

Ministear airson na h-Arainneachd agus Atharrachadh Aimsir
Minister for Environment and Climate Change
Paul Wheelhouse BPA/MSP



In 2014 Scotland Welcomes the World



[REDACTED]
The Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
EH99 1SP

[REDACTED]

1st July 2014

[REDACTED]

Thank you for bringing the concerns of your constituent to my attention. I understand that you have also raised her concerns with Scottish Natural Heritage directly and that [REDACTED] has provided a comprehensive response to the points that [REDACTED] has raised. His response includes details of the seabird populations and the rat population but I would like to emphasise that I take the threat of non-native species very seriously.

The black rat is not native to the British Isles but, even if it was, the question would be whether it was native on the islands and causing harm. The delicate balance of island populations are particularly at risk from invasions, but equally we have found some success in eradicating non-native species from islands, as the risk of reinvasion can be managed in a way that would be much more difficult to achieve on the mainland.

It is important to note that, in considering the project, SNH carefully considered the likely benefits to be delivered for the native seabird populations. In addition they looked into non-lethal control options, but none were found to be suitable. I know that they took great care in assessing all aspects of the project. However, like SNH, I am mindful of the responsibilities we have to protect our native species - in this case brought into sharp focus by the Special Protected Area status of the islands.

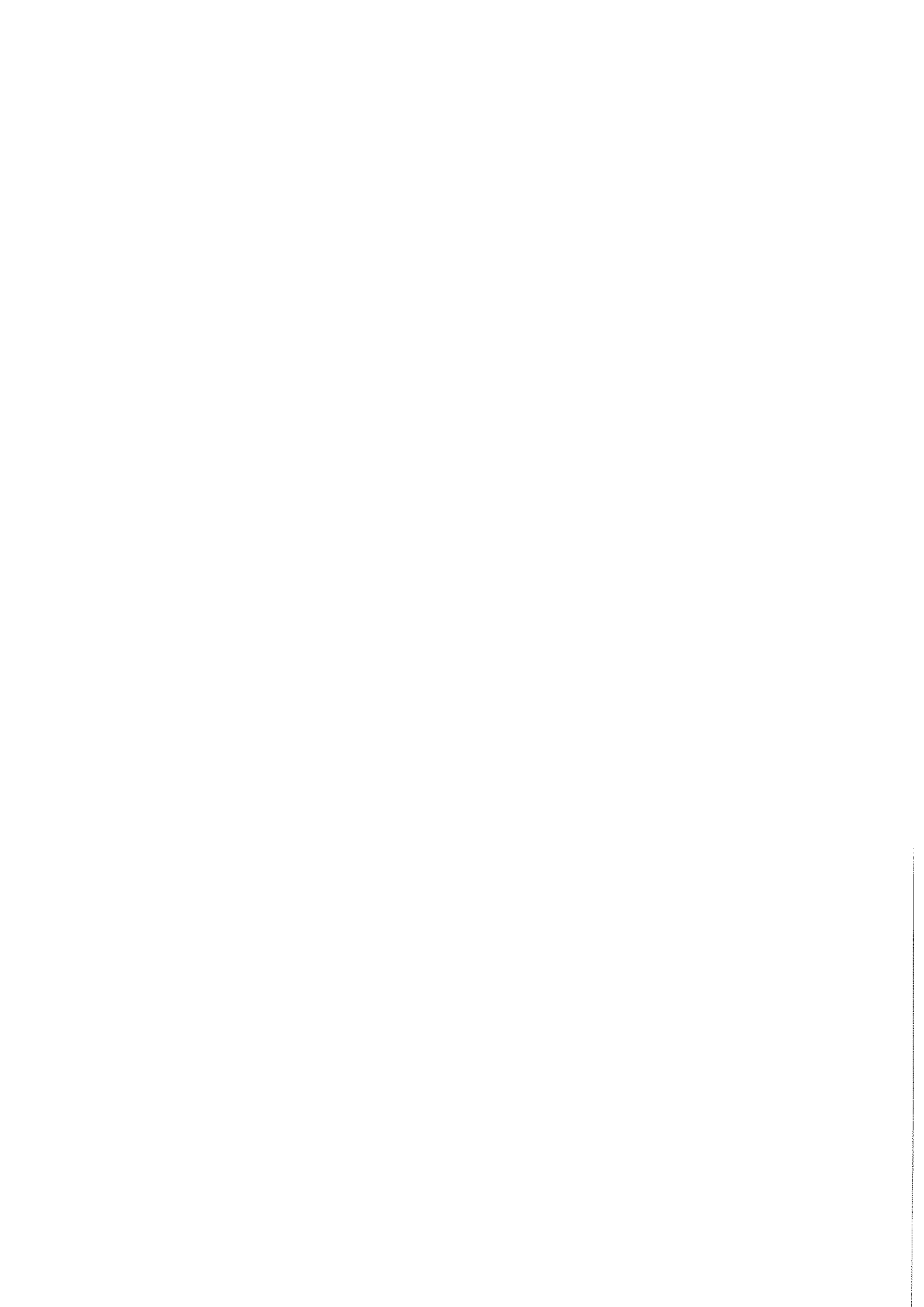
I hope that this provides some clarity as to why I am supportive of the project and why it is necessary to take action to control and eliminate black rats from the islands.

Paul Wheelhouse

PAUL WHEELHOUSE

[REDACTED]





From: [REDACTED]@scottish.parliament.uk
Sent: 16 June 2014 11:12:49
To: scottish.ministers@scotland.gsi.gov.uk
Subject: FAO Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs & Environment

Attachments: Rural Affairs and Environment.pdf, Black Rats.pdf

Please find attached a letter from [REDACTED] to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Environment together with a letter from [REDACTED] constituent [REDACTED]



This message has been received from an external party and
has been swept for the presence of computer viruses.



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Richard Lochhead MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs & Environment
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

By email only

Our Ref: [REDACTED]

Your Ref:

16 June 2014

Dear Cabinet Secretary

[REDACTED]

I have been contacted by [REDACTED] who has raised with me concerns about the proposed elimination of black rats from the Shiant Islands in the Outer Hebrides.

I would be grateful for your comments on the points she makes in her attached letter

tel: [REDACTED]

RECEIVED 10 JUN 2014

9th April 2014

To:

The Shiant Seabird Recovery Project, a group effort by the RSPB, Scottish Natural Heritage and the current owners of the Shiant Islands in the Outer Hebrides, have just been given a huge EU grant to eliminate a colony of black or ship rats (*Rattus rattus* sp.) from the Shiant Islands because they occasionally predate on seabirds. As there are 150,000 seabirds in the Shiant Islands and only 200 black rats, who are not much bigger than gerbils and rarely eat meat, it's difficult to see how they could have much of an impact - but even if they were having an impact, the fact is that the Shiant colony of black rats is the last remaining wild population of the rarest native mammal in Britain, and destroying them would be as much an ecological tragedy as the killing of the last wolf in Scotland in 1743.

The Shiant Seabird Recovery Project is disingenuously claiming that the black rats on the Shiant Islands are non-native because they arrived there from a shipwreck. As a species, however, they first appeared in Britain during the Roman period, only 200 years after the brown hare and at least 800 years before the rabbit, both of which we accept as native species, and they were widespread on the mainland up to the 18th C. Indeed, one of their traditional species names is "the Old English rat". Prior to World War I they were actually in the process of being domesticated in the UK, alongside the brown rat and the house mouse who have both become popular pets. Examples of "black" rats were bred in a variety of attractive colours (including black-eyed cream and, supposedly, green!) and exhibited at shows in London, but the domestic strain was lost after the breeders were despatched to the trenches. Now the EU has apparently decided to classify black rats as non-native invaders wherever they occur in Europe, despite their having been established in mainland Europe for 2,300 years and in Britain for 1,800 years.

Yes, ship rats are only rare in Britain, not worldwide, and yes, they are omnivores who sometimes eat birds - but both these things are also true of the red squirrel. I possess a biology textbook from the 1920s, written when the red squirrel was still quite common and illustrated with paintings of typical scenes from the lives of various British mammals, and the "typical" scene for the red squirrel shows a pair raiding a nest, with blood and yolk dripping down their chins. Black rats are actually very like red squirrels, playful, arboreal, intelligent and pretty, and much less problematic than the brown rat. They are half the size of their larger cousins, with a much weaker bite, are less predatory and much less prone to over-population. Whereas female brown rats are fertile at five weeks old and can potentially have ten babies every 23 days thereafter, female black rats aren't fertile until three months old and usually have one or two litters of four to six babies per year, about the same as a hedgehog.

They are also highly adaptable, and if they really are causing a problem then the 200 last-ditch survivors of Britain's rarest native mammal could easily be live-trapped, as was done with the hedgehogs on Uist, and moved to another uninhabited island such as St Kilda, or relocated to a zoo.

As a member of your constituency, a fellow [REDACTED] and one of only a handful of experts in the world on the care of the black rat as a pet, I would appreciate it very much if you could ask Scottish Natural Heritage why they are brazenly preparing to exterminate the last remaining wild British colony of the Old English rat to protect various species of seabird which are considerably less rare - including two species which aren't even present in the Shiant Islands but which they only think might roost there at some point in the indefinite future. In a more general sense you might also ask them why they are doing all they can to preserve and reintroduce the red squirrel whilst at the same time deliberately destroying a very similar and locally much rarer rodent. And "because one has a fluffy tail and the other doesn't" doesn't really cut it.

Yours faithfully,

[REDACTED]