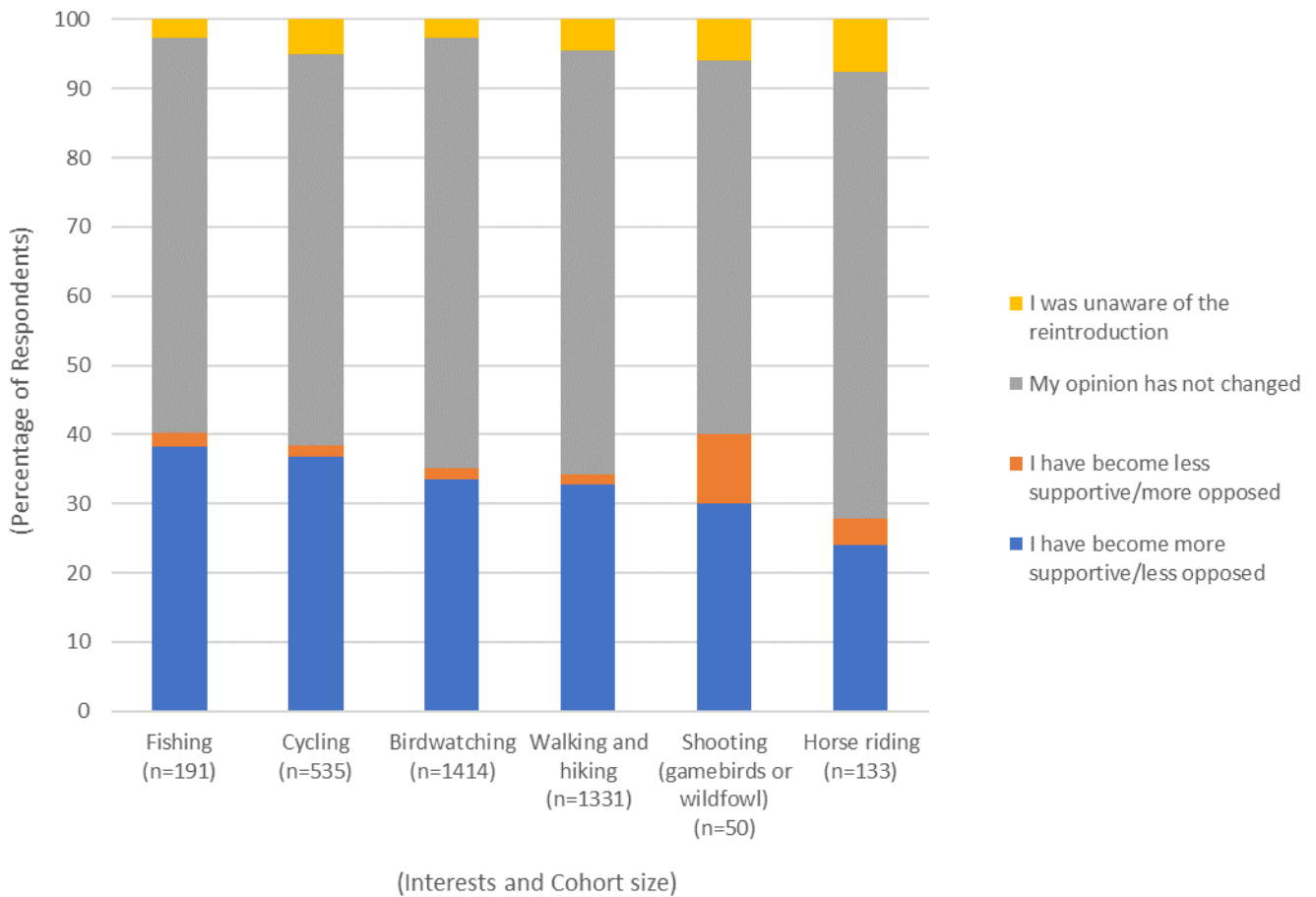


Figure 8. Change in Support/Opposition for the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction by Interest Group.

A review of supplementary comments from the entire sample revealed that of the small number of respondents opposed to the reintroduction, very few have ill-feelings towards white-tailed eagles or concerns about their impacts. Instead, comments tended to relate to concern for the eagles (owing to perceived habitat unsuitability or persecution), or a preference for resources to be directed towards other conservation projects/priorities. Some also opposed the project on the grounds of a perception that the eagles would have come to recolonise the area without human intervention, at some point in the future.

2.2. Eco-tourism Benefits of White-tailed Eagles

In the 2019 survey, 92% of respondents stated that they would be more likely to visit the Isle of Wight if the reintroduction were to go ahead. The 2022 (post-reintroduction) survey revealed that 74% of respondents consider themselves more likely to visit (or if a resident, more likely to recommend others visit) as a result of the reintroduction. A further 22% reported being no more or less likely to visit/recommend visiting, while less than 1% stated they would be less likely to visit/recommend visiting as a result of the reintroduction (Figure 9).

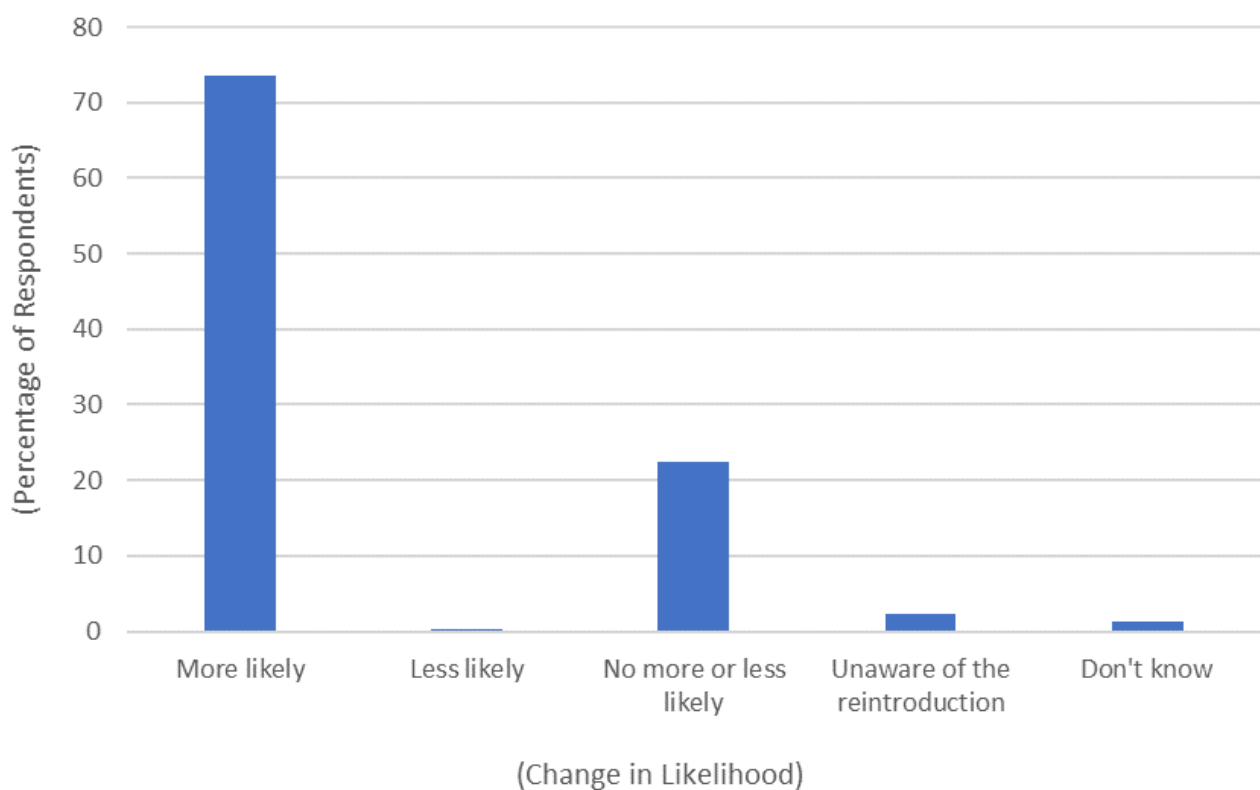


Figure 9. Change in Likelihood of Visiting the IoW or Recommending Others Visit as a Result of the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction.

There was no observable difference in likelihood of visiting (or recommending others visit) between males and females, though age was negatively associated with increased likelihood of visiting/recommending i.e. younger generations were more likely to have reported an increased likelihood of visiting/recommending others visit as a result of the reintroduction. Even so, <1% of all age brackets reported being less likely to visit/recommend others do so (Figure 10).

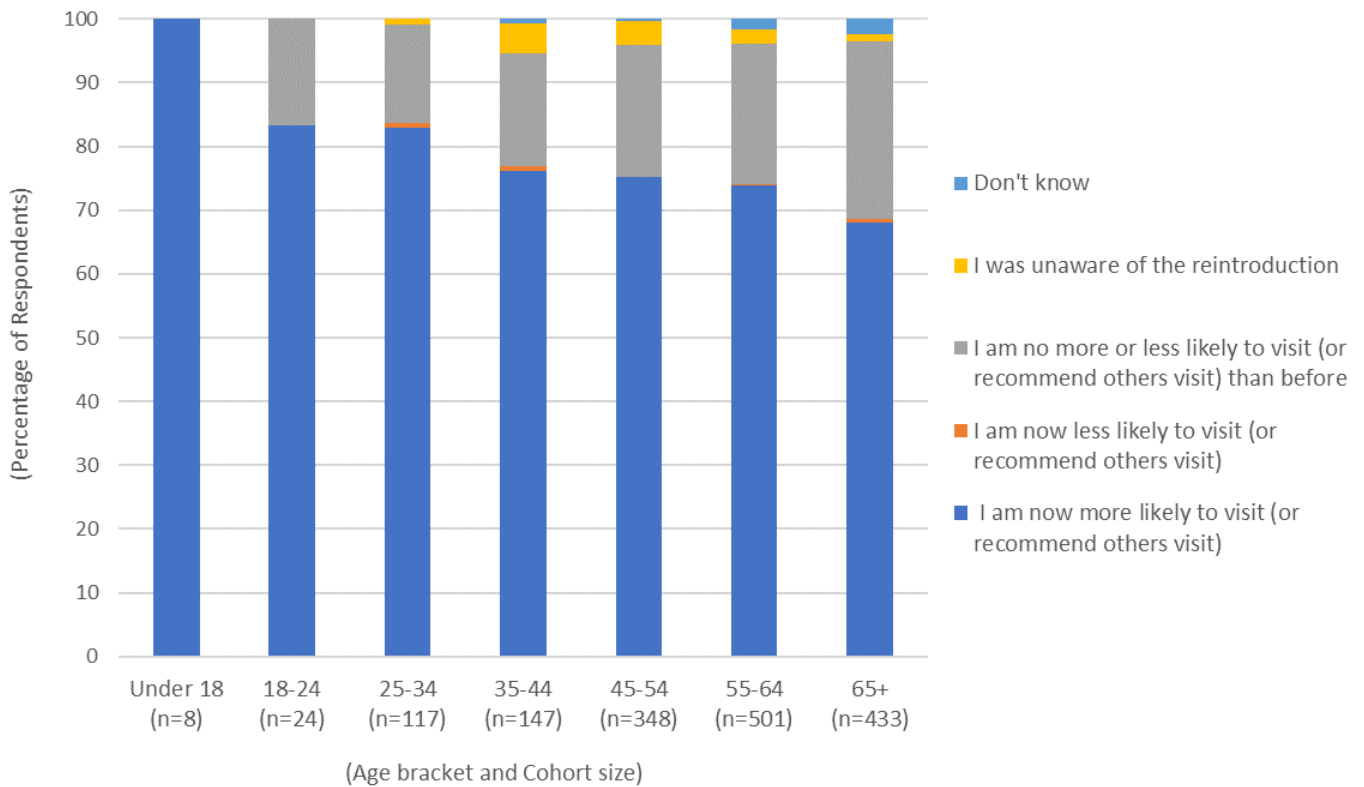


Figure 10 – Change in Likelihood of Visiting (or Recommending Others Visit) the IoW as a Result of the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction by Age Bracket.

Similarly, there is some variation in change to likelihood of visiting (or recommending others visit) across different interest groups (with 76% of those interested in cycling and birdwatching being more likely to visit/recommend, down to 50% among those with an interest in shooting), yet $\leq 2\%$ of all interest groups reported being less likely to visit/recommend others do so as a result of the reintroduction (Figure 11).

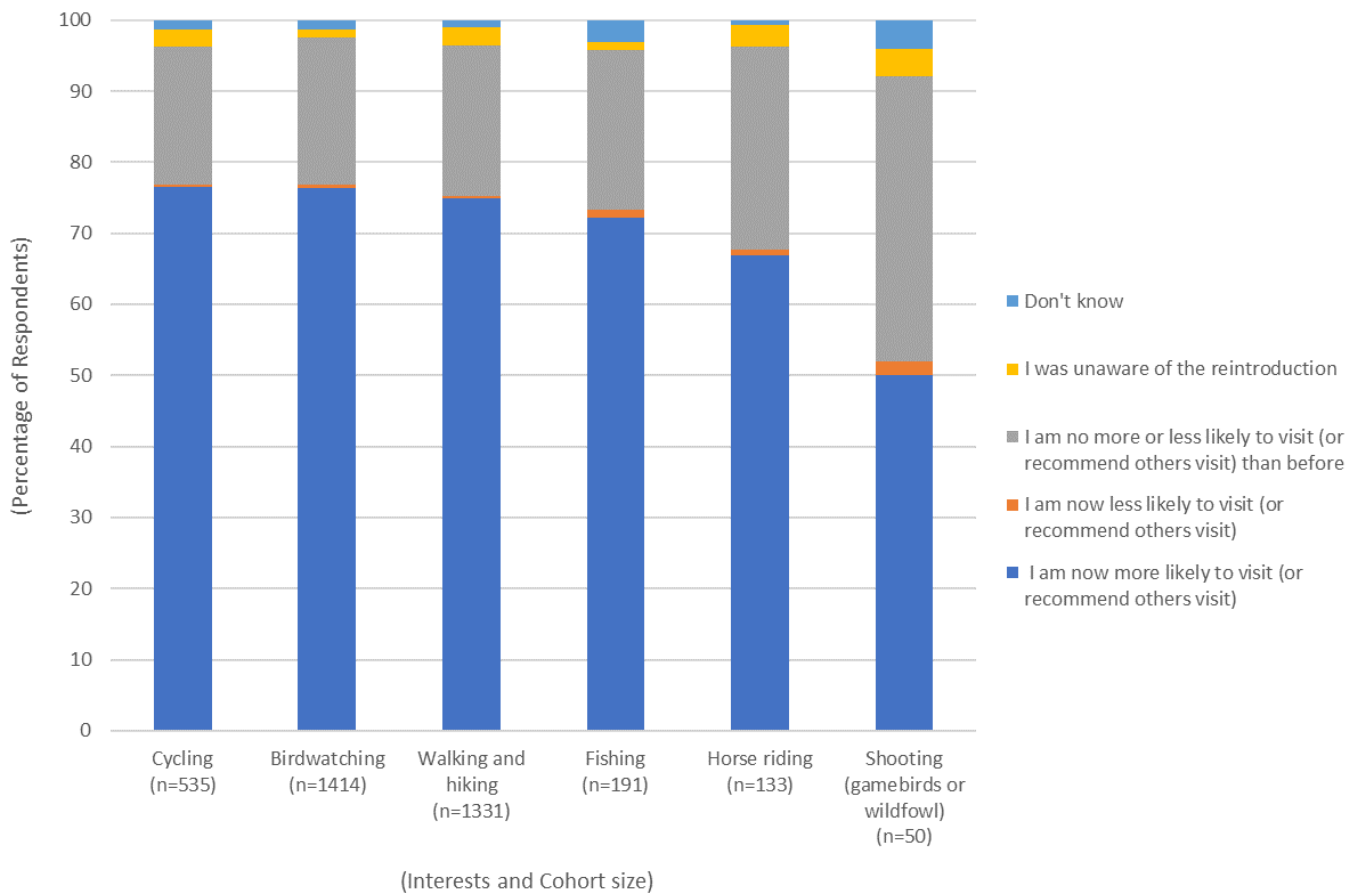


Figure 11. Change in Likelihood of Visiting (or Recommending Others Visit) the IoW as a Result of the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction by Interest Group.

These positive findings are further substantiated when examining the reasons why people are choosing to visit the Isle of Wight. In the 2022 survey, 934 respondents reported to have visited the Isle. This equates to 59% of the overall sample, and 68% of the non-Isle of Wight residents. The most common attractions noted by this cohort were the Isle’s natural landscapes (noted by 74% of visitors), castles, museums and other historic attractions (35%), and white-tailed eagles (35%) (Figure 12). Note that responses were not mutually exclusive i.e. respondents could select multiple attractions that had influenced their decision to visit.

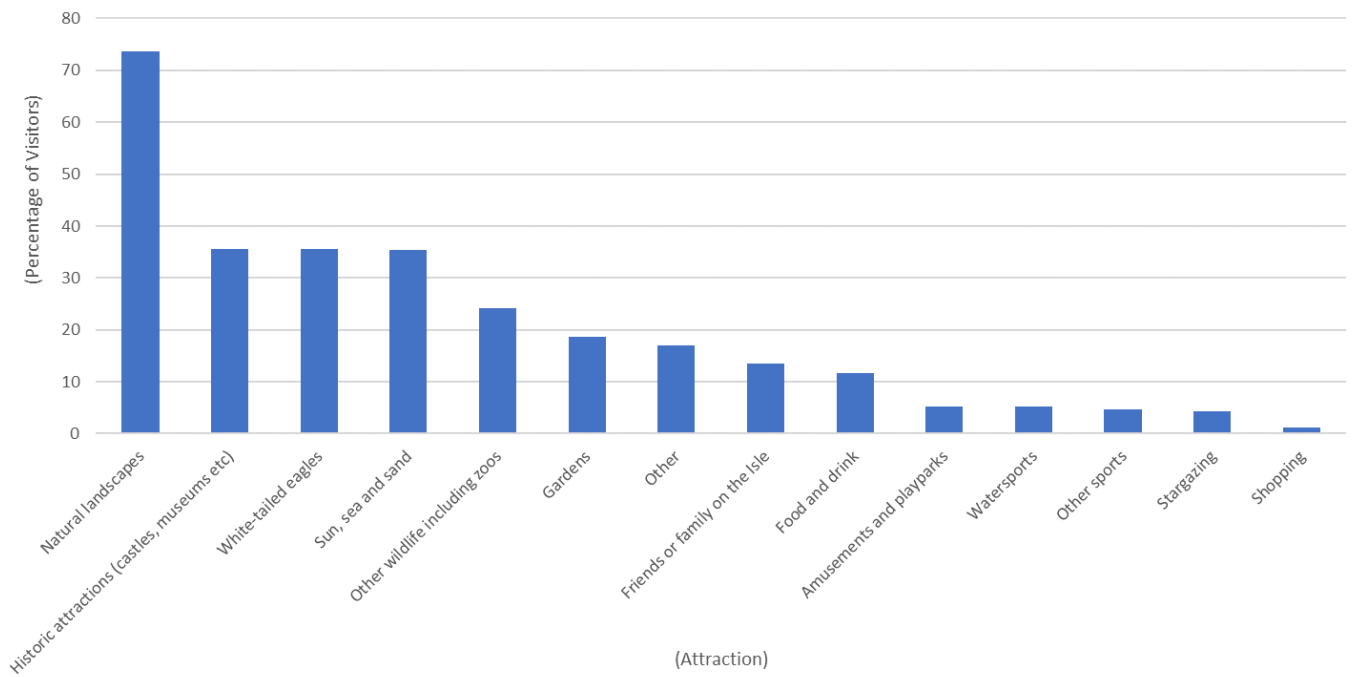


Figure 12. Reasons for visiting the Isle of Wight.

Together, these findings strongly suggest that the reintroduction of white-tailed eagles is likely to generate notable eco-tourism benefits for the local area.

2.3. Support for Further Reintroductions

In light of the successful reintroduction of white-tailed eagles on the Isle of Wight, respondents were asked to consider whether they would be supportive of other reintroductions of native species to the south of England. Support for this proposal proved to be comparable to that expressed for the white-tailed eagle reintroduction, with 92% reporting to be in favour, 2% opposed and the remaining 6% unsure (Figure 13).

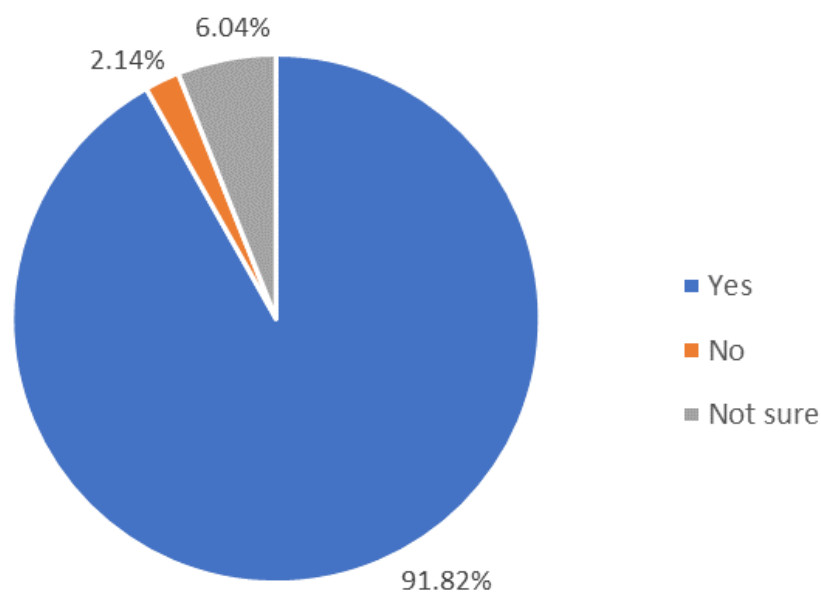


Figure 13. Support for the Reintroduction of Other Native Species in the South of England.

Given such widescale support, it was not possible to discern any differences in attitude among sub-populations (e.g. by age bracket, gender, interests, or location). However, review of supplementary comments revealed that the small number of respondents expressing opposition based this on a belief that it would be better to conserve existing species under threat and/or to restore habitat, rather than to focus directly on the reintroduction of lost species by humans.

3 Reflections

There appears to be exceptionally high support for the white-tailed eagle reintroduction on the Isle of Wight. Not only has support within the wider sample and those counties neighbouring the Isle of Wight remained high, support on the Isle itself appears to have increased from the somewhat polarised state observed pre-reintroduction. As such, high levels of support now appear to be ubiquitous across geographic boundaries, as well as age groups and genders.

In addition, there appears to be widespread support for the reintroduction across the range of different interest groups. Notably, responses in the latest survey indicate increased support/reduced opposition from groups which had previously been identified as more opposed, namely those with an interest in shooting and/or fishing. However, as in the 2019 survey, it is apparent that relatively few Isle of Wight residents with these interests engaged with the survey.

A large proportion of respondents also expressed that they would be more likely to visit the Isle of Wight – or to recommend others do so – as a result of the reintroduction. Indeed, a substantial number of those who have visited noted that the presence of white-tailed eagles had played a part in attracting them to the Isle. As such, the reintroduction of white-tailed eagles offers the potential to generate notable eco-tourism benefits for the local area, and may already be doing so.

Almost all respondents expressed support for the reintroduction of additional native species to the south of England. Of the minority who remain opposed to the reintroduction of white-tailed eagles and other native species, very few have ill-feelings towards the species, or concerns about their impacts. Instead, comments tended to relate to concern for the welfare of the reintroduced individuals, a preference for resources to be directed towards other conservation projects/priorities including existing species under threat, or a preference for the natural expansion of lost species back into their former range.

Appendix A - 2022 Survey Questions

1. Do you live on the Isle of Wight?

- a) Yes (skip to Q5)
- b) No

2. In which county do you live?

<dropdown list of all UK counties + other>

3. Have you visited the Isle of Wight as a tourist?

- a) Yes
- b) No (skip to Q5)

4. Which of the following attracted you to visit the Isle of Wight? (Select all that apply)

- a) Amusement and playparks
- b) Castles, museums and other historic attractions
- c) Food and drink
- d) Friends or family on the Isle
- e) Gardens
- f) Natural landscapes
- g) Shopping
- h) Stargazing
- i) Sun, sea and sand
- j) Watersports
- k) Other sports
- l) White-tailed eagles
- m) Other wildlife including zoos
- n) Other (please specify):

5. Has the likelihood of you visiting the Isle of Wight (or recommending others visit) changed as a result of white-tailed eagles being reintroduced?

- a) I am now more likely to visit (or recommend others visit)
- b) I am now less likely to visit (or recommend others visit)
- c) I am no more or less likely to visit (or recommend others visit) than before
- d) I was unaware of the reintroduction
- e) Don't know

6. Have you taken part in any activities relating specifically to the white-tailed eagle reintroduction on the Isle of Wight? (Select all that apply)

- a) Reading blog posts, magazine or newspaper articles
- b) Listening to local radio about the project
- c) Visiting the Forestry England or Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation webpages
- d) Birdwatching specifically hoping to see white-tailed eagles.
- e) Other – please specify:
- f) None

7. Are you in favour of the white-tailed eagle reintroduction project on the Isle of Wight?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure

8. Has your opinion of the white-tailed eagle reintroduction project changed since it started in 2019? If applicable, please note in the comments why your opinion has changed.

- a) I have become more supportive/less opposed
- b) I have become less supportive/more opposed
- c) My opinion has not changed
- d) I was unaware of the reintroduction

Comments: If your opinion has changed, please briefly tell us why.

9. Are you open to other lost native species reintroduced to the south of England?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure

10. Do you work on the Isle of Wight?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Please specify your occupation:

11. Are you interested in any of the following activities?

- a) Birdwatching
- b) Walking and hiking
- c) Cycling
- d) Fishing
- e) Shooting (gamebirds or wildfowl)
- f) Horse riding

12. Which age bracket do you belong to?

- a) Under 18
- b) 18-24
- c) 25-34
- d) 35-44
- e) 45-54
- f) 55-64
- g) 65+
- h) Prefer not to say

13. Which of the following best describes your gender?

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Non-binary
- d) Other
- e) Prefer not to say

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