

WATATUNGA CONSERVATION POLICY & STRATEGY POLICY

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 site 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 provided the opportunity to create a large lake which became the centre of the creation of Watatunga Wildlife Reserve, covering over 170 acres of woodland, grassland, wetland, and lakes. This diverse habitat makes it an ideal environment for all our animals to thrive, which includes over twenty types of ungulate and bird species. Aiming so that our animals live as natural lives as possible, they have the space and freedom to roam at their will.

Our Vision

To provide an exceptional wildlife experience, with animals behaving naturally despite some being thousands of miles from their native lands. Watatunga Wildlife Reserve will be a place to relax, a place to learn and a place to explore. As a centre for conservation excellence, the Reserve will offer the chance to see extraordinary, non-predatory wildlife close-up in a beautiful, natural, open environment.

Our Mission

To innovate new techniques in wildlife conservation and be a world class conservation site for deer, antelope, and birds. To be one of the UK's leading small visitor attractions, offering people a unique and optimistic story of conservation today for wildlife tomorrow.

Our Beliefs

We can make improvements to our own land and practices to benefit native wildlife and to conserve threatened species. 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.

Our Objectives

We will identify species that are present locally, but vulnerable or scarce in number, and take steps to attract these species to the reserve.

We will create appropriate habitats that provide food, shelter and areas for nesting and breeding sites for both native and non-native species.

We will work towards being a future site for species that need a 'middle ground' between captivity and being reintroduced into the wild. By encouraging natural feeding techniques and methods that encourage gut development from natural forage.

We will take engage our visitors during guided tours, encouraging them to connect with and learn about wildlife and make them as passionate about conservation as we are.

We will take every opportunity to raise our visitor's awareness of the value of wildlife and promote simple steps that everyone can take to help wildlife in their everyday lives.

We will consider our own environmental impacts across all areas of the business and take every possible step to minimise these.

STRATEGY

The 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 Vision and Mission.

The strategy is intended for use by reserve staff along with external professionals, 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 threatened species conservation needs, and to reflect changing conservation goals on site and at a local, national, and global level.

The Strategy is divided into four key areas of focus:

- Conserving Native flora and fauna
- Conserving threatened Species
- Connecting People with Nature
- Working Towards a Sustainable Future

For each area the strategy describes our aims, steps taken so far and the future.

1. CONSERVING NATIVE FLORA AND FAUNA

Aims

To work to conserve the flora and fauna already present onsite.

To create habitats to support local wildlife; and increase biodiversity through encouraging the natural return of species present locally, but rare or absent on site, and targeting species that are a conservation concern.

To manage and breed native species in an environment where they can learn to behave and forage naturally without depending on supplemental feeding or management – ensuring they are ready for reintroduction.

To assess what is present onsite through monitoring and working together with local experts.

Steps taken so far

We have worked to conserve what native flora is present by careful management, cutting back some species such as brambles, nettles, and thistles to prevent them from dominating and crowding out other more important or more sensitive species.

We have planted several individual native species trees across the site, a mix of English Yew, Silver Birch, Horse Chestnut, Hazel, Common Ash, Hornbeam, Sessile Oak, and Scots Pine.

We have erected nesting boxes for small birds, barn owls and bats. We have a pair of Barn Owls breeding on-site yearly and a resident pair of Long-eared Owls which are 1 of only 7 pairs in the area.

We have created habitats, nesting sites and planted specific seed mixes to encourage species such as Sand Martins, Oystercatchers, terns, turtle doves, songbirds, dragonflies, bees, and partridge to thrive within the reserve.

We house Eurasian Crane, White Stork and Great Bustard in the reserve and have started work on imitating their natural feeding habits and diet ready for potential reintroduction in the future.

Working with local groups such as the Norfolk Bat group, British Trust of Ornithology, Norfolk Record Society and the Norfolk Moth Society we have conducted surveys on the native bat, bird and moth populations found on the reserve. We will also be expanding the taxa surveyed with dragonflies, damselflies and birds being studied this year.

In 2024, an in-house ecology survey was conducted to survey the invertebrate populations found in different habitats across the reserve. A reptile survey was also conducted to measure population sizes of any herpetofauna found. This biodiversity audit highlighted which areas had the highest levels of invertebrate diversity and which

areas had the lowest, with recommendations to improve native diversity. It also discovered rare fauna found on the reserve such as the Scarce Chaser dragonfly.

We are a release site for the English Partridge, we housed and then released captive bred birds into the reserve and allowed them the freedom to leave and integrate back into their natural habitat. This has been successful with partridges being seen throughout the habitat surrounding the reserve.

We work alongside local community groups like the Friends of the Walk and Gaywood Valley Conservation group by providing staff time and expertise to assist in the conservation of local habitats and species. We also continue to assist in national native species monitoring initiatives like Spotted on Site BioBlitz.

The Future

Moving forward we will work to increase biodiversity by continuing to work with local experts to identify species that could be attracted to the site from the locale. Also, with key species that are present locally but need bolstering and identify which we could help by making changes and improvements on site.

We will continue being a release site for species like the English Partridge and aim to branch into other native bird species as well.

We will work to ensure conservation decisions are based on sound knowledge scientific research and fact. Recognise the expertise of local and national conservation organisations and local experts, and be guided by their policies, research, and advice.

We will work on carrying out surveys of the native species we have on-site and implement monitoring of numbers and breeding successes so our conservation efforts can be properly evaluated.

We will continue to research natural feeding techniques of the species held in the reserve and share our findings with those organisations managing reintroduction programmes to help improve the success of these programmes.

We will work on breeding successes of the native species we manage so we can be involved in reintroduction programmes. We hope to become part of reintroduction programmes for the White stork, Eurasian crane, and Great Bustard.

We will increase the amount of resources including staff time, equipment, expertise, and funding to directly supporting local projects that aim to increase biodiversity and help native wildlife.

2. CONSERVING THREATENED SPECIES

Aims

Play our part in securing the future of threatened species by housing, breeding, and managing a range of threatened species.

Become involved in the European Association of Zoo's and Aquaria (EAZA) breeding programmes and contribute to both in-situ and ex-situ conservation of the world's most threatened deer and antelope species.

To manage and breed species in an environment where they can learn to behave and forage naturally without depending on supplemental feeding or management – ensuring they are ready for reintroduction.

Development innovative techniques such as genetic analysis to highlight unmanaged sub-species and embryo transplantation, to aid the conservation of threatened species.

Steps taken so far

We are providing a reserve for threatened species where they can thrive in a natural environment, learn to forage, and fend for themselves and develop the health and skills for survival in the wild.

We are providing a facility for EAZA EEP species bachelor groups or individual animals needing a short-term home before joining other collections for breeding.

We have joined with Nature's SAFE, a wildlife Biobank, and provide genetic material of the rare and endangered species housed on the reserve.

We provide expertise on nutrition and management to directly support in-situ conservation projects such as the Great Bustard Project.

We also work closely with NGOs that work to protect the species in-situ and are directly linked to species held in our collection such as the Mount Kenya Conservancy.

Fundraising is carried out with our donation boxes to assist them with projects which also provides an opportunity to raise awareness.

The Future

Participate in EAZA EEP'S and contribute to the European Breeding programmes.

Research the sub-species of several Deer species through genetic work.

Providing the facilities and expertise for carrying out innovative techniques such as embryo and genetic work to aid in the conservation of threatened deer and antelope species.

Encourage natural feeding methods and habits and encourage native and non-native species to learn to fend for themselves so future reintroduction is more likely to be successful.

Continue to strengthen links with NGOs focusing on in-situ conservation and branching out to other organisations that are directly linked to the animals found on the reserve.

3. CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH NATURE

Aims

Work to bring our staff and visitors closer to nature to create connections between people and wildlife and inspire a conservation orientated mindset. Through formal and informal education, we will promote our conservation message and work to inspire others.

Steps taken so far

We provide information on our endangered species during our guided tours and in our guidebooks.

Our trained Tour guides have a captive audience where they can educate and inspire our guests about the exciting and unusual species we have in the reserve and on the work, we are doing to ensure their survival in the future. Watatunga Wildlife Reserve is uniquely placed to offer applied learning opportunities to young people.

We currently have a single trail camera/drone which is 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 education purposes. In 2021-22 we offered 5 students formal work-experience placements of 150 hrs each to meet their requirements for the level 3 Animal Care courses that they were pursuing at the College of West Anglia and Easton College. We are particularly proud to have been able to offer this experience to one student in a wheelchair.

We offer school trips between February-September and regularly welcome Primary school classes for trips that are tailored to the Science topic that they are studying (e.g., Ecosystems). We also work closely with a nearby school of Bushcraft, providing land rent-free for them and collaborating on school trips to make a whole day immersed in nature for the young people onsite. With the purchase of a third trailer, we now have the ability to educate schools of a much larger size. One of these trailers also has wheelchair access to increase accessibility for all students.

From September 2022 we have extended our education offer to pre-school children as well and have set up a weekly Forest School, operating on Wednesday mornings, where 0-5 years olds interact with nature and learn practical outdoor skills.

We also welcome groups from the Scouts, Brownies, Girl Guides, and local Young Farmers Association.

Our team regularly give talks to local groups such as the W.I. or horticultural societies and spread the conservation message on these occasions.

The Future

In the future increasing the number of trail cameras, investing in nest cams, and installing live streaming screens inside the reception building to show people the wildlife that lives here would be an ideal way of connecting people with wildlife.

We have just created a Biodiversity Base outdoor area, we aim to make this into an area of native wildlife where students can run ecological surveys or learn to create habitats for different taxa in a hands-on educational setting.

4. WORK TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Aims

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.

Steps so far

As part of our sustainability, we keep the stocking density of the reserve in balance with nature – this means that we minimise supplementary feeding with feed that is often heavy in soy products and we keep numbers of animals in line with what the trees, grasses and browsing material in the reserve can support. At times, usually early spring, this may result in a species being off-site to protect the balance and regrowth of the flora within the reserve.

All our tours are carried out in electric buggies and our flagship Wildlife Reserve demonstrates to our visitors of sustainable land management practices.

We have recently submitted to an external inspection and accreditation scheme- the Green Tourism Award, which awards us with a certificate on the business' current sustainability level and offers ways of improving the sustainability of our practices.

Staff are encouraged to be environmentally friendly by minimising waste and participating in reusing and recycling. We will also offer recycling for our visitors and compost for our coffee grounds and cups which is then composted on site.

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.

The future

Moving forward we will consider an environmental audit of our business and use this to identify areas that require improvement, for example investigate installing solar panels as a green method of generating energy that can be used to power the electric buggies.

We will use the information offered from the Green Tourism award to further improve our current sustainability.

Record Keeping and Evaluation:

We have two excel spreadsheets, one for the conservation activities that occur on the reserve itself and another for the conservation activities that occur outside of Watatunga. For every on-site conservation activity, we record the date, details of the activity, name of the group that provided assistance (e.g. British Trust of Ornithology), findings, future plans, total hours and any relevant referenced materials. We then evaluate each activity by assessing its resource use, research value, community involvement and level of impact- each section is traffic light colour coded to visually highlight areas that may need improving.

For the off-site conservation activities, we record the date, details of the activity, which company we worked with (e.g. Great Bustard Project), how it helped and any relevant referenced documents. We then evaluate each activity by assessing its resource use, public engagement and collection representation- each section is traffic light colour coded to visually highlight areas that may need improving.

In both spreadsheets each activity has a final column to highlight which of our 6 conservation aims that it meets, these aims are based on the four key areas of focus highlighted in our conservation policy strategy and are heavily integrated with our conservation policy.

Records are updated every time a new conservation activity is undertaken, this can be every week or once a month. Evaluation is undertaken at the completion of every activity. Once a year, these records are revised to identify which activities were beneficial and which were less beneficial and shouldn't be repeated in the coming year.

Miranda Sealy is the conservation officer who regularly updates these records and is responsible for the conservation records and evaluating the conservation activities.

Both spreadsheets are uploaded to the Watatunga One Drive (which is not publicly accessible) as a working document which allows operations manager, Molly Ruder, to review and monitor up to date conservation records.