**Watatunga Wildlife Reserve Environmental Policy and Action Plan**

Vision:

Watatunga Wildlife Reserve is committed to making a positive impact through outstanding environmental sustainability performance in the day to day running of the business. Our vision contains the following underpinning principles:

* Energy and Carbon Management
* Water Management
* Biodiversity and Ecosystems
* Waste Management
* Sustainable Procurement
* Sustainable Construction and Refurbishment
* Travel
* Environmental Sustainability in Teaching and Research
* Partnership Engagement

Aspiration:

We aspire to a long-term ambition to be carbon neutral from energy use by 2050. The following are key priority areas that support this aspiration:

* Actively encouraging walking, cycling, use of public transport and car sharing for all staff and visitors to the sites where we work. We are partnered with Good Journeys, an initiative that promotes ‘car-free days out.’ If you arrive at Watatunga via foot or public transport, you receive a 20% discount on off-peak buggy tours.
* We are also in the process of attempting to get a bus stop added to the front of the Watatunga entrance so that people can get public transport right to our doorstep. At present the closest bus stops do not connect to the front of Watatunga via a public footpath so it’s not very safe for commuters.
* The use of electric vehicles for all commercial activity, all buggies and vehicles used at Watatunga are 100% electric.
* Ensuring all new employees are inducted in environmental sustainability matters
* Maintain buildings in an environmentally sensitive way
* Maximising recyclable waste and minimising non-recyclable waste, reusing and repurposing goods already purchased where possible
* Reducing energy consumption and carbon emissions
* Reducing water consumption through efficient use and management
* Choose more sustainable food options (locally produced food only) for any sales on site.

In addition, we will focus on four key areas of conservation (in no order):

1. Conservation of natural habitats that can co-exist and enhance the pastoral farm environment.

2. Conservation of wildlife; mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates that can thrive in our local environment.

3. Conservation of rare breeds and endangered species.

4. Conservation of the environment through the conservation of natural resources on a local to a global scale.

**Conservation Strategy**

*Site Introduction*

Watatunga Wildlife Reserve is sited at Watlington Farms Ltd, which is a private limited farming company whose sole director is Mr Edward Pope. The Pope family have been farming at Watlington for many generations. The farm is in a general rotation of arable and grassland, the remainder in lakes, woodland, and wildlife habitat. The farm in 1953 diversified into the extraction of gravel which extends to 95ha of the property. As part of the restoration works the land has provided the opportunity to create a large centrally placed lake. The lake currently provides a wide variety of habitats for wildlife and is surrounded by woodland, grassland, and bush. Mr Pope is using the restoration site as a refuge and breeding programme for deer, antelope and birds. There have been several other gravel extracts in the past, each one has been returned into a natural wetlands habitat where wetland species thrive.

*Our Vision*

To be a powerful force in the care and conservation of the countryside and the natural world, by being an effective role model as an environmentally aware and sustainable rural business. To engage and enthuse our visitors with our four key areas of conservation, so that they may develop and enhance their own understanding of conservation and foster these within their own personal values. To strengthen the link between people and the natural world. This will mutually benefit both human health and well-being along with wildlife and rare breed conservation. To bring together rare breed conservation and farming for wildlife in a way that achieves both conservation goals.

*Our Beliefs*

We can make improvements to our own land and practices to benefit wildlife and to conserve rare breed animals. We are well placed to extend our conservation successes beyond our own physical boundaries, by inspiring our visitors to better understand and value the countryside, rural affairs, and the natural world. We can have positive effects on global conservation issues through the decisions we make regarding our own business practices. We can promote conservation awareness, on a local through to a global scale, and pass on sustainable living methods and practices.

*Principles of our Conservation Strategy*

This Strategy is an essential tool that outlines the content and scope of conservation at Watatunga Wildlife Reserve. It sets out the ways in which we aim to achieve our Aim and Vision, promoting best practice. The strategy is intended for use by our team, members of the public and other stakeholder groups. It is a revisable document and will be reviewed from time to time to meet the ever-changing nature of the natural environment, wildlife, and rare breed conservation needs, and to reflect changing conservation goals on site and at a local, national and global level. The Strategy is divided into six key areas of focus.

* Conserving Resident Wildlife
* Habitat Creation
* Careful and Considerate Farm Management
* Connecting People with Nature
* Conserving Rare and Native Breeds
* Work Towards a Sustainable Future

 For each area the strategy describes our aims, steps taken so far and future plans. The following underpinning objectives are integral to all areas:

* To strive to improve.
* To evaluate.
* To comply with relevant health and safety requirements.
* To use only appropriately trained and knowledgeable staff.
* To draw on the knowledge of local experts, organisations, and professionals.
1. *Conserving Resident Wildlife*

Work to conserve the flora and fauna already present onsite, understand how species interlink and work to increase current levels of biodiversity. During the in-house biodiversity audit, conducted in 2024, we assessed what species were present across the various habitats within the reserve. We have also worked with local experts such as the Norfolk bat group and the BTO to conduct surveys on the bat and bird populations present. Joining projects such as the winter ringing project helps to assess species present year-round. On other areas of the estate, we plan our farming year carefully to be sensitive to the changing seasons and the changing needs of our flora and fauna. We will work to ensure conservation decisions are based on reviewed scientific research. We joined BIAZA in 2024 which allows us access to a plethora of research and provides us with policies and guidelines to guide us with our decision making.

*2. Habitat Creation*

We aim to create habitats that support wildlife and increase biodiversity, through encouraging the natural return of species present locally, but rare or absent on site. Whilst also targeting species that are a conservation concern. Steps taken so far to create habitat include individual tree planting using native species where possible. We have planted several individual trees across the site, a mixture of species including English Yew, Silver Birch, Horse Chestnut, Hazel, Common Ash, Hornbeam, Sessile Oak and Scots Pine. These will support a variety of invertebrate species as well as providing perches, roosting, and nesting sites for a variety of birds. We have also planted a small orchard consisting of heritage fruit varieties which will attract and support pollinators and provide a habitat for small mammals. Whilst we work to provide habitats that will meet the needs of resident and visiting birds and mammals through planting; we recognise that there is currently a need to supplement natural nesting sites and food.

We have placed multiple bird feeders throughout the reserve which are regularly filled with a seed mix, to supplement the food available for our wild birds. We have erected nesting boxes for small birds and kestrels, also a bat box. Our barns and buildings are used as nesting sites by swallows, we ensure doors are left open and they are not disturbed from their nests. We recognise the importance of providing water, as piped water supply has seen a dramatic decrease in the number of ponds in our landscape. We have created two large lakes for our waterfowl collection within the reserve itself. We have worked with local expert to conduct surveys on the reserve to see which species are present. These groups include the Norfolk bat group, BTO and NMS, to create a base of knowledge across a variety of taxa. We are currently a release site for native species such as the English Partridge and we wish to get involved with more reintroduction programmes. Moving forward, we will work with more groups across an even broader range of taxa to take a holistic approach to increasing biodiversity within the reserve.

*3. Careful and Considerate Farm Management*

Managing all areas of the site with careful planning and consideration of the sensitivity and needs of wildlife. Ensuring our conservation aims are considered in all land management decision. We aim to increase plant diversity through allowing local seed dispersal and natural regeneration whilst additionally sowing locally sourced seeds where required. The use of water buffalo to restore grasslands throughout the estate has been extremely successful. Due to their non-selective grazing, buffalo remove thistles, nettles, and ragwort from our grassland areas which are detrimental to the health of the other grazing animals. These plants also outcompete the native species, so removing them from the grassland thus increases the native flora population. To protect insects, the use of insecticides is banned on the reserve and habitat management that is focused on terrestrial and aerial invertebrates will be conducted throughout the reserve. Any mowing that might be needed will be left until late July where possible, to prevent damage to ground nesting birds. Most areas will be left long to support overwintering field birds such as the meadow pipit, whilst in our grazed fields short grasses will support starling flocks.

We recognise the importance of hedgerows as a food store and habitat for a broad variety of species. We will not carry out blanket flailing on our hedgerows and will limit cutting to coppicing and laying when required. We will always put off hedgerow management to allow fruits and berries to provide food throughout the autumn and well into winter. Any management that needs to be undertaken will be carried out before the bird’s nest in the spring. Different height hedges will provide song posts for bullfinch and whitethroat, and mature trees will be left in the hedge to provide a habitat for owls and bats. Work undertaken onsite so far includes restoration of a hedge along our southern boundary through planting saplings to fill in the gaps. Coppicing of the willow hedge in the orchard and laying of a blackthorn hedge along the boundary of the wildflower meadow.

Within our field margins, grass is left long for resident hares to make their scrapes and to provide cover for foraging small mammals and birds. We have enriched the existing field margins by planting wildflowers as plug plants, including Common Knapweed, Teasel, Field Scabious, Oxeye Daisy, and Ragged Robin providing nectar for invertebrates and supporting animals higher up the food chain. Banks of nettles and thistles are left to provide an important food source for invertebrates, particularly caterpillars.

*4. Connecting People with Nature*

Work to bring our staff and visitors closer to nature to create connections between people and nature and inspire a conservation orientated mindset. Through formal and informal education, we will promote our conservation message and work to inspire the next generation. We will work to bring wildlife closer to visitors by guided tours around the reserve and school visits. A new area has been created, the ‘Biodiversity Base,’ which focuses on giving children hands on experience with nature. The area consists of native species of flora and fauna and was built in a way to facilitate learning species identification, ecology surveys and creating habitats to encourage native wildlife (such as bird feeders and insect hotels). A specific blend of wildflower mix is planted on the bungs throughout the reserve. This mix is ideal for pollinators such as bees and butterflies and will provide foraging material throughout the year. These plants are also left to go to seed for the birds. We currently have trail cameras and drones which are used to collect footage of wild mammals onsite. This allows us to gain an insight into the kind of animals visiting the sight and the footage can be used for educational purposes. Multiple nesting boxes have been placed within the reserve for species such as Barn Owls and Sand Martins, in collaboration with the BTO, these will be monitored and hopefully documented which would provide an ideal way of connecting people with native wildlife.

*5. Conserve Rare and Native Breeds*

Play our part in securing the future of rare breed and native livestock. In 2024, we joined BIAZA which provides us with access to certain collaborative groups, and research into rare and native breeds. BIAZA guidelines aid us with our decision making when managing our animals, including decisions to bring in new species. During our commercial tours, we convey this information on rare and native breeds to our visitors. Using the ‘halfway house’ ethos of Watatunga, we work with various other zoos and breeding programmes to help rare species that are born into captivity to be released into the wild, such as the English Partridge and Vietnamese Pheasant. Our population of Water Buffalo are also used to regenerate wetland and waterways throughout the estate. During population management of these buffalo, the meat gained is sold in our reception to promote organic, locally sourced produce.

*6. Work Towards a Sustainable Future*

Consider the environmental impacts of our actions and work towards a sustainable future. Across all areas of the business, identify, minimise, and reduce any negative environmental impacts we may have whilst maximising our environmental successes. Our flagship Wildlife Reserve aims to demonstrate sustainable land management practices to our visitors. Staff are encouraged to be environmentally friendly by minimising waste and participating in reusing and recycling. We will also offer recycling for our visitors. We will have a no smoking policy onsite. We consider energy consumption by using motion sensitive lights in suitable areas such as the toilets, and we switch off all other lights when not in use. We will use low energy LED lighting and use efficient energy appliances where possible. Materials used for educational purposes, will be no-plastic and sustainably sourced. For example, when making insect hotels, all materials will be sourced from the reserve and neighbouring habitats, these materials will be biodegradable and plastic free. Within reception, we are improving our sustainability through the use of compost, our coffee cups and grounds will be composted on site. We also use environmentally friendly cleaning products such as Ecover and Ocean Saver. Moving forward we will consider an environmental audit of our business and use this to identify areas that require improvement. We are currently working towards a green tourism accreditation of our business to continue working towards improving our overall sustainability.