

Press Release 14 October 2007

Npower take on the Newts at the Radley Lakes.

“Site’s importance may have been underestimated.”

Npower’s operations at Thrupp Lake continue to ravage the wildlife in the area. Their recent activity has included the construction of a newt barrier around the lake and there have been reports of the trapping of a number of Great Crested Newts, rare amphibians which enjoy, or rather should enjoy, the highest levels of protection under UK and European Law. The high number of creatures reported to have been captured (around 30* in just a few weeks) indicates that the importance of the site for wildlife, and this species in particular, may have been underestimated, with potentially serious and ultimately most regrettable consequences.

Thrupp Lake is already known to be an area of exceptional biodiversity, with more than 1,440 different species recorded in the immediate vicinity in recent years. Sixty eight of these are classified as UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP) priority species, meaning that they are in severe decline, threatened or endangered. Thirty of these UKBAP species are dependent, or partially dependent on water or wetland habitats. The lake itself is a UKBAP priority habitat, being in not one, but *three* categories, which means that it is a habitat type considered to be in decline in the UK and worthy of protection.

The unsightly and intrusive newt barrier has been constructed most of the way around the lake edge, with pit fall traps at intervals to catch the newts as they leave the lake to hibernate on land. Not only will the newts be deprived of a breeding site when they return next spring, if npower goes ahead and turns it into an ash dump, but a major source of their food, food that sustains not only the newts, but also many other of the many other species at the lakes, will be obliterated.

The great crested newt has suffered a major decline in Britain over the last century. Ponds have been lost at a dramatic rate, particularly since the Second World War. Newt habitats are fragile and have become increasingly fragmented through development, roads and other unfavourable land-use; smaller, more isolated populations are more vulnerable to extinction than larger, well-connected populations. The Radley lakes area with its network of ponds and larger water bodies is excellent habitat for them.

The lake is also an example of a qualifying habitat type listed in schedule 1 of the European Habitats Directive. The presence of a EHD schedule 2 species, such as the great crested newt, on such a site qualifies that site for designation, and protection, as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Little Wittenham Nature Reserve (Wittenham Clumps) was recently designated as a SAC on the basis of its great crested newt population. The capture of so many great crested newts at Thrupp Lake indicates that the importance of Thrupp Lake for this species has been seriously underestimated, and that it would probably rank and least equally with Little Wittenham.

* The number reported as having been caught on 8th October.

Great crested newts are a highly legally protected species[†], and their presence would normally present a serious obstacle to any proposed development. In the face of this, npower and their ecologists have consistently tried to diminish the importance of their presence at Thrupp Lake, firstly by arguing that they were not present in significant numbers, and then by saying that there would be little dependency on the larger lakes, like Thrupp Lake, because of fish predation.

However local ecologist Dr Robert Eeles disagrees

"I would like to quash this myth about fish predation. It is demonstrably untrue that great crested newts do not breed in lakes because of fish. Great crested newts breed very successfully in lakes and, although fish might naturally reduce their numbers, they do not do so in a catastrophic way. The lakes at Little Wittenham Nature Reserve are teeming with both fish and great crested newts (which is why it was designated a SAC) and the latter breed very successfully there. I would expect the same to be true of Thrupp Lake where great crested newts have been observed in the water during the breeding season. The large population of great crested newts currently being found by RWE npower around Thrupp Lake were in all likelihood breeding within this water body.

"If great crested newts and fish could not coexist, then the former would probably have gone extinct long ago!"

Marjorie White of Save Radley Lakes said,

"The presence of such a treasure as Thrupp Lake so close to a large centre of population would be a source of great joy for local people if it were not for the threat posed by the intransigence and the short-termism of npower, who own and manage Didcot A Power Station. These people, unfortunately, are blind to the beauty and biodiversity of the area, and see only a convenient place to dump their waste ash. Back in the spring, they evicted kingfishers, another protected species, and tried (unsuccessfully) to prevent swans from breeding on the lake. Now, even before the result of the Town Green Inquiry has been announced, they are engaged in a further assault on that biodiversity by trapping and removing great crested newts from the lake."

"Npower's concern for nature conservation is all spin. They know perfectly well that the biodiversity of the area will be irreparably damaged by turning Thrupp Lake into a huge ash tip. Their poor showing on action on climate change has been exposed by a recent survey of the six big energy companies by WWF - UK in which they came last. Their poor showing on nature conservation will soon be exposed for all to see as they turn Thrupp Lake into an impoverished wasteland.

"This debacle also exposes Government's lack of concern for wildlife and conservation, and its willingness to concede to the demands of Big Business, despite the tiers of legislation that it, and previous governments, have put in place supposedly to prevent such things from happening.

The law strictly protects great crested newts from trade, transport, possession, capture, injury, killing or disturbance[†]. Their habitat also receives the strictest possible legal protection from

[†] Great crested newts enjoy the highest possible level of protection under European law through the EC Habitats Directive (Annexes 2 and 4); the Bern Convention; and the UK Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations 1994; and under Schedule 5 of the UK Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

disturbance. Whilst it is presumed that npower have received the necessary permissions to disturb this important and protected species, many people will be disturbed to find that npower's desire for a cheap disposal facility for its ash overrides the protection of such an important ecological system and a vulnerable species.

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