

**CONTRIBUTING VETERINARY EXPERTISE TO WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PROJECTS AND RESEARCH
– MORE THAN BEING “HANDS-ON”**

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The concept of conservation and reintroduction medicine will be familiar to many, though their involvement is often at a direct, hands-on, level. Throughout there is awareness of the constraints under which one has to work as determined, in the UK, by the Animal Scientific Procedures Act (ASPA). Any institution, (including zoos), working under ASPA must have an Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB). These require veterinary input, as do the organisational ethics committees that ensure compliance with the Zoo Licensing Act (ZLA).

There are, however, many workers from multi-disciplinary backgrounds carrying out conservation work and research outside the more familiar “zoo” situation. The author has, for a number of years, worked in an honorary, advisory, capacity with two major UK based conservation organisations: the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and will present some of this work.

The RSPB’s mission is nature conservation, and it strives to pursue this mission with full regard to animal welfare. It established, several years ago, an ethical review committee. Work reviewed primarily sits below ASPA thresholds. (Clarification can be, and is, sought from the Home Office (HO) to confirm this). This has parallels with committees convened under the ZLA, in particular as RSPB is a large membership organisation, drawing its members from diverse backgrounds. Some of the work, e.g. invasive species eradication, is essential to species conservation but not without controversy. Their overseas work falls within the remit of the committee because of direct links to the RSPB in the UK.

The BTO oversees the ringing of birds, under licence and by trained ringers, in the British Isles. There are additional techniques that require scrutiny before being permitted. These include the various tracking devices that can be fitted to e.g. leg bands, collars or harnesses, and plumage marks, ID tags and sampling (feathers and DNA swabs). Working to pre-agreed definitions a number of applications are passed on to the Special Marking Techniques Panel (SMTP) for review. Using pre-agreed derogations, the SMTP works closely with the HO, to approve or reject applications. In addition, all applications have to be reported annually to the HO with active review of outcomes by all parties, particularly if further research is intended.

Though different in function, these two committees can act as models for other conservation bodies and give further opportunities for the veterinary profession to contribute to wildlife conservation.

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