Position statement: Feral Boar in the Forest of Dean

B. Rationale

In 2004 sixty boar were illegally released into the Forest of Dean. Five years earlier fifteen similar animals had escaped from a farm near Ross-on-Wye. These two events re-introduced into the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley a mammal that had not been present here as wild animals for over 700 years. Boars are large mammals weighing up to 170kg with an omnivorous diet and distinct rooting behaviour when foraging which typically causes a large amount of ground disturbance relative to their abundance. They are also animals with a high fertility. Depending on environment, weather and food supply, a sow may have two litters a year with an average of just over 4 young per litter. Within a year of birth, sows are ready to breed. In the UK today they have no natural predators. Formal re-introductions of species lost from the British countryside are fairly rare events. The red kite, great bustard and large blue butterflies are examples of recent re-introduction programmes. In each case, however, before re-introduction took place, comprehensive research was undertaken to try to determine the likelihood of success and probable impact on their new environment, be that implications for agricultural activity or interactions with native species already present. In all cases they were informed by the ecology of the environment they were entering and driven by a recognised conservation need.

No such preparatory work took place in the case of boar and their appearance in the Forest of Dean was not as a result of any scientifically informed re-introduction programme. The feral boar populations in the Forest of Dean are not considered by conservation organisations to have any current conservation status. Furthermore, studies on the genetics of Forest of Dean boar (1) suggest that they have a wild boar/domestic pig ancestry. The Trust does not view the boar in the Forest of Dean as a restored native species. Unplanned introductions of non-native species such as mink, Himalayan balsam, Japanese balsam or ruddy duck have generally proved harmful to native flora and fauna.

There is recent evidence (April 2013) of damage to wild daffodil meadows and bluebell woodlands caused by boar, with bulbs being uprooted and

eaten. Both these plants and the habitats they occupy are of significant conservation value. Furthermore there is evidence that boar are moving further out of the central forest into the surrounding land (i.e Blakeney) and the threat to important conservation grasslands as a result of this may be increasing. Within the forest itself the Trust is concerned that boar may pose a threat to ground nesting birds (including such typical Forest of Dean species as woodcock, nightjar and wood warbler) and dormice which hibernate on the ground, as well as rare butterfly habitat, adder hibernacula and grasslands important for fungi.

While it is acknowledged that boar were historically part of the British countryside, and in some circumstances ground disturbance can have conservation benefits, the habitats and species which are currently of high conservation value in the Dean have evolved and developed over hundreds of years in the absence of boar and their rooting activity.

The Trust believes that further research is needed to ascertain more fully the impact of boar on the habitats and species native to the Dean and is developing a monitoring strategy on its reserves in the Dean in collaboration with the Forestry Commission. The ultimate aim of the research will be to determine at what level boar numbers should be maintained in order to avoid significant negative impact on the existing habitats and species for which the Dean is so important.

The Trust's Habitats & Species Committee is increasingly of the view, however, that that level has already been reached and exceeded; that significant damage is very likely already happening and with increasing boar numbers is likely to get worse. The Committee believes it is time for the precautionary principle to be adopted and for boar numbers in the Dean to be reduced and thereafter maintained at a limit of 400 animals – in line with the Forestry Commission's strategy – in order to remove the threat to native habitats and wildlife whilst retaining the benefits of a much lower level of "random" ground disturbance.