

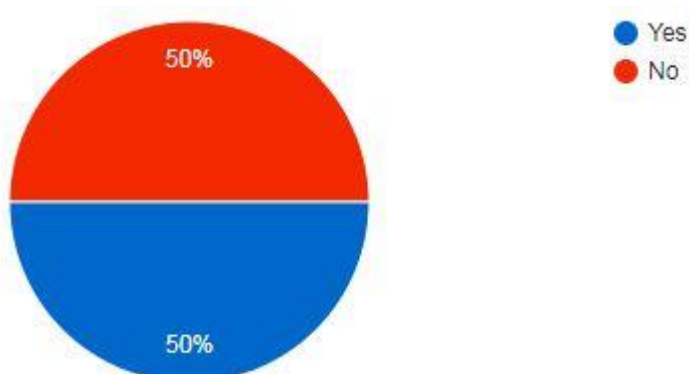
Mink Free GB questionnaire responses

Many thanks to all who completed our questionnaire on mink control. We circulated the online questionnaire to anyone we could think of, and from this initial pool of under a hundred contacts and leads, it was forwarded and further names were passed on to us for further distribution. The responses have continued to trickle in. It seems we will never get to the end of waiting for the last response so we are now sending a belated report to those who have contributed to this survey.

In total 180 responses have been received. Not everyone answered all of the 7 questions, and we tested the system out on ourselves in the initial trial of the questionnaire system, so numbers of responses per question are not completely consistent but the results are very encouraging.

Question 1 Is mink control part of your water vole conservation work, if any?

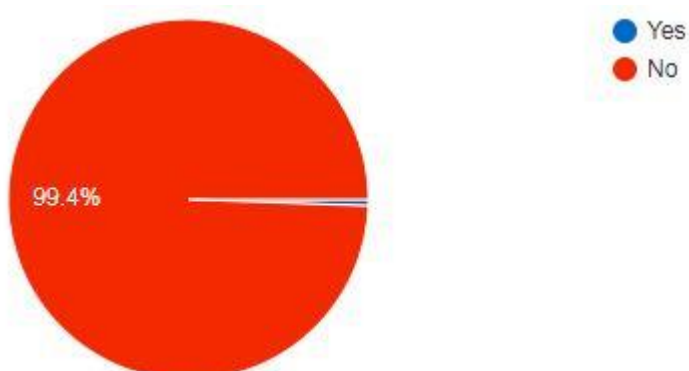
178 responses



Clearly there are plenty of people out there who could get involved in mink trapping! It seems we got the questionnaire to a good number of people already involved in this important work. Importantly, we have also found a number of people not currently mink trapping (who we thought perhaps should be, or who found the questionnaire relevant to themselves even though not active).

Question 2 Would you object in principle to mink culling in your area/on your reserves?

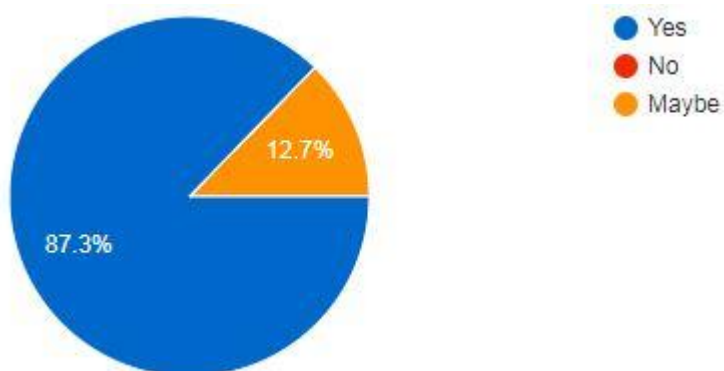
180 responses



Just one respondent would not like to have mink culling on their property. This seemed to be more to do with land ownership than objection to the act. For this project to go ahead we will need to engage and persuade those less disposed to this activity, but so far it seems we have a good body of support behind us to address those issues openly.

Question 3 Do you see the merit in a Britain-wide mink eradication campaign?

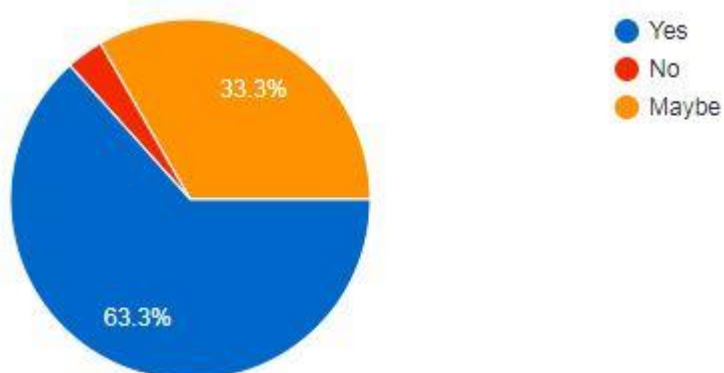
181 responses



It was very encouraging that no respondents thought there was no merit in the concept of an eradication campaign. We need to build an evidence base that persuades more maybe's into yes's.

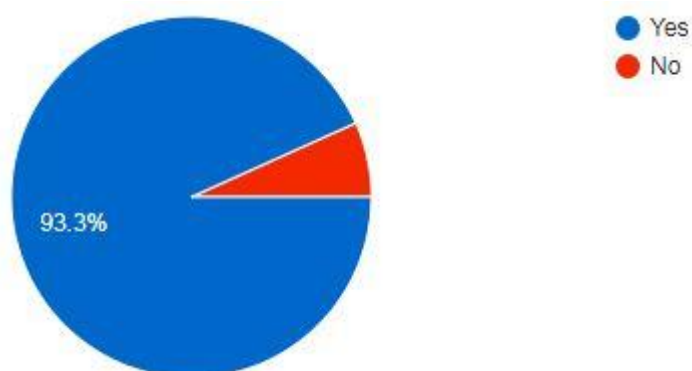
Question 4 Would you or your organisation consider being involved in a GB-wide eradication partnership?

180 responses



174 people or organisations would or might get involved in an eradication. So if nothing else we might be able to encourage a few more people to get involved in trapping compared to the current position. The strength of such a movement cannot be underestimated.

Question 5 Would you like to be kept on the mailing list for this enquiry and possible project as it develops? - 179 responses



Most people are going to stay in touch. We are unlikely to be sending messages on a frequent basis but thank you to those who are keen to keep on the list. One aspect which we need to address is administrative. The current 'Mink Free GB' partnership is an informal association of individuals from around the country representing different organisations with a shared interest in the mink problem. There are no staff assigned to this project just a strong willingness to move things forward. So communication is likely to be slow and limited until a funded campaign begins.

Question 6 If you are controlling mink in your area, could you send a map or briefly describe the area together with information on the level of mink control underway, the number of years of operation and the sort of numbers caught? Approximate information is fine at this stage.

Part 1: a map or briefly describe the area We have compiled the geographical information into a map – some of the most recent responses have not been added to this yet, but overall it shows a very good distribution of activity the length and breadth of Britain. We also had responses from Northern Ireland, even though the questionnaire was only sent to mainland Britain operators – it found its way to the Wild Trout Trust website and Salmon and Trout magazine, so it got picked up by folk in NI. Unfortunately an eradication is not possible there while mink farming continues to operate in the Republic, Hence Ireland has to be discounted at this time. The map also omits activity on the Outer Hebrides, where a project is very close to eradicating mink, and this is likely to be extremely informative to what would be needed on the Inner Hebrides islands where some activity is already underway as control/containment level at this stage. The map also underestimates the effort underway in NE Scotland where a major project is taking place.

What the map illustrates is the widespread adoption of mink trapping as a conservation practice across Britain. The grey lines are rivers or other sites where correspondents indicated historic, current or planned mink control efforts. Some of these are very large, joined up schemes organised by Rivers Trusts or other organisations, for example BASC co-ordinated efforts to span the Somerset and Wiltshire/Dorset coasts and create an effective mink barrier for the South-west peninsula. This is now extending into projects across Wales. Others are more localised, such as trapping on individual seabird islands on the Argyll coast or sections of trout rivers in Derbyshire owned by particular fishing clubs.

The original test ground for the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust mink raft and developing a scheme for catchment level control of mink using rafts with a combination of clay monitoring pads and active trapping when mink arrive on the scene was developed on the River Monnow in Herefordshire in 2002. That scheme is still active and in the questionnaire response it was indicated that there were plans to expand this effort.

The main gaps in coverage appear to be the English midlands and mid-Wales, and the 'borders' region around the north of England and southern Scotland. It seems likely that these regions have active salmon and trout fisheries with some level of mink control, but the questionnaire did not reach them. Other sources of information or approaches may well fill more gaps, and this exercise is certainly not complete.



Map of Great Britain showing areas already undertaking mink control at some level. Based on an online questionnaire conducted in 2019. Efforts represented here account for over 300 mink per year, while another reporting network accounts for another 700 mink per year (GWCT unpubd). A mink-free GB would require this effort to be joined up and reinforced at scale. Mapping created in QGIS, Mink-control areas drawn as approximations based on open-source mapping layers downloaded from country agency websites.

A clear stronghold of mink trapping activity can be seen in East Anglia, and up the Thames valley. This region has a long history of collegiate mink control, under the auspices of the Eastern Region Mink and Water Vole Project, chaired by Darren Tansley of the Essex Wildlife Trust and bringing together a wide range of partner organisations and individuals. At the scale reproduced here this looks very impressive, but even in this region it is acknowledged that there are many gaps in coverage and mink are still an ever-present problem after more than 15 years of large scale operation.

Part 2: the number of years of operation and the sort of numbers caught Not everyone gave precise details but the following was gleaned from responses. Project longevity ranged from 'about to start' to '35 years' with an average of 8 years duration. Catch rates vary from 0 where projects have succeeded or have not started, up to 130 reported by the major 3 counties operation conducted by The Wildlife Trust for Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. The total reported annual catch from questionnaire respondents was 319 mink, with averages of 6 per year per project. This is somewhat below the catch rate reported to the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust *Gamebag*

Census of over 700 mink per year which probably reflects a different set of operations to those who completed this questionnaire, suggesting that over 1000 mink are killed in Britain every year.

Question 7 Please let us know the most appropriate name and email address for individuals/organisations that could be contacted about this work, including any additional organisations that you know to operate locally, be that fishing clubs or other conservation bodies.

This was very helpful to see who is involved in mink control, and also many thanks to those who passed on additional contacts.

Major NGO's responded outwith the form – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds sent a data table reporting on 61 reserves and Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust said all 9 GB sites undertake trapping. National Trust sent the form to their site managers who emailed directly. Wildlife Trusts sent the questionnaire via their internal system to all county-based Water for Wildlife Officers, but rather few replied; of the 21 replies, 6 were from Yorkshire.

| | |
|---------------------|------------|
| Private individuals | 96 |
| RSPB | 61 |
| Wildlife Trusts | 21 |
| Govt. bodies | 19 |
| Rivers Trust | 10 |
| Other Trust | 10 |
| WWT | 9 |
| NT | 9 |
| IDBs | 3 |
| TOTAL | 238 |

Ten Rivers Trusts are undertaking mink control or know of projects in their areas. These organisations (and the overarching Rivers Trust) will be uniquely valuable in co-ordinating activity at a national scale, although many rivers are yet to get a dedicated Trust. There were also ten 'other' trusts, e.g. the Countryside Restoration Trust, Wild Trout Trust and small nature reserves. This shows the widespread appeal of mink control to organisations looking after natural resources at a wide range of scales.

Nineteen Government bodies got in touch, ranging from county councils to Natural England, Forestry Commission, National Parks, Natural Resources Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Environment Agency. Clearly mink operate in many areas of concern.

Three Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs in the table) responded, and more of these organisations have since got involved in funding or hosting mink control operations. These organisations are responsible for many of the waterways that are more functional and less glamorous than the Rivers Trusts type of river, but are nonetheless important refuges for wildlife and potential habitat for mink to be found.

The overwhelming number of responses came from private individuals – mainly fishing interests. There were 96 such folk. This shows the potential for a volunteer army that could be recruited to tackle the mink problem!

Mink Free GB activity in 2019

The early responses to the questionnaire have been presented and discussed with the relevant government department (The Invasive Non-Native Species Secretariat <http://www.nonnativespecies.org/home/index.cfm>), along with an outline proposal to seek backing for an expansion of current activities to 'join up the dots' and achieve a Mink-free GB. This idea was strongly welcomed, but with reservations about the scale of operation, cost-effectiveness and chances of success; understandably so, given that this would be by far the largest such eradication attempt ever. The suggestion from INNSS was to undertake a substantial trial operation, and the obvious region to attempt this would seem to be East Anglia. This area already has an active network

of experienced trappers, a long coastline and would make an excellent contrast to other large-scale projects underway around the country. The principle tool that is thought to make this a possibility, which changes the way mink are trapped, is the trap alarm. These devices allow traps to be deployed ready to catch at any time, giving an immediate alert to the trapper and a regular update on status so that trappers know there is no need to visit the trap on a daily basis. This increases the potential for catching all mink, rather than the majority, and a mink-free GB requires that no mink are left to breed anywhere. A daunting but exciting task.

Subsequent to this discussion, we have convened a meeting of all potential East Anglian mink trappers, and representatives of major organisations likely to be involved in such an operation. This meeting was held at the British Trust for Ornithology Headquarters in Thetford, Norfolk, in September 2019. Thirty three people attended, and another eighteen sent apologies. This meeting approved the concept of an East Anglian mink eradication pilot project. Among many other things, it was also decided that to ensure this operation progresses efficiently, a sub group of delegates were needed to form a Steering Group. Fourteen individuals have kindly volunteered to sit on this Steering Group, and the initial meeting was held at the Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Lackford Lakes reserve in October 2019.

At this stage, the concept is being refined and costed, but there is still no funding for this; Steering Group members are fitting this in within their existing commitments. We are optimistic that the momentum is with us for a successful fundraising effort and a start to testing the potential for eradication of mink from East Anglia. If successful, it will be essential to then roll this out to the rest of Great Britain without undue delay, as it would be most unfortunate if East Anglia was eradicated and then a two year lull in activity allowed mink back in before the whole-island eradication was started. For this reason it is essential that everyone undertaking mink control around the rest of Britain continues to do so and if possible starts to think about expansion of their operations.

If anyone is interested in hearing more, copies of the minutes from the Thetford and Lakenheath meeting minutes can be supplied on signing a disclosure agreement, or please get in touch directly with any specific questions or comments to minkfreegb@gmail.com

Many thanks once again,

Vince, Tony, Xavier, Jon and Ian.

Vince Lea, The Countryside Restoration Trust, Cambridgeshire

Tony Martin, University of Dundee

Xavier Lambin, University of Aberdeen

Jon Trail, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

Ian Danby, British Association of Shooting and Conservation, Clwyd