

# GLOBAL RE-INTRODUCTION PERSPECTIVES

*Re-introduction case-studies from around the globe*



**Edited by  
Pritpal S. Soorae**



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**Cover photo:** Clockwise starting from top-left:

- Formosan salmon stream, Taiwan
- Students in Madagascar with tree seedlings
- Virgin Islands boa

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## The re-introduction of the golden eagle to Glenveagh National Park, County Donegal, Republic of Ireland.

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### Introduction

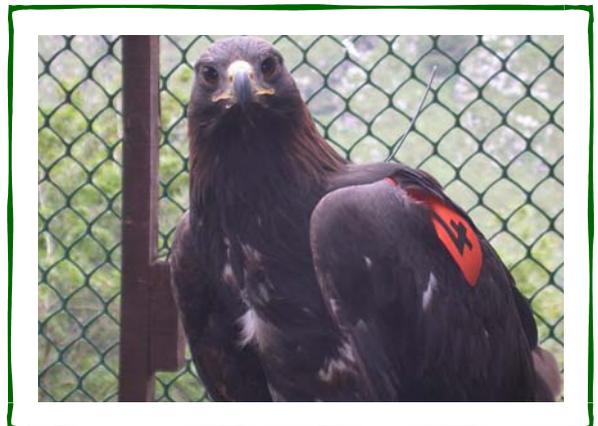
The golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) is listed as extinct in the Irish Red Data Book 2: Vertebrates and an Annex I species in Europe. Ireland has the lowest range of bird of prey species in the European Union due to the extinction of up to seven species historically- primarily the bigger raptors. Golden eagles were known to have bred in the majority of Ireland's Mountains up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The project was based in Glenveagh National Park, County Donegal - in the extreme North west of Ireland, where the National Parks and Wildlife Service had explored the idea in the early 1990s. The Irish Raptor Study Group and the Curlew Trust Ltd. developed the proposal since 1995 and established a single entity, the Golden Eagle Trust Ltd., in order to implement the project proposals. The Golden Eagle Trust Ltd. staff had experience of re-introductions and golden eagles, gained in Scotland. We also sought outside expert opinion and advice from leading raptor and re-introduction experts; in Scotland, England and Norway. As a newly established charity we were entirely dependent on project funding from the Heritage Council, the National Millennium Committee, the EU LIFE Nature fund and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

### Goals

Goal 1: Our primary goal was to establish a viable golden eagle breeding population in Ireland.

Goal 2: Our secondary goal was to use this proactive conservation project to help change public attitudes toward conservation in Ireland.

Goal 3: We also aimed to raise awareness of Ireland's other existing and extinct raptors.



Female Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)  
captive stage - 2005 © Lorcan o'Toole



**First golden eagle chick to hatch in almost 100 years © Lorcan o'Toole**

## Success Indicators

- Indicator 1: Establish 6 - 10 territorial pairs of golden eagles in Ireland by 2010.
- Indicator 2: We did not set a target here, but are satisfied that the level of national media attention has shown this conservation project in a positive light. It is noticeable that elected representatives have repeatedly endorsed this project since its inception.
- Indicator 3: Again no targets were set, but the re-introduction of the white-tailed eagle and red kite into Ireland has been a

consequence of the golden eagle project and there is more public awareness now of other extinct Irish raptors such as marsh harrier and osprey.

## Project Summary

The golden eagle re-introduction proposal was produced and developed between 1995 and 2000. The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) had already carried out live prey and carrion transects in Donegal in the early 1990s. We had a clear understanding of the species ecological requirements from nearby Scotland. There were detailed historical records of former breeding places prior to their extinction in 1912. Fieldwork by the Irish Raptor Study Group identified at least 23 potential golden eagle home ranges in the North west of the Island of Ireland. The Northwest of Ireland was chosen, above other potential release areas, because of the presence of buzzards in Donegal - a key indicator species of the absence/presence of poison meat baits. We were confident that the ecological conditions were suitable. However, the Irish mountains are relatively low and usually range from 300 to 500 m above sea level and therefore Irish mountains are more accessible than other European mountain ranges. From the outset, we had fully appreciated the IUCN RSG advice that, "re-introduction lies squarely at the junction of biology and sociology". We felt that the public attitude to the eagles, especially among farmers, would determine the success of the project. We invited representatives of the farming, tourism and Gaeltacht (Irish language - speaking communities) to join the project steering group. The tourism sector accepted that the eagles would help promote Donegal. The Donegal farming representative body were reassured, by Scottish farmers, that there was only a minimal risk of lamb predation among lambs lambed indoors. We emphasized that the project would have economic, cultural, aesthetic and educational benefits alongside its conservation enhancement.

The project is managed by the Golden Eagle Trust Limited (GET) in partnership with the NPWS. The project began in March 2000 and the first birds were released in August 2001. The captive stage was similar to the recent Scottish

white-tailed eagle and red kite release programs, rearing the captive stock in wooden release cages for 5 - 6 weeks and feeding them through a cloth sleeve to minimize human contact. Scottish Natural Heritage granted permission to collect 60 - 75 Scottish golden eagle chicks from eyries containing two chicks at 5 - 7 weeks of age. The logistical support available in Glenveagh National Park (including a variety of skilled staff, walk in freezers, visitor centre, machinery etc.) greatly added to the project management. The collection of donor stock has been totally reliant on the voluntary support and goodwill of up to 100 individuals in Scotland, including raptor enthusiasts, wildlife bodies and landowners and estate staff. Unfortunately, due to a recent decrease in the productivity of the Scottish eagles our original aim to release 60 - 75 birds, over five years, has not been met. We have released 50 birds over seven years to date (2001 - 2007) though we still aim to release up to 75 birds by extending the release period. All birds between 2001 - 2006 were fitted with patagial PVC wing tags and fitted with radio backpacks or satellite tags (just two birds).

During the latter stages of the project it has become more difficult to effectively monitor the released birds as they wander and settle further away from the core release area. We are seeking assistance from other larger conservation bodies to monitor these immature vagrants and outlying sub-adults. In 2007, the released birds were only fitted with wing tags, as we believed we could no longer justify attaching radio backpacks to the released birds. The first pair of released golden eagles to breed laid one egg in 2005. Two pairs laid two clutches of two eggs in 2006 - including one three-year-old pair. However, none of these clutches hatched. In 2007, there were five occupied territories including two pairs that laid two eggs each. One of these pairs laid two eggs, hatched two chicks and fledged a single chick in Glenveagh National Park. This was the first successful golden eagle pair to breed in the Republic of Ireland in approx 100 years. The remaining priorities are to release a further 15 - 25 birds, maximize the productivity of Irish breeding pairs and try to extend the effective monitoring and awareness of golden eagles in areas outside of Donegal. We hope to satellite tag more released golden eagles in future years and also try to establish a CCTV viewing system based on the breeding pair in Glenveagh National Park. We have shown that golden eagles can breed successfully in Ireland, but it may be another decade or more before we can say we have established a viable population. This would constitute a 20 - year pre- and post- project conservation effort. To date the project has cost the GET ~€473,000 (March 2000 - December 2007). The considerable effort involved seems justified in light of establishing golden eagles in a country devoid of large raptors and in light of the enormous amount of public goodwill the project has generated toward conservation in Ireland.

### Major difficulties faced

- Overcoming the concerns of Irish conservationists regarding the feasibility of the project proposal and thereby getting the import license issued.
- As it was not a recognized conservation priority, it was difficult raising project funding initially.
- Allaying the traditional fears of such a predator among the hill sheep farmers in Donegal.

- Convincing the public that the golden eagles and the project itself would make a beneficial contribution to Donegal's natural and cultural heritage.

## Major lessons learned

- Extremely useful to have to have cross community (i.e. non - conservationists) support and input for the project.
- We incorrectly assumed that Scottish golden eagle donor stock would be more readily available. This view was based on expert opinions - but was not thoroughly investigated.
- We were surprised at the level of reticence and in some cases opposition to the project amongst wildlife enthusiasts. We may have slightly overlooked this sector whilst focusing on the farming sector in particular. The level of PR generated by re-introduction projects can be perceived as unwarranted by other committed conservation projects working with equally important but possibly lower profile species.
- It was beneficial that our energy was focused on raising the species profile and not diluted by mixed messages about the lead organization, membership and other worthwhile conservation causes.

## Success of project

Highly Successful	Successful	Partially Successful	Failure
		√	

## Reasons for success/failure:

- Too soon to say that we have established a viable breeding population.
- The project is now recognized as an important Irish conservation project.
- This project has lead to the re-introduction of other extinct Irish raptors elsewhere in the country.